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MASSIMO **LEONE**

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contributi di

NADIIA **ANDREICHUK**, GIUSTINA BENEDETTA **BARON**, MOHAMED **BERNOUSSI**
LUCA **BRUNET**, JAMES **BRUSSEAU**, NICHOLAS **BUCK**, ARKAPRAVA **CHATTOPADHYAY**
PAOLO **COSTA**, VERONICA **DELLA DORA**, ANTONIO PIO **DI COSMO**, MARTA **FASAN**
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MASSIMO **LEONE**, GIULIO **MARIOTTI**, JON **MATHIEU**, LUÍS **NEIVA**
JENNY **PONZO**, BORIS **RÄHME**, CLAUDE **ROMANO**, TOMMASO **ROPELATO**
DANIEL **TOSCANO LOPEZ**

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INTRODUCTION

MAPPING RELIGIOUS AND ETHICAL FAULTLINES: SEMIOTICS, AWE, ALTITUDE, AND ALGORITHM

Massimo Leone

The Center for Religious Studies at the Bruno Kessler Foundation, by virtue of its institutional vocation and intellectual history, occupies a unique position at the epistemic thresholds of contemporary religious and ethical inquiry. Situated at the interstices of confessional, secular, and post–secular worldviews, its scholarly mission has long privileged those zones where paradigms falter, where the fabric of doctrinal coherence thins, and where new configurations of sense — ritual, metaphysical, aesthetic — emerge under the pressure of cultural and technological reconfiguration. This volume of the "Annals of Religious Studies" continues in that tradition by gathering four thematic constellations — semiotics of religion, awe, mountains, and AI ethics — each of which interrogates shifting paradigmatic terrains through the lens of their respective semiotic, affective, symbolic, and normative faultlines. Across these inquiries, semiotics is not merely a method but a conceptual wedge, a theoretical lockpick capable of prying open the hinges of disciplinary certainty and illuminating those zones where signification slips and novelty enters.

The opening section, edited by Jenny Ponzo and Massimo Leone, is devoted to the semiotics of religion itself, now an autonomous and self–reflective domain of inquiry. The essays collectively map how religious meaning emerges, circulates, and mutates across diverse cultural, historical, and media ecosystems. Articles by Andreichuk, Baron, Bernoussi, Brunet, Di Cosmo, Finol, Galofaro, and Jardim not only offer close readings of objects as diverse as Ukrainian carols, embalmed

bodies, psychedelic rites, angelic eschatologies, Marian iconographies, and Trinitarian corporealities, but also engage with meta–theoretical questions about visibility, performativity, and the scope of ethnosemiotic methodology. The section exemplifies how semiotics, in its religious inflection, functions as a diagnostic apparatus for tracking the unstable borders between matter and spirit, ritual and abstraction, visibility and sacralization. The field's vitality is thus measured not by closure but by its openness to entangled phenomena and its capacity to host transdisciplinary crossings that challenge disciplinary orthodoxies.

The second section explores awe as a liminal, affective infrastructure at the core of both paradigmatic crisis and transformation. Based on the 2024 EUARE panel "On Awe," the contributions interrogate awe not as a discrete emotion but as a culturally encoded mode of experiencing semantic undifferentiation. As argued in the section's framing text, awe functions as a psychic and cultural hinge — where perception suspends habitual frames, and affective excess renders visible the very mechanics of symbolic reconfiguration. The essays analyze phenomena ranging from quantum participatory cosmologies to digitally mediated rituals, AI–based eschatologies, and scriptural poetics of wonder. Each study shows how awe, as both semiotic and ontological disturbance, constitutes the atmospheric condition for paradigmatic slippage — what Kuhn would call rupture, and Agamben would theorize as the zone of the whatever–being. Through such slippages, awe becomes a vector of affective creativity, crucial to religious, philosophical, and cultural metamorphosis.

The third section focuses on the mountain as a symbolic and epistemic formation — no longer merely background to theological or anthropological inquiry, but a foregrounded site of cultural contestation and sacred inversion. Built around Paolo Costa's pivotal essay on "oblique sacrality," this section reconceptualizes high–altitude landscapes not only as physical thresholds but as heterotopic terrains where modern scissions — mind and nature, immanence and transcendence, figure and ground — undergo symbolic reconnection. In this perspective, the mountain functions as a sacred operator: an experiential and cognitive medium through which epiphanic rupture occurs and existential reconfiguration becomes possible. Whether approached through ecological theology,

alpine spiritualities, or post–secular phenomenologies of landscape, the mountain reveals itself as both shrine and battleground, ritual medium and critical topos. It is here that the desire for a renewed ontological consonance — between the human and the more–than–human — becomes thinkable in an age of climatic precarity.

Finally, the volume closes with a section on artificial intelligence (AI) and ethical imagination, which turns from natural elevation to algorithmic opacity. Here, AI is not simply a technological phenomenon but a semiotic and ethical horizon in which new forms of normativity, injustice, and epistemic authority are being engineered. Drawing on cutting–edge scholarship in psychiatry, medical ethics, and digital philosophy, the section addresses issues such as epistemic injustice in mental health care, the automation of moral judgment, and the colonization of affect and intimacy by predictive analytics. Through contributions that critically engage the dangers of algorithmic normativity and the need for global ethical frameworks, this section asserts that AI must not merely be a tool but a subject of spiritual and ethical scrutiny. The questions raised — about personhood, autonomy, agency, and care — demand not only applied answers but a rethinking of the semiotic grounds of moral discourse itself.

Across its four thematic axes, with the addition of a miscellaneous tryptic woven by the voices of Costa, Romano, and Taylor, this volume reaffirms the vocation of the Center for Religious Studies at FBK to operate within the *interstices* — not only conceptually, but institutionally and affectively. Whether tracking the seismic shifts in religious semiosis, exploring awe as a sensorium of ontological rupture, contemplating the mountain as hierophanic fissure, or exposing the latent ideologies of AI systems, the essays collected here show how religious and ethical reflection must increasingly inhabit faultlines. These are not zones of indecision but of creative indeterminacy, where paradigms — ethical, symbolic, technological — shudder and shift. In mapping them, the "Annals of Religious Studies" continues its commitment to fostering interdisciplinary cartographies of the sacred and the future it strains to articulate.

SEZIONE 1
NEW INSIGHTS INTO THE SEMIOTICS OF RELIGION

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INTRODUCTION: NEW INSIGHTS INTO THE SEMIOTICS OF RELIGION

Massimo Leone, Jenny Ponzo

This issue of "Annali di Studi Religiosi" is dedicated to the semiotics of religion. This field of study has conquered its own place in the varied landscape of semiotics and has attained an advanced level of development, evidenced by the fact that it has reached what Lotman (2000) would call the level of self–description. Indeed, in the 2010s and 2020s several works have provided definitions, overviews and critical reflections on the "semiotics of religion"(1). At the same time, the development of this subject area is also due to a constant dialogue with other disciplines, in particular with linguistics, ethnography and anthropology, as well as with religious studies(2).

In this spirit, this issue brings together articles by international scholars who make a valuable contribution to this field of knowledge. They examine religious questions from different traditions, perspectives and methods and thus bear witness to the diversity, richness and vitality of the semiotics of religion.

Nadiia Andreichuk questions the classical pragmatist approach of Peirce and Morris and the concept of semiosis through a particular case study provided by traditional Ukrainian Christmas carols. Starting from an etymological interpretation of the word "carol", the analysis provides a reflection on this genre of ritual discourse. The result is a refined taxonomy in which the levels and dimensions of the semiosis of

(1) See in particular Leone (2022 and 2025); Ponzo (2022); Ponzo, Yelle and Leone (2021), Yelle (2013).

(2) A key contribution in this sense comes from the so–called Chicago School, see in particular the works by Michael Silverstein, Webb Keane, and Robert Yelle.

Ukrainian Christmas carols are considered at the perceptual level (code dimension), the referential level (information dimension) and the evaluative level (cultural dimension).

Giustina Baron examines the dynamics of visibility in connection with the embalming of Lenin's body. The leader's corpse was the subject of an experimental preservation process that kept the body in an extraordinarily similar and flexible state by replacing organic matter with artificial matter. The nature of this process was known only to the political elite, who built an aura of sacrality around the corpse and used Lenin's legacy to maintain and extend their sovereignty. Both the corpse and the *figure* of Lenin thus undergo a similar transformation, which involves their sacralization on the one hand, but also their alteration and replacement on the other, ultimately becoming a functional figurativization of the Leninist party itself.

Mohamed Bernoussi, who has made important contributions to the semiotic study of Muslim culture(3), presents here an analysis of two fascinating figures of this culture, namely Nakīr and Munkar, two angels who are believed to accompany every faithful at the moment of their death, one collecting the good deeds committed during lifetime and the other the bad ones, thus judging whether the person is destined for paradise or hell. The author proposes a historical reconstruction of the discourse on these figures in the sacred texts and then considers their role in the broader framework of Muslim eschatology, showing how the judgement of these angels has elements of unpredictability, since it can be disturbed by the intervention of evil, embodied by the cursed angel Ibliss, and is above all subordinate to the Deity, whose will is mysterious and omnipotent.

Luca Brunet deals with the different practices and interpretations related to hallucinogenic substances, from the traditional Mesoamerican cultures to the contemporary Western context. The comparison between these different cultures and the related encyclopedias leads the author to emphasize the continuing link between the sacredness and transcendence associated with religious experience and the idea of therapy and healing. If such a link was evident in traditional cultures, Brunet hypothesizes that it is also crucial today within the processes of re–enchantment.

(3) Just to mention some recent examples, see Bernoussi (2025 and 2023).

Antonio Pio Di Cosmo presents a study of the face of the Black Madonnas enquiring the complex semiotic tensions in which their iconography is placed over time. In particular, a tension arises between the biological or physical aspect — which entails the representation of the Madonna according to a certain physiognomy or certain "phenotypes", as the author suggests — and the spiritual aspect — namely the fact that this human figure also represents sacredness and transcendence. According to Di Cosmo, semiotics, especially in conjunction with neuroscience and art history, offers a particularly fruitful approach to this topic.

José Enrique Finol is best known in semiotics for his theories on the relationship between body and meaning, in particular for the concept of the "corposphere" (Finol 2017). The latter also found its first application in the field of the semiotics in a reflection on the Trinity (Finol and Leone 2021). In this article, the concept of corposhpere is further explored in relation to a case study on the corpse of Pope Formosus. The analysis problematizes the relationship between the concepts of body and corpse and the conditions that determine their segnic or anti–segnic character. Various sources are used for this purpose: on the one hand, those relating to the process of which the papal corpse was the subject, and on the other, an artistic source (a painting).

Francesco Galofaro relates the semiotic study of religious phenomena with the specific methodology of ethnosemiotics, which combines semiotics and ethnography. Drawing on his many years of experience in this field, Galofaro addresses a crucial methodological problem that he has recently researched (Galofaro 2024), namely the question of the observable, and considers it from the particular perspective of the semiotics of religion. He proposes a reflection on the difficulty of reconciling the complexity of reality and the limits of the point of view adopted by the observer, focusing on the case study of the observation of the Orthodox liturgy of Vespers.

Marilia Jardim proposes a kind of metatheoretical reflection by examining the deep cosmological presuppositions underlying two of the best–known concepts of semiotic theory and methodology, namely Greimas's semiotic square and Lotman's semiosphere. Jardim explores the mathematical, geometrical and esoteric relationships between the square and the circle, the planar and the spherical, claiming that these

dimensions are closely connected and interdependent. These considerations lead the author to the conclusion that religious studies can make a contribution to semiotics, not only in relation to specific subjects of study, but also as a critical stance that provides useful insights for (re) considering semiotic theories and methods.

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ANGELS SING: AN ATTEMPT TO ANALYZE THE SEMIOSIC DIMENSIONS OF UKRAINIAN CAROLS

Nadiia Andreichuk

Abstract: The present paper seeks to outline a theoretical framework for the study of Ukrainian Christmas carols by exploring the potential of Peirce's and Morris's ideas on semiosis. Christmas carols are viewed as signs that "act" in the space of Christian religious culture. Entering a dispute with Morris we single out three dimensions of semiosis: code (the study of the nature of sign vehicles), informational (the affiliation to knowledge as a set of relatively stable collective interpretants), and cultural (the relationship with the system of values in the mind of the interpreter). Proceeding from the suggested dimensions, methodological underpinnings of the semiosic interpretation of carols are substantiated: formal or codosemiosic approach, cognitive or infosemiosic approach, and communicative or sociosemiosic approach. The discussion is focused on the following arguments: 1) codosemiosic approach serves to describe the means and rules of encoding Christmas carols; 2) infosemiosic approach makes it possible to discover the action of carols becoming informative which occurs through establishing correspondences between the components of the basic semiotic triad: reality, knowledge, signs; 3) sociosemiosic approach allows the correlation of the space of mind for the production of semiosis and value adherence in multi-layer cultural processes. Following the logic of the approaches the paper presents the following issues: 1) the etymology of the term "kolyada" (Ukrainian for "carol"); 2) the genre characteristics of carols and the discursive attribution of the genre; 3) code dimension of carols' semiosis: verbal and musical coding; 4) classification of Ukrainian carols based on the informational dimension of semiosis; 5) tendencies of the current development of carols discussed in the context of the cultural dimension of semiosis. The arguments are substantiated by references to different Ukrainian carols selected mostly from Hnatiuk's collection (1914) and the last published Christmas songbook (2023).

Il presente contributo intende delineare un quadro teorico per lo studio dei canti natalizi ucraini, esplorando il potenziale delle idee di Peirce e Morris in

merito alla semiosi. I canti natalizi vengono considerati come segni che "agiscono" nello spazio della cultura religiosa cristiana. Entrando in dialogo critico con Morris, si distinguono tre dimensioni della semiosi: quella codica (relativa allo studio della natura dei veicoli segnici), quella informazionale (afferenza al sapere inteso come insieme di interpretanti collettivi relativamente stabili) e quella culturale (relazione con il sistema di valori presente nella mente dell'interprete). A partire da tali dimensioni, si fondano i presupposti metodologici per un'interpretazione semiosica dei canti: un approccio formale o codosemiotico, un approccio cognitivo o infosemiotico, e un approccio comunicativo o sociosemiotico. La trattazione si articola attorno ai seguenti argomenti: l'approccio codosemiotico consente di descrivere i mezzi e le regole di codifica dei canti natalizi; l'approccio infosemiotico rende possibile individuare l'azione informativa dei canti, che si manifesta mediante la costruzione di corrispondenze tra i componenti della triade semiotica fondamentale: realtà, conoscenza, segni; l'approccio sociosemiotico permette di correlare lo spazio mentale della produzione semiosica con l'adesione valoriale nei processi culturali multilivello. Seguendo la logica di tali approcci, l'articolo affronta le seguenti questioni: l'etimologia del termine "kolyada" (canto natalizio ucraino); le caratteristiche di genere dei canti e l'attribuzione discorsiva del genere; la dimensione codica della semiosi dei canti: codifica verbale e musicale; una classificazione dei canti natalizi ucraini basata sulla dimensione informazionale della semiosi; le tendenze attuali nello sviluppo dei canti, discusse nel contesto della dimensione culturale della semiosi. Le argomentazioni sono supportate da riferimenti a diversi canti natalizi ucraini, selezionati prevalentemente dalla raccolta di Hnatiuk (1914) e dall'ultimo canzoniere natalizio pubblicato (2023).

Keywords: Ukrainian Christmas Carol, Semiosis, Interpretant, Code/Informational/ Cultural dimension of semiosis, Codo/Info/ Sociosemiosic Approach

Parole chiave: Canto di Natale ucraino, Semiosi, Interpretante, Codice/ Informazione/ Dimensone culturale della semiosi, Approccio codice/informativo/ sociosemiotico

> And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another: "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us". And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger
>
> (The Holy Bible, Gospel of Luke 2:15–16)

1. Introduction

Ten years ago at the twelfth World Congress of Semiotics several leading semioticians were asked to give brief answers to the question "What is the main challenge for contemporary semiotics?" In his reply Massimo Leone emphasized the idea of common perspective and finding new courage: "worrying less about what the world thinks of semiotics; worrying more about what semiotics thinks of the world" (Kull and Velmezova 2014, p. 537). Today semioticians "think of the world" trying to understand contemporary civilization. The latter includes human existence and the ontology of culture, particularly the problem of archetypes of national mentality (Krymskyi 2008, p. 6). At different stages of cultural history projections of the world onto consciousness express fundamentally different ways of holistic understanding of being and our presence in it. These projections are fixed by sign systems, which en masse define the environment of human existence reflecting the systemic parameters of the world and the way it is organized. Each type of consciousness has its own characteristics of the representation of cultural objects that embody the corresponding experience. The object discussed in this paper is the Ukrainian carol, which is viewed as a special sign in the space of Ukrainian culture that embodies a unique form of communication and understanding of the world.

2. Methodological underpinnings

To outline the theoretical foundations of the research we turn to the potential of the ideas of Peirce and Morris regarding semiosis. Peirce interprets it as the action of sign, while Morris sees it as all processes in which something functions as a sign. We share Morris's view that semiotics "is not concerned with the study of a particular kind of object, but in ordinary objects in so far (and only in so far) as they participate in semiosis" (Morris 1938, p. 4). Eco (1979, p. 16) claims that it is in this sense that one must take Peirce's definition of the 'standing–for' power of the sign "in some respect or capacity". He also adds that "the interpretation by an interpreter, which would seem to characterize a sign, must be understood

as the possible interpretation by a possible interpreter" (*ibid.*, p. 16). The original statement that every semiotically oriented study is actually about the action of sign belongs to Peirce, who was the first to call this action "semiosis" or "semeiosy." He applies both forms of the term in the article "Pragmatism," written in 1907 (Peirce 1998, p. 411), where he provides the doctrine of the triadic nature of sign and the joint action of its three components. This doctrine was developed by Morris, who revealed the potential of semiosis — "process in which something functions as a sign" (Morris 1938, p. 3) — and described its dimensions. In fact, the latter made his theory well–known. Morris distinguished: 1) the formal relationship of signs to other signs (syntactic dimension); 2) the relationship of signs to what they signify (semantic dimension); 3) the relationship of signs to interpreters (pragmatic dimension). These dimensions can be described differently if we choose to proceed from the notion of the interpretant. The latter is triadic and constitutes an inseparable unity of the primary, conceptual, and cultural interpretant (Andreichuk 2021, pp. 119–126). Distinguishing these interpretants we define three dimensions of semiosis: code, informational, and cultural, and three levels of the sign's action: the level of perception, the level of reference, and the evaluative level (fig.1) (*ibid.*, pp. 138–146).

The code dimension of semiosis displays the primary interpretant's connection to the object and involves establishing the relatedness of the representational means (Peirce's "representamen" and Morris' "sign–vehicle") to a particular code.

For example, the coding of carols occurs using verbal, musical and ritual–behavioral codes. The concept of code is inseparable from the concept of information. The latter is externalized via means of representation, the assortment and arrangement of which determine the information. Thus, the second dimension of semiosis is established through the relationship between the means of representation and the notional interpretant. If the object determines the means of representation, then these means determine the notional interpretant, which provides the connection between the recognized object and the concept of that object. The core characteristics of this interpretant are a) mental nature (mental projection of the object) and b) affiliation to knowledge as a set of relatively stable, objective, and collective notional interpretants. Since knowledge

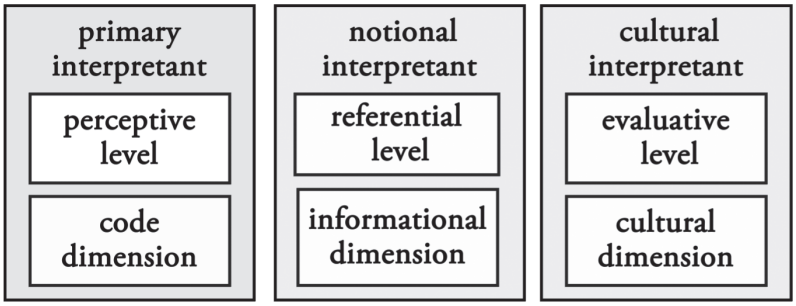

Fig. 1. Levels and dimensions of semiosis.

becomes information in the process of transmission, we propose to apply the term "informational dimension" to the second dimension of semiosis, as one concept actualizes another in consciousness and tunes consciousness to that second as informationally significant. The function of representation makes the sign vehicle the expression of a concept. Thus, if the first dimension ensures the identification of the carol as a song (musical plus verbal codes), then the informational dimension establishes a connection with the event semantics of the text.

The third dimension of semiosis is related to cultural interpretant, which reflects the evaluative perceptions of interpreters. This dimension correlates with Morris' pragmatic rules but is interpreted more extensively: the connection between mentality and culture, expressed through the system of evaluations and values in the consciousness of the interpreter. At the evaluative level of semiosis, the encoded sign is identified as a component of culture thus the research focuses on the relation of the representamen and its internal object and the integration of this relation into established systems within the cultural space. For example, the system of values in any given period of Ukraine's history is reflected in the multiplicity of carols. One of the most famous Ukrainian carols "Nova radist stala" ("New Joy has Come") has several textual variants relevant to different historical events: from the times of the Sich Riflemen of the UPA(1) to post–war deportations and Stalin's

(1) Sich Riflemen — the name used for regular military units of the Ukrainian People's Army (UPA) which operated from 1917 to 1919 and was formed from Ukrainian soldiers of the Austro–Hungarian Army and volunteers. For more details see Subtelny 2009.

imprisonments in camps. But alongside the descriptions of suffering, we discover an unyielding faith[2]:

> A new joy has come, which has never been before,
> A little bird flew over the fields of Ukraine.
> The little bird flew, bringing us news,
> That Ukraine has not perished —— Ukraine has risen
> (Christmas Songbook 2023, p. 41)

To justify the legitimacy of distinguishing three dimensions of semiosis (fig.1) we refer to the following considerations: 1) the sign has the power to generate interpretants and through them exerts influence on the interpreter; 2) the representamen generates a) the primary interpretant, which ensures the identification of the code; b) the notional interpretant, which provides reference to the external object of signification and c) the cultural interpretant, which fixes the sign's belonging to a certain conventional system by determining the value of the internal object; 3) the study of the dimensions of semiosis involves a) identification of the code (code dimension); b) discovering the relation of code units and external objects (informational dimension) and c) establishing the relation of code units and internal objects (cultural dimension).

3. "Kolyada": a sign in the space of culture

3.1. *The Spirit of History: the etymology of "kolyada" in the Ukrainian language*

The carol is an explication of discursive semiosis defined as a communication–oriented process of generating texts of culture. Like any other sign, the carol is a) encoded, that is, ready for transmission and interpretation through the representation of a series of conventional means that provide the framework in which the text acquires meaning; b) informative, as it performs a communicative function and c) culturally marked since any generation of meaning is already an act of culture in

(2) Ukrainian carols are translated into English by the author of the article.

its broadest sense. The entire set of verbal and non–verbal codes, their informational content, and cultural interpretation allows to identify carols as a distinct genre — "kolyada".

The interpretative perspective of the term "kolyada" or its "philosophical grammar" is reflected in its etymology. In *The Etymological Dictionary of the Ukrainian Language* (EDUL, vol. 2, 1985, pp. 526–527) "kolyada" is interpreted as "an ancient ritual of celebrating Christmas holidays with songs; a ritual Christmas song; a reward for caroling". It is noted that the word is often used in the diminutive form "kolyadka": "a ritual Christmas song, the ritual of caroling". In this same dictionary, we also find metonymic meanings, such as "a book that contains Christmas songs, a songbook" or "a gingerbread in the shape of 8, which was given to carolers." The word formation paradigm is made up of adjectives, verbs and several noun forms including "pokolad": a refrain to the carol in honour of the host. The compilers of the EDUL suggest that the Proto–Slavic "kolęda": "New Year; Christmas; New Year's or Christmas Eve gift; caroling (rituals and songs)" is an ancient borrowing from Latin: "Calendae (Kalendae)": "calends" "the first day of the month, the day of debt payment" related to "calare": "to call, to summon"[3], akin to Proto–Slavic "*kolkolъ": "bell", Ukrainian "колокі́л", and possibly also to Ukrainian "каля́кати": "to chatter, to babble; to roar, to grunt" (EDUL, vol. 2, 1985, p. 527).

Ukrainian scholars support the idea (Zaslavskyi 2017; Poliek 1925), that Ukrainian Christmas holidays that follow one after another resemble the Roman January calends associated with the cycle of winter holidays[4] that were celebrated lavishly — with masquerades and street festivities. Therefore, the origin of Kalendae should be sought in the Latin "calare", which is related to the Greek κάλανδα.

One more version is proposed by Serhii Plachynda — a Ukrainian writer and ethnographer (Plachynda 1993, p. 62). He argues that

(3) This relation is also mentioned in the etymological dictionary of Latin where "calendae" (the first day of the month) is derived from the Proto-Indo-European *kelhr/*klhr "to call, to summon" (de Vaan 2008, p. 82). In this dictionary, the word is spelled with the initial C, though, the Romans used the letter K, not C, and explained this by saying that they borrowed the word from the Greek καλῶ – "I call".

(4) The festive cycle, common to the entire Greco–Roman world, began with Brumalia in honor of the Thracian Dionysus (from November 24 to December 17), encompassed Saturnalia and Opalies (from December 17 to 23), and culminated in the Kalends (from December 23 to January 1).

Kolyada is the name of the ancient Ukrainian goddess of the sky, mother of the Sun, and wife of Dazhboh. She is recognized as a deity associated with rebirth that was celebrated at the end of the year. Plachynda believes that the name originates from the word "Kolo" — an ancient name for the Sun.

3.2. *Genre features: affiliation to the type of discourse*

From the perspective of cultural semiotics, genre is interpreted as a complex sign (an indivisible unity of signs) "acting" in the cultural space. The semiosic process of interpretation is fundamental for the concept of the sign. Discursive communities objectify their intentions in such signs or groups of signs that are adequately interpreted by all participants in the "model" situation. We consider genres to be repeated functional unities of signs in a repeated communicative situation. Each genre always belongs to a definite type of discourse; however, in case of carols this belonging remains a contentious issue, as characteristic features of different types of discourse have harmoniously converged in the carol. As the latter displays features of folk creativity it is inseparable from religious consciousness. Zakhara asserts that:

> Indeed, religion is a special form of social consciousness that permeates virtually all forms of consciousness. It reflects, in its own way, the great life experience of humanity, a system of emotionally–charged representations and experiences, values, norms of life, and moral ideals. Religion cultivates such humanistic values as love, goodness, tolerance, compassion, mercy, a sense of duty, and justice. All this finds vivid expression in the carol, which pertains to folk creativity rather than to theology (Zakhara 2004, pp. 43–44).

Thus, on the one hand, the carol should be considered the expression of folk theology, and on the other hand, it directly pertains to the transcendent, the highest objective reality. This allows carols to be referred to philosophical discourse with its ontological, epistemological, and axiological dimensions. The ontological dimension concerns the representation of the spiritual and material realities of the world, which

serves as the starting point for understanding the essence, the primal foundation, and the structure of being. The epistemology of carols touches upon the question of the knowability of the world and the ability of thought to accurately reproduce the phenomena of the objective world. The axiological aspect of carols is primarily related to the feeling and experience of universal and national values that play an important role in justifying the basis for actions and motivating behaviour.

Carols provide examples of discussing key problems of the surrounding world and the role of spirituality in their resolution.

There are a few arguments in favour of referring carols to mythological discourse. Mythology is a "reservoir of symbolic creativity and deep emotional sensitivity" (Medynska 2006, p. 116) and mythological discourse serves for the externalization of mythological consciousness through the linguistic coding of mythological representations. For example, in the oldest Ukrainian carols, we find the myth of the creation of the world, when "there was neither heaven nor earth," but only "the blue sea":

> Oh, how it was before the ages. Oh, give me God!
> Oh, how there was neither heaven nor earth. Oh, give me God!
> And there was only the blue sea. Oh, give me God!
> On that sea, fires were burning. Oh, give me God!
> By those fires sat the saints. Oh, give me God!
> (Christmas Songbook 2023, p. 11)

In other versions of the carol, it was a yew tree (or three yew trees) that stood in the middle of the blue sea and three doves, or three falcons sat in it discussing how to build the world. The birds decided to dive to the bottom of the sea and retrieve the gifts of the sea, from which to ceate the world: from the golden stone — the sun, from the silver one — the moon, from the sand — the stars, from the silt — the earth, from the spider web — the heavens (Ostapchuk 2023). According to a later version (already associated with Christianity), three chairs stood on three sycamores and the the Lord Himself, Saint Peter and Saint Paul were sitting on them. The Lord sent Peter to the bottom of the sea to retrieve yellow sand, to scatter it all over the world and to create "heaven with stars, earth with flowers." Neither Peter nor Paul was able

to do this, and finally, the Lord Himself, diving deep into the sea, gathered sand, scattered it, and created heaven and earth.

Ukrainian carols collected in different regions of Ukraine provide many examples of the use of mythological motifs that reach deep antiquity, echo pagan worldview and attest to the connection of carols with everyday labour and the strong belief in their incantatory–magical power. The latter is expressed in the preservation of views that caroling serves the purpose of ensuring that the livestock and children grow well and that things go well in the household (Kyrchiv 2002, p. 41).

Some ritual mythological carols gradually transformed into Christian ones and gained popularity as a genre of religious discourse. The informational dimension of such carols most commonly displays their relatedness to the Nativity Story, and their cultural dimension exhibits reverent attitude to Christian values. Kylymnyk writes that:

> In the 18th century people in Ukrainian churches used to sing their ancient pre–Christian carols during the Holy night Service. In the 19th century the Moscow clergy waged an extraordinary battle against carols in the Ukrainian church. However, when nothing could be done, it was allowed to sing carols from God's Songbook (Kylymyk 1964, p. 39).

The mentioned "God's Songbook"(5) was published in 1790 by the Basilian monks of the UGCC(6) from the Pochaiv Lavra. It was a collection of religious songs that included pieces from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, created by teachers and students of the Kyiv–Mohyla Academy and teachers from other collegiums, and performed by itinerant cantors, poets, and musicians. The original edition contained 238 songs, including 24 carols: 19 in Ukrainian and 5 in Polish. Among them, the most famous are "God Eternal is Born", "New Joy", "Heaven and Earth Now Rejoice". When the church declared ancient Ukrainian carols "pagan" and even forbade their singing, Metropolitan of the UGCC Andrey Sheptytskyi came to their defense and declared

(5) Stored at the Internet Archive. Mode of access: https://archive.org/details/sucho-id-00000443-print-hist-pochaiv-1825/mode/2up (last access 10 May, 2025).

(6) Ukrainian Greek–Catholic Church.

that they were a part of Ukrainian culture that attested to the high religiosity of the people. Only church carols were sung in churches, and over time they increasingly displaced archaic ones, becoming folklorized. The people used melodies from well–known carols, adding new texts. Hnatiuk, in the foreword to the XXXV volume of the Ethnographic Collection, which was published by the Ethnographic Commission of the Shevchenko Scientific Society(7) in 1914 (in two volumes) and contained a unique collection of carols(8), speaks on this matter:

> […] church carols, while they also have their own unique beauty, differ in language and spirit from folk carols as much as heaven differs from earth. Saying nothing about the origin of the two! While folk carols are a product of the common people and originate from the pre–Tatar era, church carols are the creation of spiritual writers and date back to the 17th – 18th centuries (Hnatiuk 2019, vol. 1, p. V).

For obvious reasons the carol can also be considered a genre of ritual discourse, as it is a component of a ritual act. Ethnologists suggest that initially the ritual embodied communication between the world of the living and the world of the ancestors. The winter solstice, from which the length of daylight began to increase, was considered the portal through which ancestors from the Afterlife entered our world. For them to bless the descendants with prosperity, they should have been well received and treated to a festive dinner. The carolers played the role of "grandfathers from the other world" and hid their faces behind ritual masks. They also turned their fur coats inside out to show that they were from another world. They sang carols at the window and the hosts rewarded them through the window: first with ritual bread, then with sausage, and approximately from the eighteenth century, they were given money. As early as the seventeenth century, the ritual of caroling with the Star, which was an attribute of the Vertep (Nativity performance), where roles were performed by carolers, was formed. The history of the vertep in its various meanings has been the subject of many

(7) The Shevchenko Scientific Society was founded in 1873 to promote scholarly research in Ukraine.

(8) Served as one of the main sources for selecting examples provided in this paper.

studies, among which the work of Ivan Franko (1906), published in the Proceedings of the Shevchenko Scientific Society in Lviv, is one of the deepest. Since the carol is the main attribute of the Nativity play, its inclusion in the ritual discourse also seems justified.

We believe that carols should be referred to the discourse of ritual singing that was shaped in the process of Ukrainian ethnos formation and includes several genres. Filaret Kolessa divided them into two groups: 1) connected with different seasonal works and holidays like carols, vesnianky (spring ritual songs), songs to celebrate Trinity, harvest festival songs etc.; 2) pertaining to important events in life like ritual songs sung during the wedding, the funeral etc. (Kolessa 1938, p. 36). Discourse of ritual singing is a valuable treasure of Ukrainian ethnos and manifests its unique traditional culture.

3.3. *Code dimension of Ukrainian carols*

The code dimension of carols is two–fold. Firstly, it is encoded using linguistic units of different levels which make up a repeated sequence of signs. Secondly, this set of signs is set to music or meant to be sung. Discussing the first code we use the term "text" in an extended semiotic sense to refer to "a structure of messages or message traces which has a socially ascribed unity" (Hodge and Kress 1988, p. 6). A system of linguistic signs as an abstract structure is realized or instantiated in each carol and is constantly being reproduced and reconstituted in texts. Typical forms of texts specify the genre of carol and are a major vehicle for their transmission. Ukrainian carols are characterized by the uniformity of metrical and compositional structure. The classical full carol consists of four independent parts: an introductory part (*zaspiv*), main part, part with wishes (*pokoliad*) and a refrain, though there are a lot of carols sung without *zaspiv* and *pokoliad*. The latter can even function as a separate type of carols (see the next paragraph). Most commonly it is a ten–syllable verse with a refrained structure like "Oh, give God." As early as the late nineteenth century, Potebnia (1887) drew attention to the uniqueness of the poetic coding of carols and emphasized that it follows the general principles of folk versification and corresponds to the most ancient Slavic strophic (stanzaic) design, rhyming, and

metrical schemes of epic verses. Potebnia conducted a detailed analysis of their meter and provided the following formula: [(5 + 5) + refrain + (5 + 5)]. Kolessa (1938) also discusses the poetic meter of carols 5 + 5 starting from the earliest records and showing how the forms were regularly expanded or varied in detail.

However, from another perspective, a carol is a Christmas song. Its sung nature is the characteristic feature of the genre. A poem is set to music and the linguistic code combines with the musical one. The latter is archaic, and its musical mode differs from that of other "divine songs" especially from liturgical "sung genres" like hymns or chuch chants (Kachmar 2015). Unlike instrumental music that has no text and is expressive precisely because it "says" nothing, carols' musical code contributes decisively to the atmosphere of the verbal code. The language of carols is lyrical and dramatic, and this is reflected in the musical mode. Applying Tarasti's (2002, pp. 71–85) existential semiotic concept of *situation* defined as "a continuous intermingling of happenings that represent various modes of being in the real contexts in which they occur" (*ibid*., p. 72) we claim that situatedness of carols can be compared to a musical mode described as a type of musical scale coupled with a set of characteristic melodic and harmonic behaviours. Jacobson assigns the musical sounds to the kingdom of signs emphasizing that the elements of music are not simple sounds (sonic substances) but count insofar as they are the goal of intentional act (Jacobson 1971, pp. 551–553). Musical signification parallels verbal signification thus linguistic terminology is applied to discuss the former. Speaking about the carol we describe it as a musical "text" where "the elements are arranged according to the principle of narrative sequences, thereby becoming a signifying continuum" (Tarasti 2002, p. 87). This definition correlates with the definition of the verbal text mentioned above. These two texts cannot function without mutual support. Acustic situations get listened to as virtual situations, as articulations of narratives, that are metaphors of unfolding situations, acts and events (Ojala 2023, p. 294).

Carols are ceremonial and considered to be a type of "folk Christian hymns" (Koshyts 1993, p. 6). Their melodic formula is rather simple with successive gradation of homogeneous structural units that correlate with syllables in the verbal text and make up periods that consist of phrases: antecedent and consequent. Each phrase includes two motives

— ascending and discending. The main part of the carol traditionally reveals the theological content of the feast, and the music mode combination creates the play of "light and shadow": the joy of feast and knowledge of God's wisdom. The joy can be different and has more gradations than "cheerful — sad." Usually, the melodic formula highlights words connected with joy and wonder like *rejoice, celebrate, cheer* etc. or *wonder, miracle, fascination* etc. "Up and down" tones may also illustrate the opposition of Heaven and Earth. This "emphatic rhythm" (Kostiukovets 1993) is also found in refrains where it adds to major — minor opposition in carols, for example in "*Rejoice*! Oh, *rejoice, earth*, the Son of God is born!" the initial major part changes to minor starting with "earth".

Outstanding researchers of Ukrainian carols (Kolessa 1970; Dey 1965; Ivanytskiy 2009) show how "musical dynamization" correlates with verbal coding creating the unique code dimension of carols' semiosis and showing its inseparable connection with their informational dimension.

4. Types of carols: informational dimension of semiosis

The study of the informational dimension of the semiosis of carols provides the basis for their classification based on the carols content. Kolessa studies the carols' themes and reduces their entire variety to five main groups: 1) agricultural; 2) military (knightly); 3) fairy–tale–apocryphal (echoing pre–Christian elements); 4) love; 5) biblical (apocryphal, gospel) (Kolessa 1938). Hnatiuk's classification (Hnatiuk 2019) is based not on themes but on the consideration of the addressee: carols for the host, hostess, sons, daughters, etc. Taking into consideration the informational dimension of semiosis, which establishes a connection with the event semantics of the text, we propose to distinguish historical, mythological, evangelic, apocryphal, eulogistic, and life–related carols.

4.1. *Historical carols*

In a series of carols, we hear the echoes of the knightly and early princely era of Ukraine. Most often such carols contain military

motifs, for example, a warrior helps his commander win a girl during a military campaign or plans to sail down the Danube to serve the lord of Constantinople; or the lord, with his servants, chases the horde, rescues captives, kills the hostile king in a knightly duel, or captures him and returns from war with rich spoils. For example, in the carol from Ivan Vahylevych's collection "Oh, on the clearing, and on the green grass":

Oh, early in the morning!
The Rus' king is riding a horse,
Is riding a horse,
gathers the army…
His yard was taken by the horde,
The horde took it,
the Tatars seized it…
My most loyal servants!
Some bring forth the sharp sword,
Others lead out the Persian horse.
Let me ride, I will chase the horde,
I will take my yard back…

(Folk songs 1983)

In the carol *Are you sleeping, O lord-master?* we find a resonance of the historical siege of the High Castle in Lviv in 1648 under the overall command of Colonel Maksym Kryvonis, which took place during the national liberation war led by Bohdan Khmelnytskyi. The High Castle, which until then was considered inaccessible to the enemy, was taken for the first time in the entire history of its existence:

And among them the oldest lord,
The oldest lord named [name].
Before him — his servants,
Carrying hats, and asking him:
Let us, sir, go to Poland for war,
To Poland for war, to serve
the queen.
— I will not let you go — I will go
with you!...
He is riding his horse and
turns towards the city of Lviv.
Oh, when he turned, Lviv trembled,
Lviv trembled, the whole world
was horrified.

The spirit of the princely era, the chivalric and Cossack epic, is conveyed in historical carols, which are full of vivid imagery and visualization of heroic events.

4.2. *Mythological carols*

These carols are the oldest. They present a picturesque mythological representation of the world, the sun, the moon, the stars, and various natural phenomena. Here we find the mythologeme of the world tree with three peaks and birds — creators of the world on it, embodying the ideal of organic unity and interaction between humans and nature characteristic of primitive beliefs. When discussing mythological discourse, we have already provided examples of carols that verbalize mythological representations. In Hnatiuk's collection, there are no such pre–Christian carols, but we find elements of mythological perception of the world.

And this master has white courtyards,
God, give us!
At his yard, three kings stand.
Oh, they stand, they stand,
and they argue.
Oh, one says that the earth is bigger,
Oh, the second says
that the sky is bigger.
Oh, the third says: Let's not argue!
Let's buy ourselves a silk ribbon,
As we measure it, we will know.
The land is bigger — mountains, valleys,
Mountains and valleys,
and meadows too.
The sky is smaller, for
it is even everywhere.
There is one king — the bright moon,
And another king — the brilliant sun,
And a third king — the gentle rain.

(Hnatiuk 2019, vol.1 p. 64)

In another version of the carol, which contains this mythological motif, the Lord, who says that the sky is larger, sends Peter to measure the sky and the earth with a silk cord. And the Lord's words are confirmed: "The sky is larger, everywhere even. The earth is smaller, with mountains and valleys" (*ibid.*, p. 65).

4.3. *Evangelic carols*

This type of carol is the most widespread. They are based on the Nativity story, which is told in the Gospels of Matthew 2:1–16

and Luke 2:1–19. Carols glorify the newborn Jesus, recounting the story from the Gospel and taking as a model the Biblical doxology "Glory to God in the highest." For example, in the ancient carol "Three Kings and Herod," (Hnatiuk 2019, vol.1, p. 27) it is described how the Blessed Virgin gave birth to her son "in Bethlehem, in a poor menger," "then angels descended from heaven and informed the shepherds in the fields," and the shepherds came to worship the newborn. It also tells us about the star that guided the Persian kings to Bethlehem, who offered all their treasures and sincerely gave gifts to the newborn child, and about the story of Herod, who ordered to find the child and to slay him. Most modern carols belong to the evangelic tradition, such as "Heaven and Earth Now Rejoice," which mentions angels, kings, shepherds, and in the concluding part contains the doxology:

> And we sing of the Born One, and we sing of the Born One
> Let us give glory to God!
> "Glory in the highest, Glory in the highest" —
> Let us sing to Him!
>
> (Christmas Songbook p. 43).

As mentioned earlier, this carol was first published in the "God's Songbook," although it appeared much earlier. It is most likely that this is a Ukrainian carol, though there is a Polish–language version "Dzisiaj w Betlejem" that was first printed in 1878 in the songbook of Jan Sidlecki (Christmas Songbook, pp. 44–45).

4.4. *Apocryphal carols*

In apocryphal carols, the Nativity story intertwines with legends and tales that are not found in the Holy Scriptures. Usually, such carols contain agricultural, fairy–tale, or modified biblical motifs and essentially describe a miracle:

Oh, by the river, at the spring,
A little swallow was bathing.
Oh, that is not a swallow,
But the Holy Mother.
Holy night, bounteous night (refrain).
She gave birth to her son.
And bathed and wrapped him.

Bright little moon, swaddler,
And the dawn, little blanket,
And the sun, little pillow.
As they brought him to the church,
The bells themselves rang,
The church itself opened,
The altars were covered,
The candles themselves were lit

(Hnatiuyk 2019, vol. 1, p. 39)

Most commonly these carols refer to the Biblical event in the context of traditional peasant life. The miraculous birth was taking place in a traditional Ukrainian barn or sheepfold, shepherds were grazing sheep under a sycamore tree in a green field, and the angel from heaven "poured a barrel of wine, treated all the shepherds, and the barrel was still full" (Hatiuk 2019, vol. 1, p. 36). Apocryphal carols revive images and poetics of ancient ritual songs and in this sense come closer to those authored by poets. Some of the latter became folk songs, such as *In Bethlehem the star shines*, in which, when the Blessed Virgin is giving birth to the Son "angels play on a pure golden bandura,"(9) and the kings — "on a pure silver bandura," and the shepherds — "on a copper bandura," and the kobzars(10) — "on an ash tree bandura." The image of a miracle is created: a heavenly–earthly orchestra of angels, kings, shepherds, and kobzars. And this orchestra creates the image of Ukraine:

Dear Jesus, this is your people,
Give, God, God,
Happiness, freedom, the fate of the people, give, God
(Christmas Songbook 2023, p. 59–61).

(9) A traditional Ukrainian musical instrument with many strings.

(10) Ukrainian bards who sang to their own accompaniment, played on a multistringed kobza or bandura.

4.5. *Eulogistic carols*

Elements of praising individual persons can be found in various types of carols; however, there are those that exclusively extol the entire community or specific individuals (hostess, young man, young woman, widow, orphan, etc.). There are all kinds of eulogistic ancient carols. Some are sung in honour of the whole household, all the villagers, and all the guests, while there are also those, and mostly so, that are sung only in honour of a particular person, for example: a priest, a host, a hostess, a young man, a girl, a child, or an elder. That is why every old carol ends in such a way that after singing the proper carol, a song of honour and goodwill is immediately sung for the person for whom the carol was performed. This refrain is called "Pokolad". The addressee principle was applied by Hnatiuk while organizing the corpus he collected. The eulogistic carols emphasize the ritual culture of human relationships, a subtle sense of ethics, and the high poetry of words. Primarily thanks to these carols, we gain a coherent understanding of the domestic life of the patriarchal family, agriculture, hunting, fishing, housing, buildings, domestic and wild animals, culinary practices, and musical instruments. For example, in one of the carols from the subgroup *The Housewife is Adorned*, the housewife is praised, who has "outfits for three storerooms": stockings, boots, dresses, a shirt, a belt, a cap, a scarf, a fur coat, a ring, and golden fabric. And she stores everything "in little pantries and in little chambers" (Hnatiuk 2019, vol.1, p. 223). And the master has great wealth:

Oh, you our lord, lord (name),
In your house, just like in paradise…
You have oxen all in pairs,
You have plows all made of gold,
You have yards all made of timber,
You have tables made of viburnum,
On them are tablecloths all made of silk,
On them are plates
all made of precious materials,
You have fields, like the meadows,
You have bread, like the quiet Danube…,

(Hnatiuk 2019, vol. 1, p. 157)

Further, they praise the host for everything he has in the field, in the barn, and in the chests.

In eulogistic carols addressed to the family, we find the image of the paradise tree with three tops, where the host is on the first top ("gray

falcon"), the hostess is on the second ("gray hen"), and on the third — the children ("swallows"). Eulogistic carols as if transferred people to some other world, close and dear to them, yet completely different from the one in which their poor, distressed life passed. They glorify the greatness of a human being. These are poetic hymns to the master–farmer, the warrior–knight, the hunter, the guardian of the clan and family, the creator of prosperity and a happy life.

"Pokolad" is the organic component of this type of carols. It is usually solemn and at the same time poetic and sincere:

And after that word, we ring the bells,
We ring the bells, we pray to God,
To God in heaven,
for the health of all:
And grant, Oh God,
a harvest of bread,
A harvest of bread,
and God's grace to all.
As rich as fat, peace among people,
Among kings and landlords,
May holy God give everyone,
Wellness and happiness.

(Hnatiuk 2019, vol. 2, p. 290)

The carolers bless the whole family, not forgetting the servants and the livestock, with a long life and good profit and harvest.

4.6. *Life–related carols*

The analysis of the corpus of carols by Hnatyuk and texts from several other collections shows that many carols contain figurative descriptions of life situations and events, which, however, are filled with symbolism and maintain the solemnity of this genre. For example, "The Nightingale in the Garden":

Our host has a new chamber,
A new chamber and
a vineyard garden.
And in that little garden,
The nightingale sings beautifully,
Cheering up the new chamber,
and the garden–vineyard,
and the master of the house,
and the mistress.
Oh, the wild oxen kicked up,
And broke the garden–vineyard,
They draw away the nightingale.
Oh, the close neighbours gathered:
Brought the gray oxen,
Planted the vineyard garden again,
And lured the nightingale again

(Hnatiuk 2019, vol. 1, p. 119)

Life–related carols tell stories how the host sets up the apiary, how he plows the wheat, how he sows. Often such texts contain apocryphal motifs, when the Lord Himself walks behind the plow, and St. Paul leads the oxen, and St. Nicholas sows, and the Holy Virgin carries breakfast. This type of carol also includes those that describe women's work: how she sews for her husband or for the church, goes to fetch water, bleaches fabrics, prepares meals, and so on. Such carols often incorporate exaltation motifs.

Thus, the informational dimension of the semiosis of carols provided the basis for the identification of six types: historical, mythological, evangelical, apocryphal, eulogistic, and life–related carols(11).

5. "Kolyada" in modern Ukraine: Cultural dimension of semiosis

Despite the diversity of types of ancient and modern carols, they share the orientation towards the formation of cultural narrative identity. Paul Ricoeur defines it as a type of identity that a person has access to through the mediation of narrative function and explains that this can be the story of an individual or a historical community. This story must make sense considering what it was, what it is, and what it will be. It must have two main modes: constancy (sameness) and selfhood (self). The first refers to permanence in time — the psychological and physiological continuity, while the second refers to selfhood, which we interpret as agency. Identity is inseparable from consciousness and memory (Ricoeur 1991).

The analysis of the cultural dimension of the semiosis of carols allows to reveal a key aspect of identity — the sense of belonging to culture. The latter intersects with such "related" terms as society, civilization, tradition, and nation (Bruni 2023, pp. 123–124). Thus, our relatedness to culture is also related to how we evaluate social reality from the perspective of "living" past and "living" present. The spiritual principle of such an evaluation is the nation that brings together the past and the present. The first is the "great legacy of memories" and the desire to immortalize

(11) Besides these types one can find parodies and humorous carols in Hnatyuk's corpus. They are not numerous, and their dimensions of semiosis require separate consideration.

the received heritage, the social capital on which the national idea is based, the common glory in the past and the common will in the future (*ibid*., p. 128) Thus, the narrative identity that defines the cultural dimension of the semiosis of Ukrainian carols will be presented as a result of the interpretation of the set of values that determine the answers to three questions: Where did we come from? Where do we stand now? and Where are we heading? The very concept of values has often been considered a way to "measure" culture. For example, in the opinion of Geert Hofstede, who interprets culture as the collective programming of the mind, values are seen as a tendency to prefer one situation over another. Each new value is incorporated into an organized system of values, which remains relatively stable but can reflect the experiences of the community at a specific time. Members of a cultural community share common values because they share a common history (Hofstede 1984, p. 18).

Analyzing the cultural dimension of the semiosis of carols, we discover that their narrative identity reflects the changes occurring in the life of the Ukrainian national community, which modify individual values and focus attention on the events that are significant for this community. Thus, the Kyiv state added to the Christmas traditions carols about princes and their retainers, the Hetmanate — about hetmans and the Cossacks, and the national liberation movement of the twentieth century — about Sich Riflemen, the 21st century — about the soldiers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. For example, the bard from Ternopil, Oleg Vitvitsky, wrote the carol *There in Bakhmut*, which glorifies the Savior and our faith in His support in this terrible war[12]:

Our family – all of Ukraine,
Both the Armed Forces
and the Territorial Defense,
Under God's banner
We are heading to victory!
"Christ is born!"
"Let us glorify Him!"

(12) Also autrhored the *Partisan Alphabet* — a poetic narrative about the life and adventures of a young soldier of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army named Alyarmyk and his friends. For each letter of the alphabet, words and terms have been selected that illustrate the history of the national liberation struggles of Ukrainians during the World War II.

This is a nation–shaping carol, as a nation is not created by ethnographic independence or the antiquity of origin — but only by that mystical force (mystical, because its causes have yet to be clarified), which is called "the will to live."

6. Conclusions

The culture of ethnos speaks a unique language. Ukrainian Christmas carols constitute an important part of national culture and represent a separate genre of ritual discourse. This genre undoubtedly is an extraordinarily multifaceted object of study for semioticians. The article proposes a semiosic approach to the analysis of carols using the code, informational, and cultural dimensions of its semiosis. Reference to the ideas of Charles Pierce and Charles Morris regarding semiosis allowed to outline the theoretical foundations of the research and to justify the legitimacy of distinguishing three levels (perception, reference, evaluative) and three dimensions of semiosis (code, informational, cultural).

At the initial stage of the research attention is drawn to various approaches of interpreting the etymology of the term "carol". The subsequent discussion deals with the discursive attribution of carols. The long history of the development and the variety of forms and plots make the issue of referring carols to the concrete type of discourse rather complicated. There are arguments that support their reference to religious, philosophical, mythological and ritual discourse. The paper substantiates the claim that carols belong to ritual singing discourse and this claim is suppoted by the analysis of the code dimension of carols' semiosis. The latter is proved to be an inseparable unity of verbal and musical codes where melodic formulas correlate with rules of folk versification.

In the subsequent part of the paper the attention is focused on the informational dimension, the analysis of which allowed to come up with the typology of carols, specifically identifying and describing historical, mythological, evangelical, apocryphal, eulogistic, and life–related carols.

Finally, it should be emphasized that a carol, encoded verbally and musically, has, firstly, functional value for the interpreter in certain

historical conditions; secondly, artistic value, as the magnificent "sung poetry" and thirdly, cultural and nation–shaping value for Ukrainians as it functions as our unique native artistic representation of spiritual treasures.

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THE EMBALMING OF LENIN'S BODY: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF A CUMBERSOME CORPSE

Giustina Benedetta Baron

Abstract: The aim of this paper is to discuss the ways in which the embalming of Lenin has fostered an experience of the sacred. This investigation serves a dual purpose: first, it aims to elucidate how the scientific management of Lenin's body could signify the "sacrality" embedded within the political ideology of the party itself, namely Leninism; second, it seeks to clarify the mechanisms that regulate visibility relations among social actors, which may be interpreted as *figurativizations* of more abstract organization associated with the dissemination of knowledge among individuals (Landowski 1989, p.115, it. transl.). In addition, this paper introduces a theoretical framework largely based on René Girard's reflection on the *scapegoat* (Girard 1972) in order to demonstrate the relevance of this case to the study of secular models of *martyrdom*. The case of Lenin's body fosters a model of martyrdom that characterizes the Soviet "pantheon of heroes", primarily because of its emphasis on penitential practices, which constitute the background for self–knowledge in Western Christianity.

Questa indagine persegue una duplice finalità: in primo luogo, intende chiarire come la preservazione del corpo imbalsamato di Lenin possa significare la "sacralità" insita nell' ideologia politica del leninismo; in secondo luogo, mira a definire i meccanismi che regolano le relazioni di visibilità tra gli attori sociali, interpretabili come "figurativizzazioni" di una più astratta organizzazione epistemica, volta ad articolare la diffusione del sapere e l'accessibilità allo stesso (Landowski 1989, p. 115, trad. it.). Infine, il presente lavoro introduce un quadro teorico ampiamente ispirato alle riflessioni di René Girard sul capro espiatorio (Girard 1972), al fine di dimostrare la rilevanza di questo caso nello studio dei modelli di martirio secolare. Il corpo imbalsamato di Lenin promuove un modello di martirio che caratterizza il "pantheon degli eroi" sovietici, soprattutto per l'accento posto sulle pratiche penitenziali, caratteristica determinante per la conoscenza del sé nel cristianesimo occidentale

Keywords: Lenin, Sacredness, Embalming, Body, Russia

Parole chiave: Lenin, Sacro, Imbalsamazione, Mummia secolare, Russia, Semiotica

1. Introduction

The appeals made by Nadezda Krupskaia(1), Lenin's widow, as published in the Pravda on January 29, 1924, did not yield the anticipated results. In the wake of the Bolshevik leader's passing, discussions commenced regarding the preservation of his body, a matter that quickly escalated into a state issue. However, it is clear from discussions between the party leaders and medical doctors in the weeks following Lenin's death (21–01–1924) that the decision to preserve his body forever was not planned beforehand, but emerged gradually and somewhat unexpectedly. This fact was reflected in the remarkable cacophony of opinions voiced by the party leadership(2). However, in late March 1924, it was decided to subject Lenin's body to an experimental embalming procedure proposed by Professor of Medicine Vladimir Vorobiev and the biochemist Boris Zvarsky, who developed a dynamic method of preservation that required regular *re–embalming*, submerging the body in baths with special chemical solutions, substituting its original organic materials with artificial ones, and regularly re–sculpting its shapes and surfaces. This proposal garnered support even among the most skeptical, based on the premise that preserving the body intact would assist the populace in the prolonged process of mourning. Clearly, the most advantageous approach, in order to ensure for the Soviet Union and its symbol that political immortality "which is the objective of every ritual strategy in an era of secularization"(3).

(1) The authenticity of Lenin's testament is contested. (See for example, Canfora 2025).

(2) The only option dismissed was cremation, which Stalin supported, despite reservations expressed by other comrades. Indeed, cremation could serve as a potent weapon against both the Church and religion; however, adopting this practice would necessitate forgoing processions, eulogies, and salutations as ritualistic forms. Initially, there was consideration given to the option of freezing the body, as it was already exhibiting early signs of decomposition. Therefore, after establishing the inadequacy of this technique through meticulous freezing tests, the government ultimately approved a new proposal.

(3) On the relationship between sovereignty and the ritualistic dimension of sacred, see Yelle 2018.

A special commission was periodically studying Lenin's body in a naked state, examining spots on his surface. Scientists have long focused on maintaining the "authenticity" of the body, replacing biological matter with artificial materials to keep it flexible and lifelike, while allowing for the gradual degradation of the original biological matter. Their focus, however, has not been on retaining the biological flesh per se, but rather on preserving its physical form: his *anatomischeski obraz*. This concept encompasses various attributes including appearance, shape, weight, and coloration, as well as dynamic characteristics such as overall suppleness, skin elasticity, joint flexibility, and internal muscle tension (Yurchack 2015, pp.116–118). By the sixth month post–mortem, the embalming of Lenin could be considered complete: in the early days of August 1924, the body was presented for public viewing, (Hutchinson and Zibarskij 1997, pp.15–28) rendered eternal and imperishable akin to relics associated with saints (cf. Tumarkin 1983, pp. 4–6).

In this respect, Christianity fundamentally established two divergent perspectives regarding posthumous bodies: one perceiving accelerated decomposition as miraculous, while viewing unaltered or slowly decomposing bodies as manifestations of sanctity. Hence arose the choice of a transparent sarcophagus, a legacy from Christian tradition but also reflective of contemporary tendencies; consider skyscrapers made from glass and notions that such material could ensure high hygiene standards.

2. Contrasting regimes of visibility: initial remarks

> "If we can preserve the body and observe it[…] why not do so, as it is so dear to us? If science can indeed preserve his body for many years, why shouldn't we?"

Thus asserted Felix Dzerzhinsky, the chairman of the Commission during one of the debates concerning the legitimacy of body preservation (cf. Ingerflom and Kondratieva 1993, op.cit. in Mengozzi 2021, p. 33). This issue holds particular significance, as the exposure of the body

and its preserved physiognomy served as a bulwark against instability: the focus on the face, also corroborated by funeral eulogies, became a fundamental instrument in safeguarding the Party and ensuring trust in Marxist doctrine (*ibidem*). However, while Soviet science asserted its claim over a body emancipated from temporal constraints, Party leaders were preoccupied with inaugurating the mausoleum and legitimizing a form of worship purged of any religiosity(4). The sacred space, the Mausoleum(5), along with its viewing chamber for exposure, parades, and funeral eulogies, constitutes essential components in constructing Lenin's cult, epitomized by his embalming initiative and his designation as an eternal body(6).

However, in contrast to other instances(7), the preservation of Lenin's body maintains a dynamic form that encompasses not only its external appearance but also transcends it. Observers at the mausoleum witness

(4) Lenin's status as a political symbol was firmly established within the core of the regime, with the authorities exercising rigorous oversight over the presentation of his image. The Committee for the Immortalization of Lenin's Memory was tasked with regulating the dissemination of all media works, while the Lenin Institute, officially founded in 1923 and inaugurated in 1924, was designated to collect and preserve his writings.

(5) Moreover, the choice of location for the exhibition was clearly motivated by the historical significance and high symbolism of Red Square — a site that has been witness to pivotal historical and political events. As Federica Rossi has highlighted, Lenin's mausoleum represents a novel architectural typology for Russia — serving both as a memorial building and a public space, encompassing both a mortuary chamber and a podium for political speeches (cf. Rossi 2018, p. 56).

(6) The deceased leader's body emerged as a central element of the nascent cult surrounding his persona. However, the veneration of his memory was not solely a top–down imposition. The desire to honor his legacy stemmed from a profound expression of grief following his death, as well as the strategic maneuvers of the political elite (as discussed further below). The initiatives undertaken by ordinary individuals — such as a teacher inspiring her students to compose poems in tribute to Lenin, a manufacturer enhancing product appeal through the incorporation of Lenin's likeness, an artist striving for recognition through works depicting Lenin, party members invoking his name and memory, and the proliferation of personal names directly associated with Lenin — collectively contributed to the emergence and evolution of the Lenin cult. Prior to its formal standardization in 1926, these grassroots contributions played a significant role in shaping the cult beyond the purview of centralized authority.

(7) In this context, the concept of bodily preservation diverges significantly from that observed in other instances of preservation, whether they be natural, such as bodies encased in permafrost, ice, salt, or sandy soil, or artificial methods involving mummification, cryogenics, or plastination. In these alternative scenarios, the corporeal form undergoes various transformations: mummified remains desiccate, harden, alter in pigmentation, and often become unrecognizable; similarly, frozen and plastinated bodies may retain their superficial appearance yet forfeit flexibility and elasticity (Shin and Bianucci 2021).

Lenin encased within a glass sarcophagus, dressed in a dark suit with only his head and hands visible. They remain oblivious to the fact that the body's joints retain their flexibility, that the internal pressure of its skin is meticulously maintained, and that its imperceptible surfaces are continuously sculpted with precision. Even in contemporary times, Lenin's torso and neck exhibit rotational capabilities, while the skin appears firm and elastic, and the hair on his head remains affixed to the scalp[8]. However, the process of preserving the body was conducted under a veil of strict secrecy, concealed from public view and accessible only to the abstract gaze of the political regime, but never explicitly examined by this regime either. From the perspective of the State's political apparatus, Lenin's body was perceived as malleable and perpetually in flux; conversely, to the ordinary visitors of the mausoleum, it appeared immutable and preserved once and for all (Yurchack 2015, p. 147).

As will be discussed, the presence of these two distinct regimes of visibility does not indicate mere oversight or accidental omission; rather, it reflects a structural tendency inherent in Soviet political culture: the deliberate curation of ideological discourse. From this perspective, the constant preservation and manipulation of Lenin's body can be seen as a semi–symbolic parallel to the selective and constant overproduction of *Leninism(s)* by successive party leaders. However, rather than reflecting a singular, unified effort, both processes represent ongoing negotiations shaped by shifting ideological imperatives; a dynamic influenced less by unified manipulation and more by competing ideological demands.

My hypothesis asserts that although embalming renders the body perpetually visible, it simultaneously serves as a tool primarily aimed at safeguarding the integrity of the state through mechanisms of erasure. This process ultimately hinges on which "version" of Leninism is being endorsed or repudiated. Consequently, the body may function as a "shield" or "screen", potentially concealing selected aspects of the collective body. I believe that an analysis of these empirically observable

(8) The current operations of this research institute, akin to those in previous eras, are obscured by a euphemistically cumbersome designation: "Center for Scientific Research and Teaching Methods in Biochemical Technologies" (Yurchack 2015, p. 117).

figurative manifestations might reveal the fundamental units of meaning that comprise the diverse political identities at play. In this article, it will be illustrated that the modulation of *bodily visibility* can illuminate aspects that transcend corporeality, establishing a dialectic of appearance in which various political actors navigate a tension between "showing" and "hiding." This dialectic relies on a certain degree of *dissimulation*: although Lenin appears to be the primary beneficiary of this collective "sacralization," the actual distribution of its benefits among party leaders suggests that the true locus of communication lies elsewhere. This dissimulation mirrors what Robert Yelle describes in sacrifice and magical practices, where the action appears to be aimed at one recipient (e.g., the deity or the public), but the true recipient and the actual distribution of benefits are obscured. The hidden nature of these practices reinforces the political regime's control, much like how certain sacrifices in magical practices serve not just the deities, but also the practitioners or institutions involved in these rituals; a rhetorical device that has a different effect than what it appears to be aimed at (Yelle 2012, pp. 2–4). As such, my inquiry into the concept of this "precarious visibility" (Asselin, Lamoureux and Ross 2008) will shed a light on the secular reliquary, not only in its discursive capacity but also as a critical factor that can either elucidate or obscure the political medium of the party.

3. The leader's two bodies

At this critical juncture, a comprehensive understanding of the expanded role of this political entity necessitates a retrospective examination of the final years preceding Lenin's demise, during which the schism between Lenin and his "cult" began to emerge. In the spring of 1923, Lenin's health experienced a significant decline following a third stroke in March; concurrently, political rivalries among party leaders intensified, leading Lenin to perceive himself as effectively "erased" from active political engagement during this period. Although the public was kept apprised of his health status through curated reports in Soviet newspapers, these updates ceased in the months leading up to his death,

thereby fostering the illusion that Lenin remained politically engaged (Yurchack 2015)[9]. However, as Lenin was isolated from politics, the Politburo began actively constructing his myth. Between 1922 and his death in January 1924, many of the iconic images and institutions that shaped the Lenin cult were established. Although his previous statements were compiled and lauded, the authentic Lenin was intentionally omitted from this meticulously constructed portrayal. Concurrently, his physical remains underwent a gradual process of *thematic re–categorization* accruing new layers of significance contingent upon the political contexts into which they were subsequently integrated.

As Landowski (1989, p. 115) elucidates, the mechanisms governing visibility relations among social actors can indeed be perceived as figurativizations of more abstract organizations related to the circulation of knowledge among individuals. In such a light, the regimes of visibility in each era, which encompass the relationships between *what can be said* and *seen*, might dictate the nodes of power dissemination. It must be also emphasized, that to the public gaze, Lenin's death was presented as a sudden and unforeseen action: which corresponds to an "explosive" moment in the emotional state of the Subject; however, it resulted from a meticulously prepared agenda over an extended period. The *punctual aspectuality* in this cases induces a peculiar rhetorical strategy, suggesting an external force acting upon the Subjects that has propelled them beyond their own will — thereby somewhat stripping them of

(9) In late December 1922 and early January 1923, as he sensed the impending conclusion of his life, Lenin composed the "Letter to the Congress", directed towards the delegates of the Thirteenth Congress of the Russian Communist Party, scheduled for convening in late spring 1924. These documents held considerable sensitivity, wherein Lenin provided a critical evaluation of the political ideologies and moral characteristics of several prominent party leaders: Leon Trotsky, Grigory Zinoviev, Nikolai Bukharin, Lev Kamenev, and Georgy Piatakov. Lenin articulated concerns regarding Stalin's authoritarian tendencies, intolerance towards dissenting opinions, and discourteous behavior in private interactions — all attributes that rendered him unsuitable for leadership within the party. Lenin issued explicit directives concerning these documents to his secretary, L.A. Fotieva, as well as to his wife. Unbeknownst to Lenin, Fotieva was acting as an informant for the delegates at the Thirteenth Party Congress; however, the letter was subsequently suppressed by Stalin and excluded from the final published transcript of the congress released a few months later. Beginning in the early 1930s, when Stalin consolidated his position as the singular leader of the party, this letter was officially denounced as a forgery created by adversaries seeking to destabilize party unity. Possession of a copy became equated with participation in anti–party activities — a designation that could lead to a death sentence during the height of Stalinist purges (see Yurchack 2015).

full agency regarding their actions. Herein, Subjects are no longer self–Destining but represent themselves as "acted upon," a passive subject dominated by an indeterminate uncontrollable external instance for which they bear no responsibility.

At this point, if we think about the process of embalming as *bodily intrusion* that violates Lenin's personal human body, we can go back to Renè Girard (1972) who theorizes that that sacredness is not an attribute of the object; rather, as clearly demonstrated by the central phenomenon of the *scapegoat*, the sacred operates as both an effect and cause of constant *control* exercised as a safeguard against "violence": controlling cultural reproduction while providing motivation for such control which remains always precarious, thus necessitating continuous re–exercise. In this outlook, in order to avoid possible conflicts resulting from the perpetual successions of Lenin, it became necessary to introduce a *deviation* (a disengagement or *débrayage*) within cultural reproduction processes to halt this effect, that continually arise within a culture(10). The selection of the personal body of Lenin underlines an interesting application of Girard's theory, because by halting decay through embalming and exposing his body in a highly symbolic space, Lenin's corporeal nature is transformed into something "sacred": from an aspectual perspective, Lenin's death is characterized as an event marked by precision where emphasis is placed on its *terminal phase* (death as new life); indeed it is precisely through *managing* this terminal phase that Lenin's life inaugurates an *eternal duration*: socialism on an everlasting global scale. In this process, the corporeal dimension is subject to a fundamental ambivalence: on one hand, the rejection of internal organs denies the reasons for the private body and, in a certain sense, its very nature, depriving it of essential elements; on the other hand, embalming becomes a tool for elevation, as denying the body elevates it, reconciling it with that higher realm of ideology. Henceforth Lenin will become an *abstract collective* (the transformation thus occurs in terms of thematization) entity symbolizing an ideology with eternity as its horizon. In this scenario, death,

(10) It requires establishing value through mutual agreement and objectification within a specific program — a certain redefinition involving particular subjects and objects: "sacred" subjects and objects (and rituals). Furthermore, this "certainty" must be reiterated and constantly re–enunciated in response to ongoing voids of meaning.

a punctual episode triumphantly overcome, becomes emblematic of a widespread conviction: communism shall prevail over time and thereby over death itself[11]. Crucially, as Marina Cattaruzza emphasizes, "Totalitarian regimes might be interpreted as attempts to hypostatize temporality which would present itself as closed — and thus non–historical — even if not necessarily cyclical" (Cattaruzza 2008, pp. 5–22; op.cit. in Mengozzi 2021, p. 54; my translation). The individuality distinct from the masses is thus isolated in a singular exceptionalism: the body of the state (the collective totality) rendered eternal through the *violation of the personal body of its founder*. Through this process, his preserved body not only symbolized the triumph of socialism over mortality but also created a physical, ever–present reminder of the "correct line" of Leninism, ensuring that the Party remained aligned with its foundational truths. What distinguishes Lenin's sacralized political body is that it represented not only his personal legacy but also the institutional immortality of the Party itself.

Ken Jowitt (1992, pp. 1–6) outlined that the Leninist system combined two seemingly contradictory principles: the traditional idea of individual heroism and the modern bureaucratic principle of organizational impersonalism. In this framework, sovereign power was not vested in a charismatic leader, as in absolutist regimes, nor in an anonymous bureaucracy, as in modern democracies. Instead, it resided in the body of the Party itself. Leninism, the doctrine invoked by all Soviet leaders to justify their authority, relied on the ongoing preservation and reconfiguration of Lenin's body as a metaphor for the Party's eternal, impersonal truth. Stalin, despite his overwhelming power, did not

(11) Girard contends that human beings possess an inherent need to emulate the lifestyles of their peers through the mechanism of imitation. Utilizing Greimasian terminology, no value is ascribed unless one actant is aligned with the values of another actant; in this dynamic, the first actant assumes the role of "subject", while the latter adopts the position of "destinant". However, Girard complicates these roles by introducing the concept of *mimetic desire*, which allows for their reversibility. The implications of this assertion are paradoxical: as subjects strive to conform to others in order to forge their identities, they simultaneously forfeit their individuality. The objects perceived as valuable derive their worth solely from third–party actants, which not only undermine the agendas of subjects but also serve to validate them. If these dynamics remain unregulated, they risk culminating in self–destruction, a phenomenon Girard characterizes as "violence." Thus, it becomes imperative to implement a deviation — specifically, a disengagement or *débrayage* — within cultural reproduction processes to mitigate this detrimental effect.

embody sovereign authority; he presented himself as its faithful interpreter, channeling the truth of Leninism. When his interpretation was questioned after his death, the Party distanced itself from Stalin and survived his personal downfall by reaffirming the "true" Leninism. This ritualized transformation ensured that Lenin's legacy and the Party's authority remained intertwined, reinforcing the Soviet system's capacity for self–renewal, even in the face of leadership changes or ideological crises. Every Soviet leader, from Stalin to Mikhail Gorbachev, produced his own version of Leninism. This was possible because each version, regardless of its contemporary meaning, held the position of unquestionable, foundational truth within the Soviet political system. This truth was articulated outside and beyond the Soviet system, and no Soviet leader, not even Stalin at the height of his power, could occupy this position — only the constructed corpse of Leninism could.

Remarkably, in the aftermath of his death, the ideological field was characterized by a proliferation of competing interpretations of Lenin's thought, each attempting to ground its authority in a privileged access to the "true" Lenin, while simultaneously discrediting others as heretical or "deviationist." What emerged was less a concealment of Lenin's positions than a discursive overproduction of Leninisms, each selectively emphasizing different aspects of his writings to justify shifting political goals. Crucially, this process cannot be understood without acknowledging Lenin's own profoundly pragmatic orientation. His political thought was neither fully systematic nor internally consistent; rather, it often exhibited an instrumental flexibility in which theoretical proclamations were subordinated to contingent strategic necessities. The well–documented tension between the libertarian rhetoric of *The State and Revolution* (1918) and the centralizing, bureaucratic practices that shaped the actual Soviet state, an inconsistency noted by Simone Weil in *Écrits historiques et politiques* (1960), exemplifies this contradiction. Lenin's political discourse operated simultaneously on two registers: the static, doctrinal register of ideological legitimation, which sought to stabilize meaning through reference to economic "laws" and historical inevitability, and a mobile, adaptive register of tactical improvisation.

This interplay between doctrinal stabilization and strategic flexibility can be helpfully framed through Eric Landowski's semiotic typology

of interactional regimes (Landowski and Petitimbert 2023), particularly the opposition between *manipulation* and *adjustment*, which offer a critical analytical tool for examining the dialectical interplay between discursive coherence and political improvisation inherent both in Lenin's praxis and its subsequent appropriation within Soviet ideological discourse. Landowski delineates two fundamentally distinct modes of semio–narrative engagement: manipulation and adjustment. The manipulation regime is characterized by strategic intentionality, wherein the addresser endeavors to direct the addressee's conduct according to a predetermined narrative schema, employing modal competencies such as *vouloir–faire* (willingness to act) and *pouvoir–faire* (capacity to act) to achieve specific outcomes. This mode presupposes a hierarchical organization of meaning production, whereby persuasive discourse functions instrumentally to orient subjects towards established objectives. Conversely, the adjustment regime operates without fixed goals or codified scripts; it relies instead on aesthesic competence and relational co–presence, with subjects attuning reciprocally through mutual responsiveness and contextual sensitivity; a process Landowski terms "mutual realization" which unfolds within lived experience rather than through premeditated discourse (*ibidem*).

These two regimes, of rhetorical control and of improvisational governance, coexisted within Lenin's own political practice, and were later reproduced by party elites as both a political necessity and a legitimizing mechanism. Rather than imagining a singular, authentic Leninian essence that was later corrupted, it is more accurate to see Lenin himself as navigating (and often amplifying) the tensions between theoretical rigidity and political plasticity, a duality that his successors merely inherited and re–inscribed through their own interpretive interventions. This semiotic dynamic finds a striking parallel in the treatment of Lenin's physical body after his death. The painstaking effort to preserve and periodically retouch his corpse in the Mausoleum, keeping it lifelike, supple, and perpetually "present", can be seen as a symbolic extension of the same logic that governed the treatment of his texts. Just as his theoretical legacy was subjected to endless reinterpretation, reframing, and strategic citation, oscillating between dogmatic manipulation and opportunistic adjustment,

so too was his embalmed body manipulated and adjusted to resist decay while remaining ideologically usable. In both cases, the goal was not preservation in the strict sense, but a kind of suspended animation: a Lenin who never fully dies, because he must always remain available for ideological projection. The corpse becomes a shield of the discourse: plastic, curated, and situated between manipulation (its artificial maintenance) and adjustment (its periodic refitting in response to physical and political decay). This dual process reveals the deep interconnection between corporeal materiality and ideological signification in Soviet politics, where even death was no closure, but a new modality of control. Applied to the posthumous construction of Lenin's corporeal presence and intellectual legacy, this semiotic model reveals the structural ambivalence characteristic of Soviet ideological production. Accordingly, the proliferation posthumously of competing "Leninisms" does not merely indicate internal ideological fragmentation; instead, it signifies a deeper semiotic instability within the Soviet political imaginary caught between manipulation–oriented doctrinal closure and pragmatically adaptive adjustment regimes. These coexisting modalities thereby reveal not a unified Leninist orthodoxy but rather an inherent structural ambivalence embedded within Soviet political culture.

4. Lenin has died, but Leninism lives!

Broadly speaking, one might assert, echoing Leone's examination of reliquaries (cf. Leone 2014), that the dialectical relationship between encompassing entities (the glass case, the mausoleum, the body) and encompassed entities (Lenin as individual body–soul) merely replicates (at the level of manifestation) the interplay between *system virtuality* and *process realization* (the promises of communism versus their actual phenomenal realization). In this regard, Leone posits that "covering devices" function as forms of débrayage (embalming or displaying the body within a mausoleum), while all unveiling mechanisms represent forms of embrayage (with transparency allowing public visibility). The former conceals what exists yet remains unseen (Lenin is deceased),

whereas the latter reveals what was previously obscured but now manifests (Lenin lives). Within this framework, if embalming signifies that textual articulation transitioning from truth (what is and appears) to secrecy (what exists but does not appear), then exposing the body within a transparent case serves as that textual articulation moving from secrecy (what exists but does not appear) to truth (what is and appears): *Lenin lives!* A subsequent essential consideration concerns how to further articulate the dialectic between the transparency of encompassing entities and the perceptibility of encompassed entities according to applicable plastic categories. In this context, an increase in perceptibility regarding the encompassed entity (Lenin as both body and spirit) prompts a more or less progressive reconfiguration: as transparency heightens for the encompassing entity (the glass case being transparent), so too does it elevate for the encompassed entity. Nevertheless, "overall unveiling" remains largely imaginary since it relies on observers tasked with completing qualities inherent within the case: although visible to sight, access to touch or dialogue remains obstructed. The body exists in suspension; therefore, it falls upon observers to imbue this "body's shell" with ideological essence. This abstract narrative mechanism elucidates why visitors frequently expressed an inclination to transition from imperceptibility associated with life (the immobile suspended body perceived merely as a container for something unexperiencable) toward its antithesis: soul. Consequently, there arises a pragmatic effect derived from this narrative dialectic between encompassing and encompassed elements: "to recognize imperceptibility alongside desire for perception will lead either to elimination or at least attenuation of encompassing entities" (Leone 2014, pp. 609–617). Thus, the relationship between embalmed bodies and immortality presents *dual veridictive implications*: on one hand, an embalmed body affirms authenticity concerning represented events (Lenin lives); on another hand, both case and mausoleum act as authenticating sources for this sacred body. Indeed, visitors could partake in that same here–and–now experience with Lenin's remains; thereby establishing direct connections with him and his corporeal essence, while reactivating a form of enunciational solidarity among Party members (the enunciator) and observer–visitors at his tomb.

As Leone emphasizes, one could argue that it is the reliquary that confer upon the body its status as such, essentially "indicating" it sacrally. While such an assertion holds validity when viewed through an ethical lens grounded in structural semiotics, understanding it from an emic viewpoint reveals that it is not the reliquary which creates the relic; rather, it is the relic creates its own reliquary. Indeed, for the believer though the reliquary is not important in itself but serves merely as an indicative sign of the sacred; in the sense that the adoration reflects reverence towards the entirety from which this relic is but a fragment (*ibidem*).

As previously outlined, the embalming and exhibition of Lenin echoed the models established by Orthodox tradition. However, while the rationale behind this analogy may seem evident; namely, to facilitate the public's adoption and adherence to the dogmas of religious communism, the ritual itself took on a more ambiguous character. Initially, the embalmed body was treated as though it were a living being, only to later undergo a solemn "sacralization", pointing to a macabre and grotesque ritual. Had the hypothesis concerning the Orthodox origins of this image ceremony been accepted, Jowitt's assertion would have been rendered untenable, or at the very least, would have required a more nuanced revision. Nevertheless, there exists an alternative, and more clandestine, explanation: that a purely "laic" *consecratio* offered no foundation for associating the leader's effigy with what is perhaps the most defining characteristic of sovereignty: *its perpetuity*. From a semiotic standpoint, this mechanism establishes a basis for the "contest over meaning" prevalent at the political level, marked by discursive games enacted by various participants (Schmitt 1932). This implies that the essence of the political domain necessitates a specific dynamic of identity construction characterized by the emergence of gaps and associated practices. I contend that an examination of certain expressions found within late imperial and early Soviet constitutions can illuminate this transcendent dynamic, illustrating how the sacralization of power was not only feasible but also profoundly intertwined with the ritualistic dimension associated with a religious gap.

5. Insights into a "supreme idea" through late Imperial and early Soviet constitutions

As Jacub Sadowski outlines, the phrase "to do something not out of fear but for conscience" ("ne za strakh, a za sovest") (Fyodorov 2008, p. 665; op. cit. in Sadowski 2022, p. 2058) serves as an idiomatic expression within the Russian language that encapsulates the fundamental principle of acting with moral responsibility and conscientiousness. The connotations associated with this expression align seamlessly with the delineation of an individual's obligation to the monarch, thereby transcending the limitations imposed by secular law. The characterization of the tsar as a "sovereign and unlimited Monarch" or as the "possessor of the Supreme Sovereign Power" (Sadowski 2022, p. 2058) inherently implies an expectation that his commands be executed with sincere intent, necessitating no further explanation (Uspenskij and Zhivov 2012). Indeed, the invocation of God situates the Russian power structure within a cosmological framework, thereby legitimizing its legal architecture through religious underpinnings. This formulation exemplifies the extensively documented occurrence surrounding the sacralization of authority figures, while simultaneously reflecting adherence to the historio–sophical doctrine of the "Moscow–Third Rome" (Lotman and Uspenskij 1984). Consequently, within legal texts that outline governance structures in the Russian Empire, references to God function not only as instruments for religious legitimization of sovereign authority but also symbolize an overarching "supreme idea" deeply embedded in conceptualizations of state power prevalent in Russian culture. Building upon Sadowski's insights, we argue that the concept of God functions as an apophatic "rhetorical" echo within the first Soviet constitution, symbolizing supreme ideas that are integral to political authority. These ideas contribute to the sacralization of the collective body and establish the locus of sovereignty as external to the body of the system itself (Lenin). In fact, this rhetorical echo extends beyond the divine; it encompasses all worldview and mythological frameworks embedded within Russian constitutional constructs, which, whether implicitly or explicitly, allude to any form of transcendent ideal.

The introductory section of *The Constitution of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic* (1918) includes the Declaration of Rights for Toiling and Exploited People adopted by the Third All–Russian Congress of Soviets. The discrete points within this internal structure established foundational articles constituting not merely legislative poetics but performative acts. For example, Article One proclaims that "Russia is declared a Republic of Soviets representing Workers', Soldiers', and Peasants' Deputies. All authority at both central and local levels shall reside within these soviets." In Article Seven, which functions concurrently as both declaration and political directive, it asserts:

> The Third All–Russian Congress of Soviets […] maintains that during this critical phase of proletarian struggle against its oppressors, there exists no rightful place for exploiters within any governmental institution. Authority must be wholly and exclusively allocated to the working masses and their duly authorized representatives — the soviets representing workers', soldiers', and peasants' deputies (Sadowski 2022, pp. 2062–2963).

The semantics inherent in these sentences prompt reflections not only on how orders are executed or the attitudes toward their execution, but also on the interpretations of their rhetorical dimension. This dimension is embedded in the orders themselves — an essence that becomes apparent not merely through content, but through its form, which is imbued with repeated references to the proletariat, now assuming the role of the sovereign, god–like authority. This echoes the rhetorical "power" of an enchanted structure. Similarly, what precisely constitutes the body of the state encompasses two distinct dimensions: mortal and immortal, personal and sacred, enchanted and scientific. The first dimension, a quasi–biological mortal body, transcended the individual biology of each party member and leader, achieving a state of perpetual renewal with each successive incarnation throughout Soviet history. In contrast, the second dimension, the immortal body, represents the external foundational truth inherent to Leninism. Ineed, as Yurchak emphasizes, the material presence of Lenin enshrined

within his mausoleum exemplifies one aspect of this duality concerning party sovereignty (Yurchak 2015).

In sum, although Leninism maintained its status as an unquestionable external truth, its practical implications evolved over various historical epochs: from Stalin's Short Course to Gorbachev's attempts to reestablish an "unknown Lenin", among others. This duality involved not only ongoing manipulation and reinterpretation of Lenin's writings and biographical details but also a continuous reshaping and reconstruction of his physical embodiment.

Such a persistent emphasis on the authenticity of the face, corroborated by restrictive regulations concerning paper reproductions and the photographers permitted at ceremonies, contributes over time to the sedimentation within the collective imagination of a cognitive type (Eco 1997) as an integral component of the cultural and historical memory of the nation. In this context, the visual memory of the leader, cultivated through meticulous embalming, frames, posters, and official images disseminated by propaganda, has served as a foundation for intriguing re–semantizations manifested in translations, reconfigurations, and transmedial migrations that span from artistic domains to consumer contexts. A face gradually transforms into a *cognitive type*, (TC) perpetually reproduced, referenced, and emulated; it becomes subject to parodies and syncretic forms of hybridization that are occasionally deemed blasphemous.

6. A model of martyrdom

Another critical element to consider in the present analysis is the international community, which assumes the role of sympathetic observer and engaged participant in collective mourning. For instance, Antonio Gramsci published an extensive article succinctly titled "Leader" in issue number one of the new series of "L'Ordine Nuovo" (March 1924), presenting a brief treatise on leadership, predicated on the premise that every state operates as a dictatorship led by a figurehead alongside a select few. Notably, upon receiving news of Lenin's death while in Vienna, Gramsci conveyed his initial reflections in a letter addressed to his wife Julka, in January 1924:

> It will never be possible to prevent great masses from synthesizing Revolution into certain names that seem to embody all aspirations and pain felt by oppressed working–class masses […] An incident occurred in an Italian village: three days after Lenin's death, an agricultural laborer who was communist died […] he chose to be buried dressed in red with 'Long Live Lenin' inscribed on his chest. Lenin had passed away and wished for such burial. Within significant portions of poorer and more backward populations, these names take on almost religious mythic status. This is a force that must not be destroyed" (cf. Gramsci 1924; cited in Santucci 1992, p. 204; my translation)[(12)].

If we accept this hypothesis, it is crucial to note that they Lenin's body was also set within an educational and pedagogical frame: by showcasing Lenin, exemplifying perfect moral integrity and total devotion to the Cause, the Soviet ideology encouraged preferred representations for legitimization purposes regarding the worker's body, both as a reference to a common "creed" (the proletarian revolution) and as a memory of the sacrifices made by its founder and his total devotion to the collective cause. As such, in promoting a vision of a penitential society, it presented the cultural reference category of *smirenie (*representing humility and subjugation imbued with emotional connotation) whose religious origins were traceable to submission to God (Piretto 2004, p. 4). In exploring the role of productivity within Soviet ideology, Peter Kenetz highlights how the political education system, even during the civil war, placed a strong emphasis on productivity as a central value, corroborating that of sacrifice. As Kenetz emphasized:

> Even during the civil war, the political education system stressed the importance of productivity. Not surprisingly, in the 1930s, productivity became the dominant theme of Soviet propaganda. […] The regime selected a group of workers and helped them to vastly overfulfill their norms in order to hold them up as examples. The movement, named

(12) Non si potrà mai evitare che nelle grandi masse la Rivoluzione si sintetizzi in alcuni nomi, che sembrano esprimere tutte le aspirazioni e il sentimento dolorante delle masse operaie oppresse […] In un villaggio italiano è successo questo fatto: tre giorni dopo la morte di Lenin è morto un salariato agricolo, comunista […] egli si è fatto seppellire vestito di rosso, con sul petto scritto "Viva Lenin". Lenin era morto, e ha voluto essere seppellito così. Questi nomi, in una grande parte della massa più povera e arretrata, diventano quasi un mito religioso. È questa una forza che non bisogna distruggere." (cf. Gramsci 1924, op.cit. in Santucci 1992, p. 204).

> after a miner, A. Stakhanov, brought considerable benefits: it took advantage of the genuine enthusiasm that may have existed among segments of the population for the socialist transformation of their land, and enabled the factories to demand more from the ordinary worker" (Kenez 2022, p. 657).

From this vantage point, a body called upon to bear witness to labor and exertion is more reflective of its subjugation to the collective than of its autonomy or individuality. This raises a critical issue regarding the public legitimization of bodily representation, which is intrinsically tied to the rejection of individual needs, an avenue through which the specter of individualism may have been concealed. The individual, thus, was stripped of personal time and subjected to the influence of a collective entity that embodied both religious and political–ideological characteristics, as well as prevailing mentalities and customs. Indeed, the bodies of individuals were inseparable from the divine body of the state. Through sudden "hierophanies", such as purges, persecutions, and arrests, the state appeared to enforce strict compliance with the regulations that governed the correspondence between the "mundane" aspects of life and the transcendent dimensions of ideology. An example of this can be found in the repression tied to the forced collectivization of land–owning peasants (kulaks), which must be framed within a broader context of the suppression of individual needs. This repression eventually led to a crisis marked by a sharp rise in suicide rates. In response to this alarming phenomenon, the Party introduced a new dogma in 1925, officially prohibiting suicides, branding them as signs of spiritual weakness and a lack of faith in the collective cause (cf. Mengozzi 2021, pp. 60–61). In this context, Lenin's embalmed body was imbued with specific guarantees of legitimacy by Soviet power, becoming a paradigmatic symbol of martyrdom — devoid of physical status or individual needs. Lenin himself had sanctioned this interpretation of his role as the protector of ideology, with subsequent attacks on his body underscoring its perception as a foundational pillar within the Party's doctrinal structure. The first assault on his embalmed remains occurred on March 19, 1934, when Mitrofan Nikitin, a disillusioned farmer frustrated by corruption and material deprivation, attempted

to shoot Lenin's body before taking his own life shortly thereafter. In July 1960, another individual, Minibaev, broke through the protective glass surrounding Lenin's tomb, damaging his visage and necessitating extensive restoration. The most recent documented attack occurred on September 1, 1973, when an assailant detonated explosives near the sarcophagus, causing multiple injuries and two fatalities, though Lenin's body and sarcophagus remained intact. In post–Soviet Russia, only occasional incidents have attracted media attention; notably, in 2010, an individual approached the mausoleum's podium, demanding that Lenin's remains be buried and the mausoleum destroyed. More recently, in 2015, political activists poured holy water on the mausoleum, calling upon Lenin to "Rise and walk!"

7. Conclusions

As we have observed, the project of embalming Lenin gradually took shape within a complex political cosmology, one that remained largely obscured from the perspective of the various actors involved. This phenomenon, characterized by the intertwining of ritual and sovereignty, is not unique to the Soviet context but is reflective of broader models of sovereign power (Yelle 2012). The rituals that sustain the perpetuity of sovereignty vary across regimes and may appear irrational or even bizarre to external observers. In this context, the locus of sovereign power within the Leninist polity did not reside in the individual leader's embalmed corpse, but in the party itself, which was sacralized through intricate political mechanisms. This framework can be particularly relevant in shedding light on the enduring models of sovereignty present in Russian culture. These practices, though seemingly disconnected from overt religious or sacred rituals, subtly reinforce the sacralization of power and contribute to the perpetuation of certain models of sovereignty in ways that are not always transparent or easily understood. In discussing the complexities of sacred representations, Basso Fossali offers a crucial insight into the nature of sacred texts and their translations. As he has emphasized:

> The sacred cannot merely articulate sacramental values but must exist on the level of enunciation as sacred; translations must not entirely diminish the original verb, lest their content — regardless of its determinacy or indeterminacy — lose its veritative significance (Basso Fossali 2008, p. 151; my translation).

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NAKĪR ET MUNKAR, ANGES OU DÉMONS?

Mohamed Bernoussi

Abstract: In Muslim eschatology, death is seen as a transition to the afterlife, or more precisely to paradise or hell. But the grave can already be one or the other. It can turn into a place of terrible punishment, but it can also be a pleasant place that resembles paradise in many ways. It depends on the behavior of the believer, but especially on the two angels who play a key role in determining the outcome of his life. In fact, Nakīr and Munkar are two angels responsible for collecting the believer's benefits and misdeeds during his life, one on his right collecting the positive behaviors and the other on his left collecting the negative actions. Since they have never been the subject of a systematic study related to their genealogy and have been mentioned incompletely and scatteredly over the centuries, this study focuses on these two key figures of Muslim eschatology. It is divided into two parts: The first, diachronic part, attempts to reconstruct the genealogy of the discourse on these two angels in the sacred texts, the Qur'an and the sayings of the Prophet, as well as among the exegetes who later took up the subject; the second part aims to determine their place in Muslim eschatology and the role they play in the narrative economy of stories about the living dead and in defining a new type of narratives, sometimes characterized by their accidental aspect. We will try to find explanatory elements in Muslim casuistry.

Dans l'eschatologie musulmane, la mort est considérée comme une transition vers l'au–delà, plus précisément vers le paradis ou l'enfer. La tombe devient dès lors le lieu d'une nouvelle existence pour le mort. Elle peut se transformer en lieu de châtiments terribles comme elle peut être un lieu agréable, proche par de nombreux aspects du paradis. Cela dépend du comportement du croyant, mais surtout des deux anges qui jouent un rôle capital dans la détermination de l'issue de la vie. Cette étude est dédiée à *Nakīr* et *Munkar,* deux anges chargés de recueillir les bienfaits et méfaits du croyant: l'un à sa droite recueille les comportements positifs et l'autre à sa gauche les actions négatives. N'ayant jamais fait l'objet d'une étude systématique liée à leur généalogie et faisant constamment l'objet de mentions

ou de notes de lecture, ces deux personnages clefs de l'eschatologie musulmane seront ici analysés du point de vue de leur place et leur rôle dans l'économie narrative des récits de la tombe. Cette étude sera divisée en deux parties: la première, diachronique, tentera de reconstruire la généalogie du discours sur ces deux anges dans les textes sacrés, *le Coran* et les dires du prophète, ainsi que chez les exégètes qui se sont emparés par la suite du sujet; la seconde partie a pour objectif de déterminer leur place dans l'eschatologie musulmane et le rôle qu'ils jouent dans la construction de la subjectivité du mort et dans la détermination d'une narration indéterminée qui fait écho à l'eschatologie musulmane en général très marquée par la connaissance de l'issue des choses réservée exclusivement à Dieu.

Keywords: Muslim eschatology, Nakīr and Munkar, Muslim casuistry

Mots clefs: Eschatologie musulmane, Nakīr et Munkar, Casuistique musulmane.

1. Généalogie du discours sur les deux anges

Nakīr et Munkar ont fait l'objet depuis le siècle dernier d'un intérêt, relatif certes, mais suffisant pour attirer l'attention sur la place de choix qu'ils occupent dans la littérature de 'adāb al–qabr (châtiment de la tombe). Wensinck (1932) est le premier à s'y intéresser dans un célèbre article de *l'Encyclopedia britannica* reproduit dans *l'Encyclopédie de l'islam*[1]; ce qui l'amène à en parler, c'est son intérêt pour l'eschatologie musulmane. Il note que les sourates ne nomment pas les deux anges, mais en parlent seulement, tantôt en évoquant les châtiments de la tombe comme s'ils étaient infligés par Dieu, tantôt par les anges; l'auteur remarque la frappante ressemblance avec des sources hébraïques et exprime sa réserve quant à l'hypothèse d'instruire le sens de Nakīr et Munkar qui signifie «l'aversion pour quelque chose». Louis Gardet (1967) s'y intéresse aussi pour rappeler que l'interrogatoire se déroule en présence d'Ibliss qui essaye de perturber le mort et de le confondre pour ne pas répondre comme il faut aux questions.

Ces évocations globales de Nakīr et Munkar dans des perspectives générales relatives à la théologie ou à l'anthropologie musulmanes suggèrent le rôle capital qu'ils jouent dans le succès du genre de *'adāb all qabr* qui a continué à opérer jusqu'à nos jours. Nakīr et Munkar nous

(1) Bearman 1932.

intéressent ici d'un point de vue textuel, objet de cette première partie qui relate leur naissance et analyse les textes qui en parlent.

Le premier texte d'autorité ne nomme pas Nakīr et Munkar, car dans le *Coran* aucune sourate n'évoque ces deux noms. En revanche, quelques sourates évoquent des anges qui châtient les morts en les frappant par devant et par derrière. On peut en citer ici quelques unes:

{فَكَيْفَ إِذَا تَوَفَّتْهُمُ ٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ يَضْرِبُونَ وُجُوهَهُمْ وَأَدْبَٰرَهُمْ}

Qu'adviendra–t–il d'eux quand les Anges les achèveront, frappant leurs faces et leurs dos ?

[MOUHAMMAD:27]

https://quranenc.com/fr/browse/french_hameedullah/47/#27

{وَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنِ ٱفْتَرَىٰ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ كَذِبًا أَوْ قَالَ أُوحِيَ إِلَيَّ وَلَمْ يُوحَ إِلَيْهِ شَيْءٌ وَمَن قَالَ سَأُنزِلُ مِثْلَ مَآ أَنزَلَ ٱللَّهُ وَلَوْ تَرَىٰٓ إِذِ ٱلظَّٰلِمُونَ فِي غَمَرَٰتِ ٱلْمَوْتِ وَٱلْمَلَٰٓئِكَةُ بَاسِطُوٓاْ أَيْدِيهِمْ أَخْرِجُوٓاْ أَنفُسَكُمُ ٱلْيَوْمَ تُجْزَوْنَ عَذَابَ ٱلْهُونِ بِمَا كُنتُمْ تَقُولُونَ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ غَيْرَ ٱلْحَقِّ وَكُنتُمْ عَنْ ءَايَٰتِهِۦ تَسْتَكْبِرُونَ}

Et quel pire injuste que celui qui fabrique un mensonge contre Allah ou qui dit : 'Révélation m'a été faite', quand rien ne lui a été révélé. De même celui qui dit : 'Je vais faire descendre quelque chose de semblable à ce qu'Allah a fait descendre.' Ah ! Si tu voyais les injustes lorsqu'ils seront dans les affres de la mort, et que les Anges leur tendront les mains (disant) : 'Laissez sortir vos âmes ! Aujourd'hui, vous allez être récompensés par le châtiment de l'humiliation pour ce que vous disiez sur Allah d'autre que la vérité et parce que vous vous détourniez orgueilleusement de Ses versets.'

[AL–AN'ÂM:93]

https://quranenc.com/fr/browse/french_hameedullah/6/#93

La seconde sourate évoque des anges chargés à la fois de recueillir l'âme du mort et de déclencher immédiatement les châtiments sans évoquer quoi que ce soit de la visite, de l'interrogatoire et de ce qui s'ensuit. Elle évoque le châtiment du feu, sous–entendant que la tombe peut devenir ou déboucher sur l'enfer, comme le soutiennent tous les exégètes.

Les hadīths du Prophète vont être beaucoup plus explicites quant aux aspects physiques et moraux des deux personnages en question ; ils vont présenter les deux anges de façon progressive, d'abord sans révéler leur nom. Le ḥadith rapporté par Muslim relate l'histoire suivante :

> D'après Ibn'Abbâs, le Prophète passa un jour par deux tombes, il dit : 'Ceux qui y sont ensevelis subirent des tortures et pourtant ce n'est pas pour des péchés capitaux. En effet, l'un colportait des médisances ; quant à l'autre, il ne s'essuyait pas après avoir uriné'. Ceci dit, il se fait apporter une palme humide, la partagea en deux, planta chacune des deux parties devant une tombe, puis dit : 'J'espère que leurs tourments seront allégés tant que ces deux parties restent vertes'. (439).

Dans d'autres hadīths, les tortures sont liées à des anges, mieux encore à deux anges qui vont avoir un nom, un visage et des traits caractéristiques:

> Dans le *Sahīh* d'Abu Hātil d'après Abū Hurayra qui a dit, le prophète a dit: Lorsque le mort est enterré, deux anges noirs et bleus appelés *Nakīr* et *Munkar* viennent le voir et lui demandent que disais–tu? et l'autre de répondre: je disais qu'il n'y a de Dieu que Dieu et que Muhammad est son prophète, alors ils lui disent: nous savions tout cela; sa tombe alors s'élargit de 70 coudes sur 70 coudes et s'illumine. Il leur demande : allez voir ma famille et annoncez–leur la nouvelle, et eux de lui répondre, dors avec le sommeil du marié que seul l'amour de sa femme éveille jusqu'au jugement dernier […] » (Ibn Qayyim 1992, p. 78).

Un second hadīth va dans ce sens tout en accentuant les traits des deux personnages. On peut lire ainsi ce portrait délibérément destiné à produire des effets d'épouvante:

> Al–Tabarani a repris à la suite du hadīth d'abū Hureira qui a dit : nous avons accompagné le prophète à un enterrement, à la fin lorsque tout le monde est parti, le prophète a dit : il est maintenant en train d'entendre le bruit de leurs babouches, viennent le voir Nakīr et Munkar, leurs yeux sont comme des pièces de cuirs, leurs crocs comme les cornes des vaches, et leur voix comme le tonnerre… Après on lui ouvre une voie sur l'enfer et on lui jette des scorpions et des dragons qui avec un seul souffle sur la terre la rendrait stérile pour toujours, et la terre se resserre sur lui jusqu'à confondre ses côtes. (Ibn Rajab 1985, p. 25).

A partir du IIème siècle, les anges et leur nom évoqué dans des hadīths analogues à ceux vus plus haut vont recevoir un appui et une accréditation inconditionnelle dans la tradition, notamment dans le *al–Fiqh al–akbar*(2) attribué à Abī Hanīfa. Ils vont gagner en traits caractérisant leur face, leur allure et leur corps. La raison de ce sursaut et de cet appui inconditionnel, on peut la chercher dans les désaccords, voir les conflits qui opposaient les traditionalistes et leurs adversaires, les Mutazilites. Ces derniers vont en effet de façon générale durcir les lignes interprétatives du *Coran*, mais en particulier mettre la reconnaissance des châtiments de la tombe au premier plan de la profession de foi musulmane. Les Mutazilites défendaient à l'époque l'idée que les châtiments de la tombe et que Nakīr et Munkar sont des métaphores et ne doivent en aucun cas être considérés d'un point de vue littéral. C'est pour cela que l'on peut retrouver par exemple dans les articles 18 et 19 de la *Waṣiyyat d'Abū Ḥanīfa* : « Nous confessons que le châtiment dans la tombe aura lieu sans aucun doute. Nous confessons que vu les traditions sur le sujet, l'interrogatoire réalisé par Munkar et Nakīr est un fait réel ».

L'expression *fait réel* fait désormais partie de la profession de foi musulmane et toute l'exégèse qui suit va en détailler et en ratifier l'importance.

At–Tirmidi (m.279 :892) évoque dans son *Jāmi' As–sahīh* des hadīths attribués au Prophète qui dépeignent avec encore plus de précision les deux anges, leur attribuant des yeux bleus ou verts, une peau noire et une violence insoutenable. AtTirmidī ajoute cependant pour respecter la tradition philologique d'authentification des textes sacrés qu'il s'agit de hadīths d'authenticité sûre ou qui doit l'être vu le but visé. Ceci a donné lieu à une pratique intertextuelle qui autorise d'autres personnes supposés témoins de faits similaires à les raconter même si le trait est forcé ou exagéré. Cette pratique a connu un sort sans précédent car tout simplement exagérer ou amplifier, voire inventer est une chose qui se justifie par la noblesse du but visé, à savoir édifier les âmes. Et voilà que quiconque animé par cette

(2) Le livre est attribué à Abū Hanīfa et fait partie de la doctrine salafiste, c'est–à–dire d'une tendance qui prône le retour au *Coran* et la prédilection donnée au sens littéral. Le livre a eu beaucoup de succès grâce à sa forme succincte composé de *matn*, c'est–à–dire d'arrêtés sur diverses questions de la jurisprudence musulmane formulés de façon brève et tranchée pour ne pas dire inconditionnelle. Ce livre va susciter beaucoup de commentaires et d'exégèses qui ont fini par le transformer en prétexte.

ambition morale peut se permettre de rapporter des dires attribués au prophète et ajouter davantage de choses sur ces créatures aux cheveux longs et aux yeux bleus phosphorescents, crachant le feu et marchant sur leurs cheveux longs et creusant la tombe avec des crocs aussi longs que les cornes d'une vache. Nakīr et Munkar font l'objet de portraits et de descriptions de plus en plus hideuses, frôlant parfois le burlesque.

A partir du quatrième siècle, on assiste à davantage d'intérêt pour *'adāb al qabr* (Châtiments de la tombe) et pour Nakīr et Munkar au point de consacrer à ce sujet des volumes à part contrairement au passé où ils étaient traités avec d'autres questions du dogme musulman dans des sommes.

Al–Bayhaqī[3] (384–458) renforce cette tendance ouverte par le Fiqh Akbar attribué à Abū–Hanīfa en composant un volume intitulé *Ithbāt 'dāb al qabr wa su'al al–malakayne* (La preuve du châtiment de la tombe et de la question des deux anges). Le volume, composé de trente et un chapitres, détaille les preuves en citant de façon systématique les sourates consacrés à la vie après la mort et les exégèses destinées à en expliciter le sens, quitte à ajouter parfois des choses qui ne sont clairement pas citées dans le texte d'origine. Le chapitre consacré à l'affirmation de la parole des croyants comme le stipule la sourate de Ibrāhīm dans le verset 27: "Allah affermit les croyants par une parole ferme dans la vie présente et dans l'au–delà" est étayé par sept hadīths; celui de la menace de 'adāb al–qabr sur les mécréants par cinq hadīths; ceux consacrés à Nakīr et Munkar, étayés par 41 hadīths; et enfin ceux qui y croient, par 11 hadīths; et ceux qui n'y croient pas, par 14 hadīths.

Ce décompte est important, d'abord il révèle un nouveau souci de regrouper à part les dires consacrés au sujet et d'autre part de dire certaines choses, mais sans les dires explicitement. On peut penser à tort qu'il ne s'agit que de redites déjà existantes dans toutes les sommes des dires du prophète, mais cette nouvelle réorganisation a une signification à part. On ne peut pas dire que Al–Bayhaqī n'a rien dit de nouveau. Ce serait une erreur, car ici la disposition des matières est nouvelle.

Ibn Qayyim (696) est sans doute le plus éloquent sur ce sujet et le plus suivi par la postérité. Il consacre un volume entier au sujet de

(3) Abū Bakr Ahmad b. Hussein Al–Bayhaqī est né à Bayhak (384) ; il fut le disciple de Abū Abdillāh Al–Hākim, de Abū Bakr b. Fourk, de Al–Asbahānī et de Al-Baghdādī. Il composa de très nombreux ouvrages parmi lesquels un qui intéresse de près notre sujet, intitulé : *Hayāt al–anbiyā' fī qubūrihim* (La vie des anges dans leur tombe).

l'après–mort et quelques chapitres à Nakīr et Munkar. Mais il se démarque de ces prédécesseurs par le choix d'un fil conducteur, celui de l'âme. Ibn Qayyim a senti plus que quiconque la gravité des objections des Mutazilites, l'importance de l'âme par rapport à la question du châtiment de la tombe et particulièrement par rapport à Nakīr et Munkar. Ce volume réunit donc tous les dires du prophète et des exégètes sur l'âme des morts et des vivants, la communication entre eux, ainsi que tous les aspects concernant les lieux où ces âmes se déplacent, se réunissent et s'informent de ce que disent les vivants. Ibn Qayyim fait le point sur ces questions en défendant farouchement la réalité du châtiment de la tombe et de tous les personnages clefs qui y participent. Nakīr et Munkar acquièrent dans ce contexte plus de présence et de réalité. Les nombreuses évocations des dires des autres exégètes tendent à clarifier les choses et ratifier définitivement la réalité du châtiment de la tombe, voire fixer une seule et unique ligne interprétative pour des textes qui peuvent en supporter plusieurs. Selon l'auteur chaque fois que l'on parle des anges, il s'agit de Nakīr et Munkar et il n'y a aucune ambiguïté là–dessus comme essayent de le relayer les Mutazilites et d'autres contradicteurs qui doivent être blâmés pour cela. Il affirme de façon ferme et inconditionnelle son opinion à ce sujet:

> Beaucoup de Mutazilites ont dit: il n'est pas convenable d'appeler des anges de Dieu, Nakīr et Munkar, car le Munkar est juste le mot qui désigne le résultat du balbutiement du mort lorsqu'il est interrogé, tandis que le mot Nakīr exprime la réprimande des deux anges.
> As–sālihī et Sālih ont dit à ce sujet : le châtiment de la tombe s'applique sur le mort sans rendre l'âme au corps, et le mort peut souffrir, sentir la douleur et le savoir sans l'âme et cela concorde avec les paroles des Karamias.
> Une partie des Mutazilites ont dit que Dieu dans sa majesté fait souffrir les morts dans la tombe et leur inflige des douleurs sans qu'ils les ressentent, mais lorsqu'ils sont ressuscités le jour du jugement dernier, ils retrouvent ces douleurs et les ressentent ; ils ont ajouté à ce sujet : la situation des tourmentés de la tombe ressemble à celle des personnes ivres ou évanouies, si on les frappe, ils ne ressentent rien, quand ils retrouvent leur esprit, ils ressentent la douleur des coups.
> Un autre groupe de Mutazilites a rejeté catégoriquement le châtiment de la tombe comme Derār b. Amer et Yahyā b. Kāmel selon le dire

> de Al–Murīsī, et ce sont des dires de gens corrompus et égarés. (Ibn Qayyim 1992, p.81).

Ibn Qayyim s'attaque ici à une des contradictions et des conséquences paradoxales du châtiment de la tombe et de Nakīr et Munkar ; paradoxes pointés du doigt par les Mutazilites comme il en rend compte lui–même avant de les condamner fermement. Selon les mêmes Mutazilites, si on suit jusqu'au bout l'idée du châtiment de la tombe et l'effet de terreur et d'épouvante que provoquent les châtiments du mort, cela signifie que ce dernier a un corps, qu'il ressent et qu'il est vivant. Or comment être vivant dans une tombe? La chose est paradoxale, non seulement d'un point de vue logique, mais aussi d'un point de vue narratif ou sémiotique. Rappelons comment fonctionne le sens ou la narration d'un point de vue sémiotique:

> Aucune chose, objet ou personne, ne peut acquérir un sens si elle n'est pas d'une certaine façon comparée à ce qu'elle fut avant, à ce qu'elle pourra devenir et à une autre chose qui pourrait être à sa place. Le sens est, avant même d'être signifié, conceptuel, direction, processus, changement. Aucun signifié, aucun récit ne se donne dans une stagnation absolue. (Marrone 2016, p. 32)

C'est ce qui semble être le défi de personnages comme Nakīr et Munkar. Défi qui consiste à donner la réplique au mort, à agir sur un espace *a priori* sans spatialité ou sans cadre spatio–temporel. La question qui se pose est comment réanimer les catégories d'un récit bloqué et provoquer de façon particulière des transformations narratives. C'est ce que nous allons voir dans la seconde partie.

2. Place dans l'économie narrative et dans l'eschatologie musulmane

Pour comprendre le rôle de Nakīr et Munkar, il faut rappeler ici le statut problématique du mort–vivant et d'un espace aussi paradoxal que celui de la tombe. Cette dernière est un environnement extrême, elle n'offre ni convivialité ni attrait, mais doit le devenir, de même

que le mort, et ce pour les impératifs du genre. La tombe et le mort mettent au défi quiconque les raconte, car il s'agit d'un espace et d'une subjectivité singuliers, à cheval sur plusieurs mondes possibles[4], celui des vivants qui est le nôtre et selon lequel il s'agit d'un mort, qui ne peut ni bouger ni s'animer et encore moins jouer un rôle ; le deuxième monde possible est celui de l'au–delà que nous ne connaissons pas, mais que nous sommes amenés à adopter et à faire nôtre pour des raisons religieuses ou pour des raisons sémiotiques, grâce à des formes d'accréditations spécifiques au discours religieux et au discours tout court.

Comme son nom l'indique, le personnage du mort–vivant réfère à une identité paradoxale : le mort n'a aucune identité car il ne peut s'identifier et a toujours besoin de quelqu'un de vivant pour ce faire. Ce mort–là ne nous intéresse pas et n'intéresse pas l'existence sémiotique. Dans le néant où il est ancré et dont il fait désormais partie, son seul intérêt est casuistique, il fait peur et sert d'épouvantail pour pouvoir susciter l'espoir d'esquiver cette réalité affreuse par la voie tracée du salut. C'est donc une fois qu'il est réanimé que le mort peut jouer un rôle dans le récit et se faire construire une identité. Notons au passage un élément important ici, c'est que le mort–vivant est maintenu dans un état d'incertitude quant à son identité jusqu'à l'arrivée des deux anges ou démons qui sont Nakīr et Munkar. Ce sont ces deux personnages, adjuvants ou opposants selon l'issue, qui orientent la nature de l'identité du mort–vivant qui se décline en deux types: le félicité ou le damné; un troisième type d'identité donnée d'emblée en vrac est celle de martyr qui en quelque sorte échappe à l'interrogatoire des deux anges.

Dans les hadīths, le premier élément de subjectivité est l'ouïe; le mort l'est toujours mais il peut entendre: "AT–tabarāni a repris à la suite du hadīth d'abou Hurayra qui a dit: nous avons accompagné le prophète à un enterrement, à la fin lorsque tout le monde est parti, le prophète a dit: il est maintenant en train d'entendre le bruit de leurs babouches […]" (Ibn Rajab 1985, p. 25)[5].

(4) Pour une mise au point détaillée sur la notion de mondes possibles, voir Alèn Sture (ed.) 1989.

(5) Nous citons une seconde fois le début du hadith cité déjà en entier auparavant qui met l'accent de façon subtile sur la solitude du mort.

L'un des points marquants de la subjectivité mis en avant ici est l'extrême solitude (lorsque tout le monde est parti)[6], l'abandon par les autres, les vivants qui s'en vont et la souffrance muette, puisque le seul sens qui est activé chez le mort est l'ouïe. Mais peut–on démarrer un récit avec un seul personnage privé de surcroît de tous les sens exceptés celui de l'ouïe ? La réponse est bien évidemment non. Cela demeure donc insuffisant car le récit et ses catégories restent bloquées; c'est là que sont introduits Nakīr et Munkar avec plus de caractérisations comme le décrit le hadīth suivant:

> Dans le Sahīh d'Abū Hātil d'après Abū Hurayra qui a dit, le prophète a dit: Lorsque le mort est enterré, deux anges noirs et bleus appelés *Nakīr* et *Munkar* viennent le voir et lui demandent: que disais–tu? et l'autre de répondre: je disais qu'il n'y a de Dieu que Dieu et que Muhammad est son prophète, alors ils lui disent: nous savions tout cela; sa tombe alors s'élargit de 70 coudes sur 70 coudes et s'illumine. Il leur demande: allez voir ma famille et annoncez–leur la nouvelle, et eux de lui répondre: dors avec le sommeil du marié que seul l'amour de sa femme éveille jusqu'au jugement dernier […] (Ibn Qayyim 1992, p. 78).

Durant l'interrogatoire, le mort doit affronter les deux anges et répondre aux questions, c'est–à–dire passer l'épreuve. Sa subjectivité se construit à mesure et reste étroitement liée au verdict des deux anges. Dans le cas de la réussite de l'épreuve, le mort est comparé à un jeune marié ; mais il y a plus: le mort communique *via* les anges avec sa famille ; il est heureux et peut leur transmettre cela. Les deux anges acquièrent ici le statut d'adjuvants qui aident le protagoniste à profiter des bienfaits de l'épreuve qualifiante.

Le deuxième exemple concernant toujours la figure du félicité est exprimé dans ce hadīth. Le hadīth parle des anges qui font plus pour la subjectivité du mort et l'on est en mesure de penser qu'il s'agit de Nakīr et Munkar ainsi que le défendent certains exégètes, notamment Ibn Qayyim comme nous l'avons vu dans la première partie :

(6) La solitude de l'après–mort est devenue un *topos* qui sera repris jusqu'à nos jours en littérature mais aussi dans les productions des films ou séries dédiées au sujet, le plus célèbre étant la série *The Walking Dead*.

> Le Coran monte auprès de Dieu et lui demande un lit et un tapis, et aussitôt on lui ordonne un lit, un tapis et une lanterne du paradis, portés par mille anges […] Les anges le visitent, dressent son lit et mettent le tapis sous ses pieds et du jasmin sur son corps, ils l'installent sur son nouveau lit, le mettent sur le côté droit et le laissent; alors il s'y (le lit) met au–dessus regardant les anges monter au ciel et pousser *le Coran* dans la direction de la Mekke, et Dieu aussitôt élargit sa tombe.
> Abdu R–rahmāne a dit : c'était dans le livre de Mu'āwiya : Dieu lui agrandit sa tombe une distance de 400 ans à pied, ensuite on prend le jasmin sur son corps et on le met à côté de son nez pour s'en délecter jusqu'au jugement dernier. (Ibn Rajab 1985, p.108)

Nous avons choisi ce passage, non seulement parce qu'il nous renseigne sur l'interaction de la spatialité de la tombe avec le corps béni, mais aussi pour illustrer l'embarras et les contradictions qu'engendre la description détaillée de ce corps. En effet parler de cela présuppose que le sujet soit conscient de ce qui lui arrive et jouisse de ses récompenses ; la contradiction est qu'il s'agit d'un sujet *a priori* mort. Le récit reproduit à sa manière cette contradiction et cet embarras, car comme on le remarque au moment de la visite des anges, le sujet n'existe pas en tant qu'entité consciente, il est au début porté et mis sur le côté droit comme lorsqu'il s'agit d'un corps mort, ensuite c'est le mort lui–même qui s'y met lui–même et profite des sens de la vue et de l'odorat, le premier pour voir les anges monter au ciel, et le second pour se délecter du jasmin. En tout cas, la tombe devient un lieu convivial et habitable et le mort acquiert une identité proche par de nombreux aspects de tout croyant récompensé pour sa piété.

Le deuxième type de sujet que déterminent Nakīr et Munkar est celui du damné ou du maudit. Cette identité, comme dans le cas du félicité, est déjà annoncée par des traits présubjectifs relatifs à la figure du mécréant en général dans l'encyclopédie musulmane, mais elle est plus prononcée et prend parfois des tournures violentes et choquantes, toutes justifiées, comme on peut le comprendre, par le but qui est l'édification des âmes.

Les récits de Nakīr et Munkar sont des récits d'interrogatoire ; ils présentent des oppositions fixes. Interrogé par ces deux personnages, le mort peut parler et s'animer ; à l'issue de l'interrogatoire, il peut

être récompensé et n'a donc que des adjuvants, les deux anges, comme il peut être damné et n'a ainsi que des opposants, les deux démons et d'autres créatures chargées de le faire souffrir davantage. Avant le jugement des deux anges ou démons, le mort est maintenu dans une indétermination qui crée un pseudo–suspense et fait l'intérêt qu'on connaît pour les vivants, puisque chacun, grâce à des récits cadres, peut se projeter dans d'autres récits, mais sans échapper à l'indétermination du récit originel durant toute sa vie, ratifiant par là un mouvement pendulaire où dans des moments d'espoir, il se projettera dans le personnage du félicité et dans des moments de doute ou de crise dans celui du damné.

Les transformations narratives du récit de la tombe sont donc réduites au minimum. Si le mort ne répond pas comme il faut, il acquiert le statut de damné et subira les conséquences liées à une telle disgrâce. Sa tombe se réduit jusqu'à écraser ses côtes et le châtiment est éternellement reproduit. Si le mort répond comme il faut aux questions de Nakīr et Munkar, il réussit l'épreuve qualifiante, le récit jusqu'alors bloqué, se relance en réactivant les autres catégories du récit, description statique et dynamique, spatialité et interactions intersubjectives ou narratives. La tombe devient un lieu habitable et habité et se voit malgré tout[7] dotée d'un espace et d'une spatialité. Désormais le mort qui se voit doté de cette nouvelle identité investit l'espace et jouit de ses dimensions et de ses sens dont deux sont seulement activés, l'ouïe et la vue comme le montre le hadīth déjà cité.

Les deux anges se révèlent comme un élément crucial de la relation intersubjective[8] qui permet au mort d'agir et même de communiquer avec les vivants (allez voir ma famille et annoncez–leur la nouvelle). Mais leur action demeure cependant prudente, il s'agit d'une intersubjectivité fragile et risquée puisque les deux anges sont là pour éprouver

(7) Voir à ce propos Bernoussi (2024).

(8) Cette fonction intersubjective est soutenue par des principes présubjectifs liés aux spécificités de l'eschatologie musulmane selon laquelle la mort n'est pas irréversible, Dieu peut ressusciter partiellement ou entièrement le corps humain, comme le stipule le Coran : "Tu n'auras à te soucier d'aucune affaire, tu ne réciteras aucun extrait du Coran et vous n'accomplirez aucune action dont Nous ne soyons témoin quand vous l'entamerez. Rien n'échappe à ton Seigneur, fût–ce le poids d'un atome sur terre ou dans les cieux, ni même un poids plus petit ou plus grand, qui ne soit consigné dans un Livre explicite" (Cor. Younès, Jonass 61), ou encore: "Le jour où leur langue, leurs mains et leurs pieds témoigneront contre eux pour ce qu'ils faisaient" (Cor. *An–nūr*, la lumière 24).

un mort qui doit l'être selon les principes du dogme et qui doit se réanimer de façon prudente selon les principes du discours.

Il y a cependant quelque chose de plus important à ajouter à propos de l'interrogatoire de Nakīr et Munkar et qui change tout; nous avons parlé plus haut de pseudo–suspense, car à la fin de chaque interrogatoire, Nakīr et Munkar avant de prononcer leur sentence, placent cette phrase: "nous savions tout cela" qui balaye le récit précédent avec toutes ses étapes et ses transformations (attente, épreuve puis qualification ou disqualification), attirant l'attention sur la place somme toute relative de leur importance qui désormais fait d'eux des artifices narratifs pour construire la subjectivité du mort.

Cependant il ne faut pas oublier que ces récits de morts sont destinés aux vivants pour s'y projeter. C'est une évidence certes, mais une évidence dont les conséquences sont infinies, puisque ces récits simples et prévisibles et ces personnages tout aussi simples et prévisibles que sont Nakīr et Munkar deviennent des récits cadres et des personnages cadres promus à un rôle de catalyseurs narratifs enclenchant un mouvement pendulaire où dans des moments d'espoir l'on se projettera dans le personnage euphorique et dans des moments de doute, dans le personnage dysphorique, sans parler des conséquences au niveau du comportement; Nakīr et Munkar deviennent tour à tour ange ou démon selon les circonstances et l'humeur. Le lecteur, tel le mort de la tombe, se construit et se déconstruit constamment. Le récit de la tombe devient un récit qui déclenche une mise en abîme de récits cadres qui le dépassent. Comment expliquer cette indétermination et ce mouvement pendulaire?

Un premier élément d'explication est sans doute celui de l'origine du mal dans la tradition musulmane. Comme l'expliquent de nombreuses sourates du *Coran,* le mal est incarné par Ibliss qui fut au début un ange de grande importance et qui a été maudit suite à son refus de s'incliner devant Adam et Eve lorsque Dieu les a créés et lorsqu'il a demandé à tous les anges de le faire pour montrer la supériorité de la race humaine sur toutes les autres créatures. Ibliss est donc présent en permanence et peut jouer un rôle dans l'indétermination de l'issue de la tombe. Louis Gardet (1967) rapporte qu'il est toujours tapi dans un coin de la tombe pour perturber l'interrogatoire des deux anges.

L'indétermination narrative est donc maintenue et le récit peut rebondir de façon imprévisible.

Un autre élément d'explication, corolaire au premier, est celui qui est relatif à la casuistique et au monothéisme musulman. Celui–ci s'appuie sur le dogme du caché (*al–Ghayb*). Seul Dieu connaît l'issue des choses. Car même si la sentence de Nakīr et Munkar est claire pour envoyer les mécréants en enfer et les croyants au paradis, les choses ne sont pas pour autant arrêtées : Dieu ou le prophète peuvent intervenir et infléchir la logique du récit ou l'issue des choses. Dans le cas de Dieu, c'est son pouvoir absolu et son savoir infini qui jouent ; dans le cas du prophète, c'est le principe de l'intercession qui lui est exclusivement réservée par rapport aux autres prophètes. Nous sommes désormais dans un autre récit potentiel qui dépasse celui de l'interrogatoire de Nakīr et Munkar et qui permet un développement sans précédent de cette littérature depuis le IIème siècle. Cette indétermination quant à l'issue n'affecte pas seulement la logique du récit mais aussi l'identité des personnages qui demeurent en quelque sorte en sursis dans certains récits ou susceptibles de passer dans l'identité opposée grâce à des artifices narratifs comme le songe, la rêverie, ou le témoignage(9).

Elle révèle de façon indirecte que le plus important dans Nakīr et Munkar, comme dans la littérature qui les fait exister, n'est pas la fonction informative ou narrative, mais la fonction performative qui consiste à sous–entendre que même ces deux anges avec leur sévérité et leur intransigeance n'ont pas le dernier mot et que seuls Dieu et son prophète l'ont. En ce sens Nakīr et Munkar sont, avant d'être anges

(9) Comme nous l'avions développé ailleurs (Bernoussi 2024), le récit de Nakīr et Munkar peut servir comme point de départ ou comme cadre de référence à de nombreux récits ou témoignages qui ont donné lieu à un véritable genre populaire; on peut donner cet exemple d'un témoin comme dans le passage qui suit: "Al–Hārith Ibn Manāl raconte, j'ai visité Jubāna et me suis endormi dans un miḥrāb à côté d'une tombe; j'ai entendu le bruit d'une barre en fer avec laquelle on frappait quelqu'un qui avait une chaîne autour du coup, le visage noir et les yeux bleus, qui disait: mon Dieu, qu'ai–je fait? si les gens du monde me voyaient, ils ne commettraient plus jamais de péchés, je m'étais trop occupé des plaisirs qui m'avaient consumé, quelqu'un pourrait–il avertir ma famille de mon état ? Je me suis alors réveillé en sueur et suis allé voir ses trois filles qui avaient pleuré et avaient prié Dieu de lui pardonner. Quelques jours après, je m'étais endormi au même endroit et avait vu l'homme heureux avec une couronne et des babouches en or." (Ibn Taymiyya 661/1988, p. 99).

ou démons, une trouvaille sémiotique qui remplit comme il faut son rôle intersubjectif car ils contribuent à l'élaboration de l'identité d'un mort — les cadavres sont toujours encombrants — en faisant de lui un personnage qui se délecte ou qui souffre selon l'issue ; ils jouent aussi un rôle déterminant dans la réactivation d'autres récits et se révèlent comme des ressorts efficaces pour une véritable machine à faire rêver ou à cauchemarder.

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PSYCHEDELIC EXPERIENCES WITH HETEROGENEOUS INTERPRETATIONS BETWEEN RELIGIOUS, AESTHETIC AND THERAPEUTIC PRACTICES

Luca Brunet

Abstract: This paper explores the heterogeneous interpretations and uses of psychedelic substances across religious, aesthetic and therapeutic practices. It traces the historical use of natural psychedelics in Mesoamerican cultures and their subsequent condemnation during western colonization, with a semiotic approach aimed at demonstrating how the interpretations of drug effects are shaped by different cultural and encyclopedic frameworks. It discusses the intercultural translation challenges that arose when European colonizers first encountered indigenous psychedelic practices, leading to misinterpretations and prohibitions. It highlights the contrast between indigenous perspectives, which view these substances as sacred and therapeutic, and initial western interpretations that associated them with demonic influence. Then, the paper explores the evolution of scientific and artistic perspectives on psychedelics, starting from chemical discoveries to the emergence of a psychedelic culture, highlighting how these substances transitioned from being an object of scientific study to a catalyst for aesthetic and cultural experiences. The study concludes by addressing the recent "psychedelic renaissance" in scientific research, which has demonstrated potential therapeutic benefits of these substances in treating mental health disorders. It underscores the semiotic mechanism by which the qualities attributed to psychedelic experiences are shaped by prior knowledge, interpretative habits, and cultural discourses.

Il presente articolo esplora l'eterogeneità delle interpretazioni e degli usi delle sostanze psichedeliche, all'interno di contesti religiosi, scientifici, estetici e terapeutici. Attraverso un approccio semiotico, si ricostruisce brevemente la storia delle sostanze psichedeliche naturali nelle culture mesoamericane e la loro successiva condanna nel periodo della colonizzazione occidentale, con l'obiettivo di mostrare come l'interpretazione degli effetti delle droghe sia stata profondamente modellata da differenti quadri culturali ed enciclopedici. L'articolo analizza le difficoltà di traduzione interculturale emerse nei primi incontri tra colonizzatori europei e pratiche psichedeliche indigene; viene messo in evidenza il contrasto tra le prospettive

indigene, che attribuiscono a tali sostanze valore sacri e terapeutici, e le prime interpretazioni occidentali, che le associavano invece alla pazzia e all'influenza demoniaca. Successivamente si esamina l'evoluzione delle prospettive interessate all'esplorazione degli effetti psichedelici, arrivando alla nascita di una cultura psichedelica, mostrando come queste sostanze siano passate da essere oggetto di studio scientifico a catalizzatori di esperienze estetiche e spirituali. L'articolo si conclude analizzando l'attuale "rinascimento psichedelico" in ambito scientifico, evidenziando i meccanismi neurocognitivi innescati dall'assunzione di queste sostanze, e i potenziali benefici terapeutici nel trattamento di alcuni disturbi mentali. Infine, si sottolinea come, al di là delle differenze tra i contesti d'uso, vi sia un meccanismo semiotico condiviso, tale per cui l'interpretazione dell'esperienza non emerge mai in modo neutro, ma a partire da conoscenze precedenti, aspettative soggettive e narrazioni culturali preesistenti.

Keywords: Psychedelic, Drugs, Interpretations, Rituals, Therapies

Parole chiave: Psichedelici, Droghe, Interpretazioni, Rituali, Terapie

1. Introduction

Natural psychedelics, such a psilocybin mushrooms, mescaline cacti peyote and ayahuasca, have been used for centuries or millennia by various populations within ritualistic and spiritual contexts, particularly in the Mesoamerican region. During the Western colonization of the Americas, the use of these substances was largely condemned by European catholic authorities, and subsequently forced into clandestinity. In later centuries, these drugs became a subject of scientific interest, through the chemical extraction of natural psychoactive substances, and their experimental use on subjects. Psychedelic drugs have subsequently began to attract aesthetic interest in western cultures, inspiring explorations and representations of altered states of consciousness. In recent years, the expression "psychedelic renaissance" has been used to describe the resurgence of scholarly and scientific attention toward these substances across a wide range of disciplines, including neuroscience (Carhart-Harris 2018; Codignola 2018), philosophy (Letheby 2021), and cultural studies (Pollan 2018; Jay 2019). This renewed interest has been largely driven by scientific findings demonstrating the potential therapeutic benefits of psychedelics in treating mental health

conditions such as depression, PTSD, and addiction (Griffiths *et al.* 2006; Yehuda and Lehrner 2023). Groundbreaking clinical studies have shown that psychedelic substances, when consumed in safe and controlled environment, can foster psychological well–being by inducing altered states of consciousness that promote emotional processing, neuroplasticity, and a sense of interconnectedness.

This study, which adopts a semiotic approach, focuses on the heterogeneity of uses and interpretations of hallucinogenic substances and their effects, whose history is briefly reconstructed. Our objective is to demonstrate how the interpretation of drugs–induced experience is always influenced by the encyclopedic frameworks (Eco 1975; Paolucci 2020) that underlie subjective experiences — that is, the contexts, discourses, and interpretative habits circulating within cultures, which shape both individual experience and collective knowledge. The paper also addresses the differences and similarities between religious and therapeutic drugs' uses, focusing on the relation between the subjective phenomenal experience, the materiality of the drug, and the discourses surrounding it.

2. Psychedelic experiences and intercultural translation

Psychedelic naturally occuring substances, such as mescaline cacti, psilocybin mushrooms, and ayahuasca(1), have been used for centuries within ritualistic and spiritual contexts by Mesoamerican native populations, who have orally transmitted practices and narratives emphasizing the divine origin and profound spiritual effects of these psychoactive substances. In these contexts, drugs are used as medicines for curing spiritual, psychological and physical issues, effectively bridging therapeutic and religious ritual practices. In the absence of written texts, these substances have often been visually represented as sacred objects, as divine gifts, thus serving a crucial role in maintaining the well–being of their respective communities (Schultes *et al.* 1979).

(1) Psychedelic substances share similar chemical structures and pharmacological effects, primarily acting as serotonin receptor agonists, particularly at the 5-HT2A receptor, triggering profound alterations in perception and consciousness. However, the term "psychedelic" was only coined in the second half of the twentieth century.

For instance, in Guatemala, "mushroom stones" dating back to the Maya and Olmec civilizations depict human or divine figures emerging from mushroom caps, symbolizing the sacred relation with these fungi (Heim and Wasson 1958). In this case, the substance is represented in its physical sacralized form; however, there are also instances where the effects of these substances are depicted, that is, visual representations of the subjective experience and the perceptual alteration induced by their consumption. This kind of representation, which functions as an inter-semiotic translation of embodied perceptual features into visual texts, is a longstanding practice that continues today, often carrying social and political significance. Thus, the use and representation of psychedelics in traditional cultures also serve to preserve social cohesion and cultural identity, both of which have been threatened by colonialism.

With the arrival of European colonizers in the sixteenth century, indigenous perspectives about psychedelic substances were first confronted by an external gaze that failed to comprehend their cultural and spiritual importance. The earliest written accounts of the use of psychedelic drugs, produced during the Spanish conquest of Central and South America, are shaped by the phenomenon of "coherent distortion" (Lorusso 2010) inherent in intercultural translations, as they were produced by European individuals unfamiliar with the encyclopedic frameworks of the indigenous populations. Lorusso explains that cultures "imprint a sort of 'coherent distortion' on everything that enters their space" (Lorusso 2010, p. 70), meaning that semiotic phenomena are transformed according to the interpretative habits of the semiosphere and the encyclopedic framework of reference. A striking example is found in sixteenth–century accounts of the San Pedro cactus (originally called *achuma*), used by Indigenous groups for both religious and therapeutic rituals. A Jesuit missionary described *achuma* as "the plant with which the devil deceived the Indians of Peru in their paganism, which they used for their lies and superstitions" and claimed that, under its effects, the indigenous people "imagined thousands of absurdities, convincing themselves that they were true" (Cobo V, VII; Jay 2019, p. 32). Similarly, the Franciscan André Thévet, in his *Histoyre Mechique*, describes a Mexican indigenous group, the Otomí, as being deceived by the devil into consuming *nauacatl*, an herb that "drove

them mad and caused them to have many visions" (Thévet 1905; Heim and Wasson 1958, p. 133). In fact, this was not an herb but a mushroom containing psilocybin, known in the Nahuatl language as *teonanácatl*, which literally means "flesh of the gods", (Heim and Wasson 1958)[2].

In these European accounts, the altered states induced by hallucinogenic plants are often compared to the drunkenness caused by alcohol (Heim and Wasson 1958, p. 223), thus reframed through pre–existing Western categories. Moreover, such accounts are based solely on external observation, without firsthand experiential engagement, they are situated outside both the individual drugged body and the social body within which the drug is consumed. This detachment leads to what Eco (1975) calls "aberrant decoding," whereby the specific meanings and effects of the practices are misinterpreted.

In indigenous cultures psychoactive plants hold a sacred role, and their effects are experienced euphorically within well–defined ritual contexts; however, from the western perspective, these substances appear sacrilegious, as they sharply contrast with catholic rituals, which prioritize structured ceremonies, hierarchical mediation, and doctrinal control over spiritual experiences. While both cultures recognize the opposition between ordinary perception and the altered states induced by hallucinogenic substances, they interpret this contrast through different value systems: for indigenous cultures, perceptual alteration is a visionary experience, a moment of spiritual awareness characterised by its *noetic* quality; for Westerners, by contrast, it is interpreted as mere hallucination, a symptom of madness, and thus as a threat to society. Furthermore, in indigenous practices, psychedelics are never used in isolation, but they are always holistically embedded within a discursive network, a web of beliefs and practices in which the drug functions as an artifact, a mediating tool that facilitates both individual and collective religious experiences while simultaneously serving as a therapeutic agent. However, the power of psychoactive substances does not operate in direct or immediate way; rather, it must always be channeled,

(2) Interestingly, in all these traditional cultures, psychedelic substances always bear names that reference the spiritual and transcendental realm. For this reason, they have been termed *entheogenic* substances in the field of ethnobotany and anthropology (Heim and Wasson 1958).

thus requiring the development of specific skills, specific competences for their proper use. In this context, the figures of the shaman and the healer emerge as bearers of interpretative competence, necessary for enabling the correct use of psychedelics and the proper interpretation of both their own and others' experiences, thus assuming also the role of helpers for other subjects. Additionally, ritual practices place significant emphasis on the characteristics of the context — elements that are not themselves psychoactive, but play a crucial role in shaping the meaning of the psychedelic experience (Williams *et al.* 2022). For instance, traditional songs such as the *ikaros* play a fundamental function in structuring the ritual and the psychedelic experience (Dolmatoff 1975).

The reductive western interpretation of these practices stems, in part, from a failure to recognize the importance of contextual elements that, in their original cultural settings, are considered essential in shaping the psychedelic experience. This interpretative approach has led to a long–standing neglect and, to some extent, the oblivion of the potential of psychedelic substances within the European encyclopedic framework. Meanwhile, Mesoamerican populations have continued — and still continue — to perform their rituals. Psychedelics use retains still today a therapeutic value for Mesoamerican populations, as a form of collective resilience, providing a space for processing colonial trauma, maintaining social cohesion, and preserving cultural identity, with psychedelic substances constituting a fundamental part of the indigenous knowledge system. In this sense, the use of psychedelics is also serving a political and cultural function, aimed at preserving and revitalizing traditions that colonialism sought to suppress. In fact, since the beginning of colonialism, indigenous rituals have undergone a process of transformation, leading primarily to the hybridization of traditional religious imagery with Catholic religious imagery — a process in which the use of psychedelic substances has been integrated into Catholic ceremonies. Notable examples include *Santo Daime* in Brazil — centered around Catholic–inspired ceremonies involving ayahuasca — and the Native American Church in the United States, which formed around the ritual use of peyote. More recently, psychedelic rituals — particularly those involving ayahuasca — have been exported globally, giving rise to what has been described as "urban neo–shamanism,". Here,

it is crucial to distinguish between the different operational contexts in which these substances are consumed. Although a thorough analysis of this phenomenon exceeds the scope of this discussion, it is evident from a semiotic perspective that the shift from traditional to urban contexts profoundly alters the meaning of the psychedelic–ritual experience, rendering it significantly different from Indigenous practices. In this process, a form of cultural appropriation, rooted in colonialism is evident and must be critically examined (De Mori 2021). What changes most radically is the belief in the efficacy of the psychedelic experience: in urban contexts, attention appears to be primarily focused on the drug, whereas in traditional contexts "efficacy is not dependent on the drug, but on the correct communication between the healer (or sorcerer) and the non–human powers" (De Mori 2021). This occurs because efficacy is socially, culturally and semiotically constructed, meaning that: "different forms of discourse shape differing opinions about the item and thus inform different certainties about its qualities. […] ayahuasca as a substance is constituted by basically the same, or similar, human pharmacology, but the qualities that are attributed to this substance show significant variation." (De Mori 2021)

This is fundamentally a semiotic and interpretative mechanism, in which the qualities of a given object or experience do not emerge from a pure encounter between subject and object. Rather, they are always partly determined by prior knowledge, interpretative habits, and discourses circulating within the encyclopedia, which render certain aspects of the object (or experience) relevant at the expense of others. As Paolucci writes in his *Cognitive Semiotics*: "our knowledge of the world is formed from elements deriving from objects and from elements deriving from previous knowledge circulating in the community." (Paolucci 2021, p.66). Naturally, knowledge of a phenomenon also arises from direct experience with the object itself, not only from pre–existing frameworks (Paolucci 2021, pp. 70–72). However, in the case of early Western accounts, there was no direct bodily engagement with the substances in question. Consequently, interpretation was shaped entirely by prior knowledge — that is, by the value system embedded in the Catholic–Western encyclopedia. Only in the nineteenth century, when Westerners began to experiment bodily with psychedelic

substances, did the interpretive framework begin to shift. Yet even then, expectations, beliefs, and cognitive habits played a crucial role in shaping the discourses surrounding psychedelic experiences. In what follows, we will examine this mechanism at work in both scientific and aesthetic experimental practices, to illustrate how two opposing interpretive paradigms emerged concerning the effects and meanings of psychedelic experiences.

3. Scientific and aesthetic perspectives: from chemistry to psychedelic culture

The first transformation brought about by a scientific approach to natural psychoactive substances was the process of isolating their active compounds. This process of chemical isolation constitutes a material transformation — what Simondon would call *transduction* (Simondon 1964) — whereby a natural compound undergoes a transition that results in the emergence of a new entity. Transduction is a dynamic and structuring process that, beginning from an initial metastable state in which the substance exists in its natural form, initiates a propagation of separation throughout the system, ultimately producing the isolated molecule as a distinct entity. This process of material transduction also functions in way akin to an *intersemiotic translation*, as it is based on the search for an equivalence of effects between two materially different objects. In other words, it involves a comparison between the sensations elicited by the natural version of the substance and those produced by its chemically isolated counterpart. This comparative analysis is mediated by cultural knowledge, narratives, and discourses surrounding psychedelic experiences, which ultimately influence the interpretation of the drug's effects. In 1897, the German chemist Arthur Heffter identified the hallucinogenic properties of one of the alkaloids extracted from the Peyote cactus. Through self–experimentation with various chemical compounds derived from the plant he described experiencing a sensation of "nausea, occipital headache, intense dizziness, and clumsiness in moving" followed by visions of "tapestry patterns and mosaics" and "winding colored ribbons moving with the rapidity of

lightning." (Heffter 1898, pp. 420–421; Perrine 2001, p. 43). Here the experience is primarily described in relation to visual perception, encompassing geometric and chromatic hallucinations which are typical of traditional indigenous art, and which will represent recurrent motifs within the textual production of psychedelic culture. Notably, there is a conspicuous absence of discourse pertaining to alterations in consciousness, which ostensibly remains lucid throughout the experience.

While Heffter perceives the hallucinogenic effects and may recognize a resemblance between the visions experienced firsthand and Peyote inspired art (Jay 2019), he does not mention religious or spiritual feelings, which are typical of traditional rituals. In fact, this and other experimental practices are always characterized by an exploratory approach that removes the ritual and collective configuration typical of traditional psychedelic uses, instead framing experimentation as a process aimed at identifying the specific pharmacological mechanism responsible for individual, phenomenal hallucinogenic effects. It is interesting to note that within a scientific context, individual experience is interpreted and verbally expressed in very different way compared to ritual use contexts. The material shift from the natural substance to the chemical one thus affects not only the physiological dimension, but also brings about changes in the sense–making practices employed by individuals before, during, and after the drug's assumption.

3.1. *Psychotomimetic and psychedelic paradigms*

Following its chemical identification, mescaline became, in the 1930s, the first psychedelic substance extracted from a plant with a history of ritual use to be studied in psychiatric research. This first wave of investigations was based on the hypothesis that mescaline could induce temporary psychotic states, as researchers observed parallels between its effects and clinical descriptions of mental disorders. For instance, altered perception, and particularly hallucinations, were reminiscent of symptoms reported by patients with schizophrenia[3]. According to the psychotomimetic hypothesis (Pollan 2018), inducing a temporary,

(3) The psychotomimetic hypothesis was also supported by the chemical similarity between mescaline and dopamine, an endogenous substance associated with schizophrenia (Pollan 2018).

controlled "psychotic state" in healthy individuals was thought to provide a more direct way to study the pathophysiology of psychosis, ultimately improving the understanding of these mental disorders. However, this aim was based on an incomplete understanding of both the mechanisms underlying psychedelic states and those of psychiatric conditions. In this initial experimental phase, no attention is paid to the environmental and contextual factors surrounding drug administration, elements we now know deeply influence the phenomenology of the experience. Similarly, the preparation of the subjects involved in the experiment is not considered worthy of attention, despite current understanding that an individual's expectations play a crucial role in shaping the nature and quality of the psychedelic experience. In some ways, it is precisely the psychiatric context that constructs the cases that confirm the psychotomimetic interpretation; this is determined by an experimental configuration that drastically conditions the research results, which were already directed towards studying psychopathological mechanisms rather than the experience itself, thus confirming the initial theoretical assumptions. Most importantly, the psychotomimetic interpretative paradigm is not articulated by the individuals undergoing the psychedelic experience, but rather by external observers who interpret the first–person reports of those experiences through the lens of psychopathology.

To understand the transition from the psychotomimetic paradigm to the psychedelic one, it is necessary to step outside the psychiatric field and venture into the aesthetic–literary domain. A crucial reference in this shift is *The Doors of Perception* by Aldous Huxley, a 1954 text, in which the author narrates and analyzes his experience with mescaline. The British writer became interested in mescaline through the psychiatric studies of Humphry Osmond, and after undergoing what he described as a "revelatory" experience, he began a correspondence with the psychiatrist, which led to the creation of the neologism *psychedelic*, a term that would gain widespread recognition from that point onward. In his book, Huxley begins by describing alterations in visual perception with open eyes, noting a qualitative and affective transformation of space, time (which appears expanded), and objects. He emphasizes the sense of wonder experienced when contemplating everyday

objects — such as flannel trousers or a letter opener — along with visual details that are typically irrelevant in standard perception. He compares ordinary perception to a filter that reduces the complexity and the beauty of experience, whereas the mescaline–induced state of consciousness represents a "return to truth." He later describes closed–eye visions characterized by moving lights and geometric patterns, accompanied by a profound sense of totality and a feeling of "participation in the manifest glory of things" (Huxley 1954, p. 18). Huxley's account appears to depict an ecstatic, mystical experience (Leone 2014), marked by the feeling of fusion between subject and environment, the feeling of a noetic quality of what is experienced, and by a sense of ineffability (Ponzo 2022), the difficulty of translating the experience into words, which, however, does not result in absolute incommunicability. Although Huxley repeatedly laments the inadequacy of verbal language in conveying the meaning of the psychedelic experience, this very limitation becomes part of the process of verbal translation, which is always partial and negotiated(4).

It is clear that the experience described by Huxley differs from the psychotic states outlined in psychiatric manuals. However, it is equally evident that Huxley's interpretation, like any other interpretation, is shaped by his encyclopedic framework, his interest in eastern philosophies, his explicit quotation of William Blake's visionary poems, and his implicit yet evident appreciation of William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1900). Nevertheless, it is precisely through this interpretative trajectory that the altered state induced by a hallucinogenic substance comes to be experienced and understood as a revelatory, spiritually profound event, thereby showing parallels with traditional interpretations in ritual contexts. Huxley's experience is crucial to the emergence of the psychedelic paradigm: he perceives that his experience lacks a psychotomimetic quality, yet he does not have a predefined linguistic term for translating his sensations. As a result, he invents the term *psychedelic*, drawing from another semiotic–linguistic system, Ancient Greek, available within his encyclopedic framework. This instance of linguistic invention functions as an act of intersemiotic

(4) The idea of negotiation in translation is central to Eco's semiotics of translation (Eco 2003).

translation, in which the verbal sign *psychedelic*, derived from *psychè* and *delein*, meaning "to reveal the mind/consciousness", encapsulates within its meaning a series of sensations corporeally experienced. This process of translation originates from what has been named a "syntax of the sensible" (Paolucci 2020, pp. 191–192), in which bodily sensations serve as the material formants used for translation, constructing an expressive plane oriented toward a desired content.

3.2. *Rise and decline of psychedelic culture*

The success of Huxley's text (from which the psychedelic rock band *The Doors* took its name) contributed to the formation of a psychedelic (sub)culture, during the 1960s, especially in USA, where the use of drugs intersected with aesthetic production and political discourse. The central drug of psychedelic culture was not mescaline but the newly synthesized LSD — an extremely potent hallucinogenic substance (in terms of dose–to–psychoactive effect ratio), which was accidentally discovered by the Swiss chemist Albert Hofmann (1979). Nonetheless, the experiential configuration described by Huxley in relation to mescaline's effects can also be found in accounts of LSD experiences, because of their similar chemical composition and pharmacological mechanisms.

The psychedelic culture of the 1960s is characterized by the desire "to modify social and aesthetic human relations through a controlled and conscious use of predominantly hallucinogenic drugs" (Spaziante 2005, p. 21). In this cultural context the drug is valued as a tool for both individual and collective transformation, political opposition to the establishment, and identity affirmation; thus, it also recovers a collective dimension and social cohesion, typical of traditional uses. This collective interest was reflected in the textual representation of the psychedelic experience, giving rise to a kind of *psychedelic discourse*, in which the experiential configurations of psychedelia (such as perceptual and consciousness alteration) were represented, transposed, and translated into other discursive configurations — literary, musical, visual, and audiovisual. For instance, in the musical domain, as Spaziante highlights (2005, p. 24), psychedelic music is particularly concerned with

the exploration of sonic effects, alterations in timbre and tonalities, realised through the use of techniques such as distortion, phasing, delay, and reverb. These techniques transform and modulate the sonic substance following a "logic of effects" that mirrors the altering, hallucinogenic, and transformative properties of psychedelic drugs. Moreover, the relationship between the psychedelic experience and musical experience emerges on another level: music which is itself shaped through a form of translation of the psychedelic experience, in turn becomes an integral part of that very experience. This musical translation does not aim to explain or represent the psychedelic experience in descriptive or analytical way, but rather to generate an autonomous experiential dimension, one which resonates with the effects induced by the drug. In this sense, it also reclaims a traditional configuration akin, in some respects, to the role of music as an accompaniment in ceremonial practices(5).

In psychedelic culture, the altered state of consciousness is often described through the metaphor of an inner journey — the *trip* — which, at its peak, can lead to a sensation *ego dissolution*, a kind of merging of the subject with the surrounding environment, where the subject can lose the ordinary self–consciousness, which in some respects resembles the sense of fusion and totality described in mystical narratives. The trip, and especially the experience of identity loss, can be either euphoric or dysphoric, depending on the psychophysical state of the individual and the context in which the experience takes place. The experience induced by the consumption of a hallucinogenic drug can thus manifest diverse phenomenological features, and not always is the experience, in its entirety, perceived as revelatory and thus properly *psychedelic*. The inner journey can turn into a *bad trip*, leading to sensations of anxiety, fear, and obsessive thoughts, which, in predisposed individuals, may even trigger psychotic episodes. This potential for the

(5) We do not have the space to discuss all the different enunciative strategies used to translate the psychedelic experience. One particularly interesting case, which we plan to address in future work, is the audiovisual representation of the psychedelic experience. In some ways, the audiovisual medium is particularly suited to translating altered perceptions due to its syncretic nature and its prosthetic status (Paolucci 2020), being able to offer the human eye perceptions that are impossible in ordinary experience, analogous to the altered perceptions induced by psychedelic drugs.

psychedelic experience to take on a quasi–psychotic dimension could suggest a reconsideration of the psychotomimetic paradigm. However, contemporary research has demonstrated that under controlled conditions — and with the guidance of a sober facilitator who accompanies the participant — the drug–induced experience is more euphoric and often accompanied by a positive sense of self–renewal. This attention to the phenomenological and contextual variability of drug effects in 1960s psychedelic culture led to the formalization of the concepts of "set" and "setting": the former refers to the psychological background and mental state of the subject of experience, including thoughts, mood, and expectations; the latter encompasses the physical and social environment in which the experience takes place.

Unfortunately, this promise for conscious and controlled use, with care to contextual and subjective preparation, soon gave way to abuse and uncontrolled consumption, a shift facilitated by the *Controlled Substances Act* of 1970, which classified psychedelic drugs (mescaline, psilocybin and LSD) as among the most harmful and dangerous substances in the world and, most notably, as "devoid of any medical potential" (Jay 2019, p. 251). This classification effectively halted scientific research, while simultaneously signaling the perceived threat of psychedelics to capitalist and consumerist Western society. Western political institutions had encountered psychedelic substances used in the ritual practices of Amerindian populations through a violent colonial process; they judged the hallucinogenic effects of these substances as merely illusory or as manifestations of *mental disorders* and, on multiple occasions, prohibited their use. Yet, precisely as psychedelic culture was being dismantled by Nixon's "war against drugs", LSD was being secretly tested in CIA laboratories. The secret agency sought to use the drug as a tool for psychological manipulation, information extraction, essentially as a truth serum, basically as a potential biochemical weapon. There is not enough space here to discuss in depth the political implications of this practice, which has fortunately been documented (Codignola 2018). However, the underlying ideology is evident: it reflects a desire to exert total control over individuals' minds, *a psychopower* in service of political hegemony, while at the same time open scientific debates were blocked.

4. Psychedelic renaissance, neurocognitive research, and therapeutic practices

For several decades, psychedelic substances remained out of the spotlight, only to resurface over the past twenty years in what has been increasingly described as a *psychedelic renaissance*, marked by renewed discoveries, publications, and growing discourse surrounding psychedelia (Belouin and Henningfield 2018; Letheby 2021). Throughout a long and turbulent history, the heterogeneity of uses and interpretations of these peculiar substances is undeniable. Could this heterogeneity be linked to the pharmacological complexity of psychedelics? Perhaps the phenomenological variability of psychedelic experiences calls for an expanded pharmacological framework — one in which the chemical substance acting at the neurocognitive level is not considered independent of contextual and subjective factors, instead it's deeply related to them; recent discoveries, suggesting potential therapeutic applications, seem to point in this direction.

In some countries, such as Canada, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, new regulations have enabled the resumption of scientific research on psychedelic substances (Pollan 2018). Thanks to advances in neuroimaging technologies, significant progress has been made in understanding the neuro–pharmacological mechanisms underlying psychedelic experiences. Robin Carhart–Harris (2018), a pioneer in the field, proposed the *entropic brain theory* to explain how psychedelics alter brain activity. According to Carhart–Harris (2019), psychedelics bind to 5–HT2A receptors, triggering erratic glutamate release and weakening synchronized neural oscillations, particularly in low–frequency bands like the alpha rhythm. This results in three key neural signatures: 1) disintegration of resting–state networks; 2) desegregation between typically distinct systems, and 3) increased entropy, or unpredictability, in brain activity (Letheby 2021, p. 118). These findings align with recent models of *predictive processing*, which view the brain as a "prediction machine" that constructs top–down models (priors) to interpret sensory input. Carhart–Harris and Friston (2019) proposed the *REBUS* model (RElaxed Beliefs Under pSychedelics), suggesting that psychedelics reduce the precision of high–level priors — especially

those related to self–identity — allowing suppressed or novel information to enter consciousness. This "relaxation of beliefs" may explain why psychedelics are reported to facilitate *emotional breakthroughs*, *cognitive flexibility*, and a sense of *novel perspective*, elements that are proving increasingly relevant in therapeutic settings. Under this model, psychedelic therapy functions by loosening rigid or maladaptive belief structures, such as those seen in depression, anxiety, or addiction, and enabling a reorganization or "reset" of mental frameworks. The growing scientific interest in psychedelics has also reignited a discussion on the spiritual and existential dimensions of these experiences. According to the studies conducted by Griffiths *et al*. (2006; 2019), there is statistical evidence supporting the claim that psilocybin, the hallucinogenic compound found in Mexican mushrooms, has the potential to induce deeply spiritual and mystical experiences. Many participants reported a complete mystical experience, characterized by a profound sense of connection with themselves and the universe, difficulty in describing the experience in words (ineffability), and the perception of having encountered something sacred and deeply true, more true than the ordinary reality (noetic quality). A follow–up conducted fourteen months later revealed that the majority of participants continued to regard this experience as one of the most meaningful of their lives, and reported lasting positive changes in their attitudes, behaviors, and overall well–being.

Modern therapies supporting the use of psychedelic substances focuses precisely on this subjective, phenomenal experience, proposing a conception of the drug as a semiotic–material object, whose agency emerges from the relation between chemical and neuropharmacological aspects, subjective expectations, and contexts of use (Hendy 2022). The pharmacological action is not independent of subjective and contextual characteristics; the psychedelic experience depends on a specifically semiotic dimension of interpretation (sense–making) within the experience, a process in which difficulties or criticalities may arise, and which must therefore be experimented under controlled conditions. Chris Letheby (2021) has proposed to consider psychedelic therapy as a two–factor structure:

> The first factor is the induction of plasticity at multiple levels: neural, cognitive, and phenomenological. Psychedelics induce molecular–level plasticity independently of their effects on cognition and consciousness (Ly *et al.* 2018), but also induce entropic brain activity by disintegrating cortical networks such as the DMN […] This first factor alone — the induction of plasticity — may be sufficient for the shortterm 'afterglow' of several weeks, in which subjects report feeling lighter, freer, more energised and unburdened. […] However, a second factor is required for truly durable change: the discovery of new forms of self-modelling during the experience and the consolidation of these during the subsequent period of integration. It's not just the plasticity — it's the way you use it. (Letheby 2021, pp. 147–148)

Therapeutic efficacy, as was understood in Indigenous knowledge systems, is no longer solely determined by the chemical–physical substance itself, but by the possibility (not necessarily realized) of altering the perception of the self through alternative interpretations and processes of sense–making, that is, through an alternative narrative of one's identity. In this sense, Andy Clark, in his latest book (2023), talks about psychedelics as tools for "hacking" the cognitive–predictive system:

> The idea here is that the drugs can help jolt the mind out of entrenched negative patterns, making it more flexible and open. In the cases of many affective disorders such as severe and chronic depression, the simple fact of temporarily experiencing the world very differently can be liberating. What had seemed like deep, immovable facts about how things are (and how you are) release their stranglehold, allowing other ways of seeing the world and "being you" to emerge. (Clark 2023, p.195).

This kind of use of psychedelic substances as medications within a psychotherapeutic framework can represent a significant innovation in the treatment of mental disorders. While classic antipsychotic medications involve continuous administration aimed at treating symptoms rather than resolving underlying causes, the therapeutic use of psychedelics is episodic, and the underlying goal is not merely the achievement

of a pharmacological effect but the facilitation of a profound psychological transformation in the subject (Yehuda and Lehrner 2023). In this light, the contemporary study and therapeutic use of psychedelic substances may help overcome a dualistic conception of reality, revealing an intrinsic interdependence between the material and cognitive dimensions. Such an expanded understanding of their role allows for a potential convergence between contemporary Western frameworks and traditional Indigenous perspectives (Williams *et al.* 2022). It's important to advocate for the integration of diverse perspectives and interpretative paradigms; the goal should be to seek a point of convergence between Western and Indigenous worldviews, between the therapeutic and the ritual, the individual and the collective, the scientific and the spiritual, because these dimensions are not necessarily contradictory. Acknowledging analogies and connections between different practices, tracing their histories, can help to avoid forms of postcolonial appropriation by recognizing the value and legitimacy of Indigenous knowledge systems and cultural frameworks. As we tried to show, it is only after a turbolent history of uses and interpretations that Westerner cultures started to notice the possibility of euphoric and therapeutic use of psychedelics, and more importantly understood their effects as not merely determined by physiological dynamics.

5. Conclusions

In this study, we aimed to highlight the heterogeneity of uses and interpretations of psychedelic substances, which, from a semiotic perspective, can be examined as semiotic–material substances whose agency is not solely determined by their (complex) chemical–physical properties but also by the (equally complex) practices of use and interpretations through which they are understood. For this reason, we sought to retrace key historical moments that have contributed to the development of diverse — and sometimes contradictory — interpretative paradigms, beginning with the clash between the indigenous cultures of the American continent and colonial Europe, moving through the chemical, psychiatric and aesthetic interest of the twentieth century,

and finally reaching contemporary neurocognitive and therapeutic perspectives.

Today, psychedelia is still placed at the intersection of religious–spiritual discourses and scientific–therapeutic ones, prompting reflection on the relationship between spiritual experience and psychological well–being. Although it may appear contradictory, the intertwining of therapeutic and spiritual dimensions was deeply rooted in the shamanic and ritual practices of Indigenous Mesoamerican populations, for whom the healing process — both individual and collective — is inseparable from religious and spiritual activity. In my view, we should not exclude the possibility that, in certain cases, the attainment of psychological well–being may occur through spiritual, mystical, or transcendent experiences, particularly within contemporary Western culture, which is profoundly shaped by processes of disenchantment and corresponding attempts at re–enchantment.

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LE MADONNE DAL VOLTO FOSCO E LO *ZODIACO DI MARIA* DI SERAFINO MONTORIO
RIFLESSIONI SEMIOTICHE SULL'EVOLUZIONE DELLE RAPPRESENTAZIONI DEL VOLTO MARIANO NEL MERIDIONE ITALIANO FRA I SECOLI XII–XVII

Antonio Pio Di Cosmo

Abstract: This research investigates the depiction of the faces of certain Black Madonnas mentioned in *Lo Zodiaco di Maria*, a collection of foundational legends of Marian sanctuaries in the Kingdom of Naples, published in 1715 by the Dominican Father Serafino Montorio. Particular attention is given to the evolution of the formulas used to describe the Virgin's face over an extended period, analyzed through the lenses of semiotics and the visual arts. The study explores how these descriptions reflect the development of Roman–Oriental descriptive conventions, in relation to both political changes in the kingdom and the shifting trends in local artistic traditions.

La presente ricerca indaga la rappresentazione del volto di alcune Vergini nere menzionate nello *Zodiaco di Maria*, una raccolta di leggende sulla fondazione dei santuari mariani del Regno di Napoli, pubblicata nel 1715 dal padre domenicano Serafino Montorio. Particolare attenzione viene dedicata all'evoluzione, nel lungo periodo, delle formule utilizzate per descrivere il volto della Vergine, analizzate attraverso le categorie della semiotica e delle arti visive. Lo studio indaga queste formule visive che riflettono lo sviluppo delle convenzioni descrittive romano orientali, in relazione ai mutamenti politici del Regno e all'evoluzione delle tendenze artistiche locali.

Keywords: *Vierge noire; Zodiaco di Maria;* Father Montorio; Visual culture; Marian effigies

Parole chiave: *Vierge noire*; *Zodiaco di Maria*; Padre Montorio; Cultura visuale; Effigi mariane

Un siffatto studio vuol ripensare le strategie di traduzione visiva concernenti il volto di Maria, attraverso l'analisi di alcuni documenti visuali riferibili alla particolare tipologia conosciuta come "*Vierge noire*"

(Vergine nera). L'espressione, nata in Francia durante l'Ottocento, doveva servire ad agevolare il lavoro degli Ispettori generali dei Monumenti storici che, su direttiva del Ministero degli Interni, catalogavano i beni mobili conservati nelle chiese inglobate nel patrimonio dello stato.

Consideriamo poi come alcuni *loci mirabiles*, connessi alla fondazione dei santuari in cui sono custodite queste peculiari rappresentazioni dal viso fosco, vengano riportati in un testo devozionale mariano, lo *Zodiaco di Maria*, compilato dal padre domenicano Serafino Montorio e pubblicato a Napoli nel 1715[1]. Il volume ricorre ad articolati riferimenti alla cultura immateriale legata all'astronomia e la utilizza come pretesto per tessere le lodi della Vergine. Raccoglie perciò narrazioni meravigliose relative alle effigi mariane più venerate e considerate miracolose nel Regno di Napoli, organizzandole geograficamente e associando ciascuna di esse a una delle dodici costellazioni zodiacali. Questo approccio metaforico, favorito negli studi mariologici a partire dal XVII secolo, crea un testo stratificato e aperto a molteplici interpretazioni. Il domenicano propone dunque un racconto complesso che nei suoi significanti di superficie esalta il Nome della Vergine come "venerabile agli angioli, dolcissimo agli uomini e tremendo ai dimoni", mentre delinea i miracoli della Madre di Dio, la quale a loro tramite ha acquisito uno "speciale dominio sopra il Regno di Napoli" (Montorio 1715, *Praefatio*). In questo modo, le dodici province del Regno sono assimilate ai segni zodiacali illuminati dalla Madre di Dio, formando un'efficace metafora che si colora di scopi soteriologici nelle intenzioni del redattore. Tuttavia, il complesso impianto retorico conserva motivi tipici del contesto culturale napoletano, che rimandano alle tradizioni intellettuali orfiche e pitagoriche basate sul principio: "Ciò che è in basso è uguale a ciò che è in alto, e ciò che è in alto è uguale a ciò che è in basso" (*Tavola di smeraldo*, v. 2). In questo modo, padre Montorio non solo delinea una geografia della devozione napoletana, ma propone su un piano di lettura più profondo una stringente associazione tra la Chiesa e il Regno, in uno ad una sovrapposizione di interessi condivisi da entrambi. Qui la Vergine, opportunamente onorata, diventa garante dell'alleanza trono–altare che ha governato la politica locale dal XVII secolo fino ai moti liberali nel quadro della *Realpolitik*.

(1) Circa la figura di Serafino Montorio, cfr. Milante (1745); Minieri Riccio (1844).

Il presente studio si concentra pertanto su una serie di dipinti e sculture che devono costituire uno sparuto *corpus*, ma sufficiente ad indagare la parabola evolutiva della fisionomia utilizzata per tradurre il volto della Vergine, approfondendone le singolari caratteristiche fenotipiche attecchite e sviluppatesi in un'area relativamente omogenea dal punto di vista della cultura religiosa materiale e immateriale.

Si considerano allora delle rappresentazioni mariane che presentano un marcatore visuale dotato di attendibilità storica, quale la pelle "colore del grano", ritenuta una caratteristica propria della Vergine, stando a quanto riferito da Giovanni Damasceno (*De sanctis et venerandis imaginibus*, 3). Tali effigi presentano poi tratti somatici rispondenti a quelli tipizzati dall'iconografia romano orientale, che ritroviamo — tra le molte — nelle icone della Madonna di Casaluce o della *Materdomini* di Nocera Superiore, le quali costituiscono un'alternativa rispetto ai canoni eurocentrici a cui il fruitore medio "moderno" è normalmente assuefatto. Perciò si persegue lo sviluppo del fenotipo ivi cristalizzato, che progressivamente si libera dai canoni bizantini ed assume forme nuove, come dimostrato dalla tavola della Madonna del Carmine di Napoli, detta anche la "Bruna", la quale colpisce con la sua grazia tutta francese, capace di rinnovare gli *standards* del tipo della *Glykophilousa*. Di seguito passa per la Madonna di Costantinopoli venerata nella Cattedrale di Bari, la quale di bizantino conserva solo l'eponimo e la pelle scura, condivisa con una qualsivoglia *Theotòkos*, poiché viene rappresentata secondo i canoni di moda al momento della sua produzione (metà del Cinquecento). Si ripiega poi su un'opera di Scuola cretese come la Madonna della strada di S. Lorenzo Maggiore, che rimanda agli esperimenti di ripensamento delle formule utilizzate per le icone avvenuti in Candia. Termina, infine, nella graziosa rappresentazione del volto dagli occhi grandi e sereni della Madonna di Viggiano che, con i suoi capelli biondi e ondulati di chiaro gusto nordico e la sua bocca piccola, costituisce la felice mediazione fra due formule rappresentative antitetiche. I documenti visuali vengono conseguentemente analizzati alla luce delle categorie cognitive delle discipline visuali e della semiotica in particolare, per decodificare le strategie di visualizzazione utilizzate per la costruzione dei fenotipi delle differenti rappresentazioni della Vergine, evidenziandone le peculiarità fisionomiche, ma anche quegli elementi

della semantica facciale destinati a perdurare, con particolare attenzione al loro spiegarsi sul piano sincronico e diacronico.

1. Le Madonne nere e le probabili ragioni di una *quaestio complexa*

Occorre premettere che il tema delle "Madonne nere" costituisce una questione complessa che ha fatto versare fiumi d'inchiostro (tra i molti, cfr. Bonvin 1989; Courtillé 1991; Barral i Altet 2009, pp. 265–276; Fazio 2012). Tuttavia, il dibattito accademico ha indugiato su una problematica che potremmo qualificare piuttosto come un'invenzione della storiografia contemporanea, la quale poco o nulla ha a che fare con la religiosità medievale (Barral i Altet 2010, p. 108). Parallelamente, osserviamo come il fenomeno venga spiegato attraverso teorie a volte davvero fantasiose, senza tentare prioritariamente di individuare una precisa cronologia per la produzione/rimodulazione delle singolari effigi della Vergine. Ciò ha generato molta confusione senza riuscire ad approdare ad una teorizzazione capace di dare una risposta onnicomprensiva rispetto alle esigenze della committenza e/o alla funzionalità del contesto liturgico.

Diversamente, gli annerimenti dei volti sono stati giustificati attraverso un arcano procedimento dal carattere simbolico, che potrebbe alludere ad una palingenesi e/o rigenerazione dell'umanità, riconducibile a pratiche occultiste con un chiaro richiamo all'alchimia, rendendole un prodotto per/ed opera di iniziati.

Raffrontiamo una problematica che si complica alla luce del tentativo di assorbimento di queste "Madonne Nere", nell'intermezzo fra le due guerre mondiali, nella réclame del movimento femminista (Lustenberger 2010, pp. 292–293) ed a causa degli studi di Carl Gustav Jung sul matriarcato. Quest'ultimo ha persino collegato la singolare tipologia della Vergine ad "archetipi psicologici", delineando un *fil rouge* che la connette alla dea Kalì, notoriamente connotata da un volto scuro, nonché alle dee celtiche della fertilità, perorando l'idea di una rifunzionalizzazione delle antiche divinità femminili, che vengono "addomesticate" dal cristianesimo (*ivi*, p. 293). Non sorprende allora il rimando — non certo peregrino — in alcune *legendae* a credenze

precristiane e la connessione della "*Vierge noire*" con le effigi di Iside e Cibele, anch'esse notoriamente caratterizzate da un volto nero (Giani Gallino 1989, p. 23). Per il geologo Barthélemy Faujas de Saint Fond, la primitiva Madonna nera venerata nel santuario di Le Puy in Francia viene identificata con una statua di Iside, giunta dall'Africa e poi convertita in oggetto di culto cristiano (Faujas de Saint Fond 1778, pp. 417 sgg.; Forsyth 1972, pp. 20 e 103). Tale teoria affonda le radici nella *legenda* di fondazione del santuario sistematizzata dal canonico Fayard, che data al decimo secolo l'arrivo della statua della Madonna per opera di un re di ritorno dalla crociata, che le tradizioni locali di seguito identificano con Luigi VII o Luigi IX (Barral i Altet 2010, p. 98; Barral i Altet 2009, pp. 266–267). Differentemente, il gesuita Wilhelm Gumppenberg esagera in fantasia, quando sostiene che in Le Puy venga venerata un'effige proveniente dall'Egitto, giunta per opera del profeta Geremia, il quale aveva profetato agli egizi la nascita del Salvatore. Si consolida così una tradizione che non si limita a riferire un'origine egiziana del simulacro, ma postula addirittura una rifunzionalizzazione di un'antica statua di Iside dalla pelle scura, donata probabilmente da un pellegrino, la quale viene venerata *in loco*, fino a che non è sostituita dai monaci a servizio del santuario con una Madonna "bianca". A seguito delle pressioni dei devoti la nuova immagine viene appositamente ridipinta e resa scura per venire incontro alle loro esigenze (Barral i Altet 2010, p. 98).

Non si deve nemmeno trascurare la connessione di queste Madonne nere con Diana efesina, tradizionalmente caratterizzata anch'essa dalla pelle scura. Consideriamo poi come il meraviglioso operato dalla Vergine nel Meridione italiano, i cui racconti sono sistematizzati nel citato *Zodiaco*, in uno con le narrazioni degli eventi miracolosi compiuti dalla Madonna in Catalogna, raccolte nel *Jardín de María plantado en el principado de Cataluña* opera del domenicano Narciso Camós edita nel 1657, voglia rappresentare Maria come intercessore universale, la quale preserva "tutto ciò che necessitava protezione: viaggiatori, marinai, raccolti, piante […]", ma anche animali e donne incinte (Alves 2015, p. 163). Osserviamo come nella pratica devozionale di questi due regni (culturalmente e religiosamente affini) la Madonna possa assumere le competenze della più antica vergine protettrice della

fertilità nel Mediterraneo, la prefata Diana. Tanto per Camós, quanto per Montorio, le immagini miracolose della Vergine, che sovente sono oggetto d'*inventio* da parte di animali, sia domestici, sia selvatici, le quali se pregate dominano le forze metereologiche, siano oberate del compito di affermare la potenza di Maria, la quale si appresta a divenire la nuova "signora della natura" (Rubin 2009, p. 379). Non sorprende, dunque, che — da un certo punto in poi — le effigi ritenute più potenti in questo ambito presentino un volto scuro, il quale deve ricordare l'antica divinità efesina. L'idea è condivisa pure da Marina Warner, che in *Alone of All Her Sex* vede in Maria una promotrice "mediterranea della fertilità", dei raccolti e delle donne (Warner 1976, p. 276). E se Warner addita nella Madonna Nera di Montserrat una "levatrice" soprannaturale, assimilabile a Diana, la Madonna venerata nella cattedrale di Tortosa è rappresentata come "l'albero divino […] il cui grembo verginale ci ha donato il frutto più dolce e saporito: Cristo" (Camós 1657, p. 189). Lo stesso accade per molte Madonne del Meridione italiano, specie quelle dal derma scuro, di cui — tra le molte — si ricorda quella di Siponto (Montorio 1715, p. 685), le quali presentano caratteri frugiferi e si dimostrano capaci di tutelare gli armenti e le bestie in generale.

Si è pure tentato di ricondurre la patina scura delle effigi all'invecchiamento del legno, al fumo delle candele poste dinanzi o agli acidi dell'aria, poi potenziata artificialmente con la pittura. Una simile situazione accidentale deve essere però confermata caso per caso. E se tale tesi può essere considerata plausibile per alcune madonne nere di Puglia e Basilicata in cui l'annerimento, causato dal naturale degrado del legname, ha assuefatto i devoti, spingendo ad un'enfatizzazione del colore scuro dei volti a mezzo di ridipinture, il più delle volte si realizza però *ex novo*, con lo scopo di evocare le origini orientali del simulacro e con esse di una maggiore potenza miracolosa (Barral i Altet 2009, p. 272). Tale processo pare iniziare sin dal periodo romanico come equivocamente sostenuto da Louis Bréhier (1924, pp. 205–208). Una simile tesi viene ripresa da Xavier Barral i Altet che riconduce l'annerimento alla volontà di evocare i primordi del cristianesimo, mentre nel Meridione italiano le icone e le statue lignee rese "nere" devono rimandare sin dai secoli XII–XIII direttamente a Costantinopoli o ad un

oriente sicuramente esotico (Barral i Altet 2009, pp. 272–273; Barral i Altet 2010, p. 99). Il ripensamento dell'estetica delle raffigurazioni è pure favorito fra Seicento e Settecento dall'attività degli ecclesiastici locali, i quali pongono mano alle *legendae* di fondazione dei singoli santuari e le riformulano per dimostrare prestigio e vetustà del culto prestato alle effigi possedute, attraverso il rimando ad una traslazione da Costantinopoli o dalla Terrasanta, nonché con l'attribuzione a san Luca (Andrea di Creta, *De sanctarum imaginum,* cit. in Bacci 1998, p. 11).

I dati in nostro possesso estratti da restauri ed interventi sulle effigi ci spingono a sostenere che sin dalla prima età moderna (fine secolo XIV), si predispone la modifica cromatica dell'incarnato di alcune effigi per venire incontro alle esigenze della devozione popolare. E se non possediamo fonti medievali che dimostrano una diffusa devozione verso le Madonne nere, possiamo affermare con certezza che alcune statue della Vergine come quelle di Vauclair e d'Orcival vengono ridipinte in epoca precoce, mentre altre come le effigi di Marsat e Clermont sono state annerite solo agli inizi dell'Ottocento (Cassagnes–Brouquet 1990; Cassagnes–Brouquet 2010, pp. 114–115). Ne evinciamo che i volti foschi diventano "una norma figurativa" molto tardi e solo in epoca a noi viciniore. Diversamente, la Vergine di Le Puy (Barral i Altet 2010, p. 89; Barral i Altet 2009, p. 266) risulta oggetto di un curioso annerimento progressivo, prima si ricolora il volto, poi le mani come testimoniato dal Libro d'Ore di Margherita d'Austria (fine secolo XV). Non deve meravigliare che l'annerimento non avvenga in epoca medievale, poiché il nero per l'immaginario dell'uomo medievale rimanda direttamente alle tenebre ed al male. Pertanto, la concezione di una "Madonna Nera era iconograficamente, simbolicamente, ma anche devozionalmente una vistosa eccezione nel panorama religioso medievale" (Bernardi 2010, p. 347).

Nonostante le diffidenze di certa letteratura, una delle più plausibili giustificazioni del ricorso alla ridipintura affonda le proprie ragioni nel *Cantico dei Cantici* 1, 5–6, laddove si afferma: "*Nigra sum, sed formosa*". Per Klaus Schreiner la congiunzione avversativa deve significare come il concetto di *formositas* sia inserito per controbilanciare la diffusa percezione negativa della *negritudo*. Questa linea di interpretazione perorata nei secoli XI–XIII dai monaci della grande famiglia di

san Benedetto, che minimizza la stessa *negritudo* come segno di "inferiorità sociale, culturale, fisica", in ragione della *formositas* vuol esaltare la Vergine quale espressione incontrovertibile di "perfezione" e "grazia" (Fazio 2012; Schreiner 1995, pp. 135–152). L'elaborazione viene infine finalizzata a promuovere la devozione alle Madonne Nere, spesso collocate nelle loro abbazie.

2. La *pulchritudo* della Vergine: le formule di traduzione visuale e la tradizione letteraria edificante

Occorre innanzitutto indagare le strategie di costruzione delle formule utilizzate per descrivere gli esseri umani nelle icone, sottolineando come la tradizione visuale romano orientale abbia rielaborato non solo i grandi schemi dell'arte ellenistica, ma ha metabolizzato anche l'arte della periferia dell'impero e quella prodotta al di fuori dei suoi confini, tanto che per Aby Warburg configurano "innanzitutto documenti della sopravvivenza dell'antichità" (Warburg, cit. in Spinelli e Venuti 1988, vedi anche Belting 2001, p. 105). Per Olivier Clément le soluzioni visuali esprimono una convergenza ed una relazione addirittura "planetaria", tant'è che in esse si intravede:

> il genio indo–europeo con il suo polo dell'umanesimo greco–latino e il suo polo immaginifico indo–iraniano, in cui il sensibile si spiritualizza e l'intellegibile prende forma; ecco il genio semitico con il suo polo antiocheno, dove Dio diviene patetico nell'uomo, e il suo polo alessandrino, dove l'uomo si fa impassibile in Dio; ecco, sotto il manto ellenistico, ricomparire i morti egiziani dagli occhi immensi, vivi di una vita impersonale; ecco l'ascesa degli dei dell'Oronte che rinascevano a primavera (Clément 1978, pp. 13–15; cit. in Zibawi 1993, p. 8).

Se ne evince che tali tradizioni visuali vengono metabolizzate entro le strategie di costruzione dell'icona per rendere visualizzabile l'uomo primigenio. Colpisce ancora come le rappresentazioni della Madre di Dio si orientino attorno ad un preciso simbolismo che è frutto di una complessa riflessione teologica sulla componente corporea della

Vergine, che è necessariamente legata "al triplice concetto di verginità, incarnazione e redenzione", il quale modella la liturgia e le forme di culto prestatele, da quelle auliche alle più popolari. Tutte queste si concentrano necessariamente sul volto di Maria, in quanto le sue effigi devono dare l'idea che Ella effettivamente ascolti le preghiere del fedele, mentre i suoi seni con cui da nutrimento al Redentore ed il suo utero atto a rendere concreta l'incarnazione devono costituire la via di accesso "senza mediazione" alla grazia (Barral i Altet 2009, p. 266).

Tale finalità è ben esplicata dal *Kontàkion* della Festa dell'Ortodossia: "Il Verbo indescrivibile del Padre si è fatto descrivibile incarnandosi da te, Madre di Dio. Avendo ristabilito nella sua dignità originale l'immagine insudiciata, l'unisce alla bellezza divina". Pertanto, è Cristo, il nuovo Adamo, a fornire il modello "al primo", mentre "l'antenato non è che un'imitazione del nuovo" (Cabasilas 1960, p. 183).

I prodotti visuali delineano allora un uomo "primigenio", rappresentato quale sottoprodotto della preghiera e della meditazione sulla Parola. I corpi dei raffigurati appaiono perciò assai "magri" e le proporzioni sono volutamente "allungate", tant'è che sono raffigurati quasi come se "non avessero più un sesso". Gli effigiati si presentano allora "liberati dal peso e dalla pesantezza […] — mentre le formule di visualizzazione devono accentuare — il carattere ieratico dei volti" (Zibawi 1993, p. 65). L'indagine si concentra allora sulle categorie rappresentative che orientano la costruzione del viso, le cui fattezze si ispirano ad una precisa geometria con carattere sacrale. Quello della Vergine — in particolare — viene connotato da occhi grandi e ieratici, addirittura sproporzionati, carichi di sovrumana intensità, solitamente inquadrati da due sopracciglia delineate con precisione, che formano due archi perfetti e rendono lo sguardo più intenso. Le maestranze pittoriche indugiano allora sull'espressione materna, che deve apparire intensa e connotata da un "sereno distacco", ad indicare la sua alienità a tutto ciò che è terreno. Consideriamo come il suo *visus* venga poi predisposto per attirare l'attenzione dell'astante e dare l'illusione che questa guardasse direttamente il fruitore del prodotto, al fine di attirarne lo sguardo (guardare per essere guardata dunque), invitandolo così al dialogo non solo visivo. I suoi occhi devono difatti introdurlo all'atemporale in cui vive la rappresentata. Di contro le orecchie che incorniciano il volto si fanno

piccole e sproporzionate rispetto agli occhi. Sembrano quasi sparire, perché l'effigiata è tutta rivolta al mondo interiore, in cui medita la Parola che è suo Figlio. Al contempo, l'ovale si allunga e la mascella deve presentarsi necessariamente simmetrica e regolare. La raffinata fattura del naso è connotata da una linea delicata (a volte tagliente), che conferisce una ricercata "nobiltà" e ne enfatizza la *tranquillitas*, mentre le narici appaiono sempre sottili e sembrano vibrare. La bocca è piccola ed appena pronunciata, resa con colore terroso, al fine di non suscitare sensualità. Nonostante tale necessità non deve nascondere una linea di disegno comunque sinuosa. Osserviamo come, nonostante tali accorgimenti, "il volto […] — debba presentarsi sempre — androgino, efebico, […] — quale — segreto dell'integrità dell'uomo edenico prima della scissione originaria" (Zibawi 1993, p. 66). I tratti somatici vengono così ridotti a "cifra simbolica", mentre la fisiognomica viene tradotta con rigido "geometrismo volumetrico", tanto che la violazione delle proporzioni deve derogare la grammatica rappresentativa naturalistica ed ottimizzare l'attitudine affabulatoria della rappresentazione (per la storia delle icone, cfr. tra i molti Gharib 1993; Sendler 1985; Bevan 1940, pp. 32–35; Dobschütz 1899, pp. 20–24; Kondakon 2009, pp. 10–25; Klein 1933, pp. 14–15; Uspenskij e Losskij 2007; Bernardi 2007). Se ne deduce che il documento visuale rappresentante la Vergine è pensato appositamente per costituire un luogo iconico dell'incontro tra osservante e osservato, reso capace di mediare attraverso le accortezze grafiche fra la transitorietà dell'uomo e l'eternità in cui si colloca la Madre santa, per offrire al fruitore un'esperienza di fede performante. Si riflette allora sulle strategie di costruzione di una peculiare declinazione della "cultura del volto", che vede la Vergine come protagonista. Tali tattiche aprono alla possibilità di indagare tanto i meccanismi biologici, quanto quelli sociali, culturali e religiosi, che uniti alle tendenze della moda artistica, nonché alle scelte di committenti e maestranze inducono alla strutturazione di una *facesphere* sacra, volta ad essere percepita "sia individualmente, sia collettivamente" da parte dei fedeli di una determinata confessione, ma anche di una più vasta comunità. Si indaga allora la predisposizione di un linguaggio volto ad ottimizzare la costruzione di una determinata identità per il personaggio sacro, che "emerge in modo olistico e che è in contrasto con altre *facesphere*" (Leone 2021, p. 276).

E se le icone della Vergine (come quelle dei santi dopotutto), fondano la liceità della loro produzione nell'incarnazione, non stupisce che la nascente mariologia si sia concentrata sugli effetti dell'ipostasi divina, esaltando le qualità materne della Vergine. Nemmeno meraviglia che in tempi precoci e precedendo la *definictio* del Concilio di Efeso, Proclo di Costantinopoli possa adoperare l'epiteto *Theotòkos* per magnificare Maria, legando le sue glorie definitivamente alla capacità generativa ed alla fertilità divina (Proclo di Costantinopoli, cit. in Di Nola, Gharib, Gambero e Toniolo 1988, 1, p. 565; cfr. Maggioni 1996, p. 99). Di seguito, si riflette sulla produzione poetica di Romano il Melode, il quale — tra i molti cantori della Madonna — si è concentrato proprio sulla corporeità di Maria e sull'effettività dell'acquisizione della natura umana da parte del Figlio di Dio nel processo ipostatico.

Si considera allora il secondo *Kontàkion* di Natale composto dal citato Romano, laddove indugia sulla valenza della voce materna, mentre canta la ninna nanna al Figlio, sui suoi seni che offrono il latte con cui viene nutrito ed ovviamente sul grembo in cui si realizza l'incarnazione (Gharib 1981; Maisano 2002; Barkhuizen 1986, pp. 1, 17–28, parte I; vol. I, pp. 268–281, parte II, vol. II).

Osserviamo innanzitutto come un gesto della normale quotidianità di una mamma, che accudisce il figlio e lo intrattiene col canto, divenga spunto per una riflessione soteriologica. L'inserimento del motivo del canto non è però una concessione ai normali vezzeggiamenti riservati agli infanti, ma vuole evocare un passo di Basilio di Cesarea, il quale ricorda la forza della parola pronunciata dal Cristo, la quale attira la sua *audience* come una melodia (Basilio di Cesarea, cit. in Heinz Mohr 1984, p. 256). Se ne evince che il canto di Maria, definito λιγυρός κελάδημα (2str 5, 5) assume in questo inno dedicato alla commemorazione della maternità divina, fissata dal calendario liturgico della Grande Chiesa al 26 dicembre, la stessa potenza del verbo di Cristo. Come tale pare dotato di forza vivificante, tanto che è capace di risvegliare dal sonno mortifero del peccato Adamo ed Eva e li libera temporaneamente dalla bocca di Ade in attesa del Grande Sabato. E sebbene per José Grosdidier de Matons i progenitori non debbano essere intesi come personaggi storici, ma quali "simboli dell'umanità che celebra il mistero della redenzione" (Grosdidier de Matons 1977, p. 82),

chi scrive crede che il loro inserimento è tutto funzionale alla narrazione e la loro temporanea resurrezione — oltre ad ottimizzare la narrativa — è volta a persuadere il fedele circa la valenza del potere facente capo alla Vergine. Ella, in ragione del *fiat* al progetto divino e per la conseguente maternità divina, compie in ossequio a Gv 14, 17 anche "cose più grandi" del Figlio.

Consideriamo come all'esaltazione della potenza del canto materno corrisponda l'enfatizzazione del senso che rende funzionale ai fini soteriologici la parola: l'udito. E se Adamo si limita a descrivere il canto dal punto di vista acustico come "armonioso, mormorio soave, melodioso", colpisce come Eva possa paragonare la voce della Vergine al canto di una rondine (Petersen 2012, p. 51, vedi anche Barkhuizen 2008, pp. 1–22). La metafora si dimostra altamente significante, poiché rimanda direttamente al tempo di primavera in cui si celebra la resurrezione. Un'idea che viene specificatamente "insufflata" attraverso la ricorrenza del lemma ὄρθρος con cui il Vangelo di Luca (24, 1) indica il mattino di Pasqua. Raffrontiamo una sagace evocazione, rafforzata attraverso il ricorso al verbo ἀνίστημι, che presentifica pure il risveglio della primavera, alla quale viene ricondotta anche l'Incarnazione (altra festa che non casualmente si svolge all'inizio di quella stagione), in quanto sul piano speculativo possono essere entrambe intese come "premesse della Risurrezione escatologica" (Mulard 2011, p. 136). Il martellante riferimento non deve meravigliare, tanto il Natale, quanto la commemorazione della maternità divina sono teleologicamente orientati al mattino della resurrezione, che costituisce non solo la chiave dell'anno liturgico ma anche l'evento centrale dell'economia della salvezza.

Al contempo, si puntualizza come il porre l'attenzione sul canto di Maria abbia profonde implicazioni soteriologiche, che investono la funzionalità del corpo nell'economia della salvezza e pongono in un quadro edificante i sensi umani, poiché per Romano, a dire di Georgia Frank, i "sensi portano la coppia più vicina a Dio […] — mentre — la rieducazione dei sensi non è altro che la ri–creazione del primo uomo, modulata sul racconto di Gen 2" (Frank 2005, p. 168).

L'inno continua con la magnificazione del corpo di Maria e propone l'accorata preghiera dei progenitori alla Vergine, la quale è lodata dalla tradizione patristica per il suo "orecchio recettivo" (*ibidem*). Questa

non solo si limita ad ascoltarli, ma si commuove nel profondo al fissarli in quanto "madre compassionevole". Promette così di esercitare la sua intercessione, affermando: "diventerò per voi avvocata presso il mio Figlio. Cacciate la tristezza, ho partorito la gioia" (str 10, 7–11, trad. it. Broggi 2019–2020).

Constatiamo come Romano passi a magnificare il ruolo dei seni di Maria, la cui funzione nutrizionale per il Cristo costituisce solo il significante più superficiale. Precisa allora come la madre eserciti la propria intercessione non tanto con la profusione di accorate preghiere, quanto attraverso la corporeità ed il contatto fisico costante nella sussunzione del latte da parte del Figlio. Nel porgere il seno allora può esclamare:

> Io non sono soltanto tua madre, Salvatore misericordioso, e non senza ragione allatto colui che del latte è il largitore, ma per tutti io rivolgo a te la mia supplica. Portavoce e vanto mi hai reso di tutta la mia stirpe, la terra ha in me una protezione perenne, una rocca e una fortezza (1str 23, 5–6, trad. it. Broggi 2019–2020).

L'apostrofe materna costituisce un pezzo di bravura retorica, capace di parlare su più piani. Osserviamo come sul versante più superficiale la connessione fra il cibo e l'intercessione riveli un legame che ha radici molto profonde ed affonda sia nel pensiero magico, sia nel substrato cultuale della tradizione religiosa comune al mondo mediterraneo. I riti tradizionali contemplano la nutrizione rituale delle divinità attraverso la devoluzione delle offerte, solitamente sotto forma di incinerazione e soave fumo, le quali sono sempre accompagnate da molte suppliche. Se ne deduce che Romano ha ben presente le antiche pratiche devozionali, che il cristianesimo trasforma in incruente. Raffrontiamo una plausibile lettura che è confermata dalla stessa Vergine, la quale apostrofa il Figlio: "Devo offrirti il mio latte o la mia lode?" (trad. it. Broggi 2019–2020). Lascia così intendere come quello rappresentato nell'inno debba essere percepito come un vero e proprio atto rituale e di culto, che — come tale — si inserisce entro la logica del rendimento di grazie e dell'intercessione liturgica.

Su un piano più profondo Romano vuol parlare all'inconscio di ogni uditore del suo inno, poiché rimanda alla sfera dell'infanzia e

all'allattamento da questi sperimentato. Alla luce di questa sottile evocazione mnemonica si comprende come il Melode abbia optato per una formula di sicuro successo, che deve ben predisporre il pubblico, allorché stimolato dai ricordi della propria infanzia a confidare in Maria, come nella propria madre. L'espediente retorico — attraverso il richiamo dell'allattamento — deve davvero persuadere che il Figlio sia propenso a concedere qualsivoglia grazia in ragione di un *background* mnemonico comune all'uditorio.

A dimostrazione dell'efficacia di questo tipo di intercessione nutrizionale, Romano aggiunge la puntuale risposta del divino Bambino:

> O madre, io li salvo sia per te sia attraverso te […]. Per la tua stirpe io dimoro in questa mangiatoia e dalle tue mammelle per mia volontà ora succhio il latte: per amor loro tu mi reggi fra le braccia. Ecco, tu vedi e stringi colui che i Cherubini non possono guardare, e come figlio mi accarezzi, o Piena di grazia (2str 13, 4–11, trad. it. Broggi 2019–2020).

Si prende allora in considerazione come la valorizzazione del latte materno vada inserita in una tradizione costante, che giunge alla soluzione grafica dell'Intercessione. Questa gode di un conclamato successo nell'Italia settentrionale e nella Francia del sec. XIV e presenta la Vergine orante che mostra al Figlio il seno, in ricordo del latte che ha preso da lei, per ottenere le grazie richieste. Il *locus* di Romano sembra allora preludere a "quel ricatto di famiglia" postulato da Timothy Verdon (2001, pp. 131–150), che non si limita a visualizzare Maria rogante ed a seno scoperto nel compiere un atto di coercizione psicologica, ma piuttosto apre i più colti ad una profonda riflessione sulle implicazioni devozionali correlate al mistero dell'incarnazione.

Infine, si indugia sul valore del ventre di Maria, laddove si realizza la concreta ipostasi divina. La Vergine stessa decanta il ruolo assunto in ragione della divina maternità, quando avvicinandosi alla mangiatoia, usa una strategia di *captatio benevolentiae* mentre ricorda al Figlio l'alta dignità concessale: "o Figlio, mi hai esaltato con la tua condiscendenza, la mia stirpe infelice per mezzo mio ti supplica" (2str 2, 1, trad. it. Broggi 2019–2020). La divina "condiscendenza" (συγκατάβασις) di cui la Vergine si fa campione, è sintetizzabile in quel "movimento di

discesa" con cui il Verbo ha umiliato se stesso in favore dell'umanità. È quella stessa "condiscendenza" che ha reso Maria "regina" ed in quanto tale le riconosce non solo l'attitudine ad intercedere con successo, ma addirittura la onera dell'obbligo di offrire la continua preghiera di supplica, come già operato nelle Scritture dalle donne potenti del popolo di Israele, quali la regina Ester (3, 1–15), ma anche Betsabea presso suo figlio Salomone (1Re 2, 19) o perfino Abigar innanzi a Davide (1Sam 25, 23–31). Non stupisce che Romano faccia pronunciare alla stessa Vergine un ulteriore apostrofe dallo spiccato carattere affabulatorio che deve esplicare all'auditorio gli effetti concreti del suo ruolo di magnanima mediatrice, quando afferma: "Io sono regina del mondo: poiché ho portato in grembo la tua potenza, su tutti ho potere" (2str 2, 3, trad. it. Broggi 2019–2020). Suscita pure attenzione l'uso del verbo βαστάζω, che spiega la sua significatività su molteplici piani, poiché indica sia il "portare" il bambino nel grembo, sia l'effettivo "portarlo" tra le braccia e, persino, il compito missionario di diffondere la salvezza cristiana, "portandolo" all'umanità. Il verbo, oltre le finalità teologiche, è adoperato per rendere maggiormente performanti le lodi di Maria, quando si specifica che gli spiriti celesti si stupiscono nel vedere una donna sostenere colui che è "inaccessibile agli angeli", il quale si mostra però "accessibile ai terrestri".

Romano indugia ancora sul grembo di Maria, quando la addita quale ἄμπελος (vigna), mentre il Figlio è definito ἀγεώργετος βότρυς (grappolo non coltivato). Constatiamo come il Melode oltre al parallelismo fra la vigna — che porta il suo frutto — e la madre — la quale tiene tra le braccia il figlio (2str 1, 1, trad. it. Broggi 2019–2020) —, tenti di metabolizzare una formula tradizionale della letteratura edificante. Efrem il Siro ha già usato la metafora della vigna "che si è coltivata da sé stessa" per presentificare la maternità verginale (Efrem il Siro, *Inno* 18, str 21–22, cfr. De Francesco 2003), mentre Giacomo di Sarug indica Maria come "la vigna non potata e non coltivata" che porta comunque frutto e mostra un grappolo, quel Gesù concepito senza intervento umano (Giacomo di Sarug, *Omelia seconda e terza della Natività*, cit. in Shilling 2016, pp. 208–228, in particolare p. 223). Tale frutto per Romano è dotato di qualità salvifiche, poiché di esso Adamo si può nutrire "senza morire" (2str 3, 9–10).

Il tema del grembo verginale ha un ulteriore sviluppo nell'omiletica, tanto che per Cirillo di Gerusalemme è percepito come "talamo puro", conveniente al "Purissimo" (Cirillo di Gerusalemme, *Catechesi XII*, 24, PG 33, 757). Per Teodoro di Ancira assume persino qualità olfattive, allorché lo definisce talamo "profumato" in cui si realizza l'ipostasi (Teodoro di Ancira, *Homilia*, PG 77, 1397. Vedi anche Toniolo 2011, pp. 15–16). Fozio invece lo addita quale lettiga che trasporta il Cristo, rappresentato come *plus quam Salomon* (Photius, *Canon in Deipara I*, VII, 183. Vedi anche D'Aiuto 2004, pp. 257–300).

Osserviamo poi come la doverosa esaltazione della maternità di Maria si sia ripiegata nell'Italia del secolo XVI sul *locus* della "*pulchritudo corporalis*" della Vergine, concentrandosi quindi sull'effettività dell'incarnazione e sull'altissima qualità del materiale genetico fornito al Cristo. Raffrontiamo una strategia retorica che non dice nulla di nuovo, ma rimanda ad una prassi molto antica, che padre Giovanni Pozzi ha definito quale *"salutatio membrorum*" in cui si "passava in rassegna, dal capo ai piedi, le membra di Maria dando a ciascuna la sua lode" (Pozzi 1989, pp. 273–274), secondo una prassi già cristallizzata in orazioni devozionali come l'*Ave* ed il *Salve Regina*. Queste ultime, in ragione della grande diffusione, hanno già inciso l'inconscio collettivo e possono agevolare il successo di questa pia pratica (Zardin 2010, p. 75).

Il tema della corporeità viene enfatizzato anche nella *Legenda aurea* di Iacopo da Varazze, laddove la materialità del corpo della Vergine si collega al meraviglioso, il quale nutre la narrazione in cui sono protagonisti gli "*ubera*" materni che, "turgidi di fecondità" per il divino Figliolo, configurano per il fedele piuttosto degli "*ubera spiritualia* [...] *quae sunt eius pietas et charitas, quibus nos consolat et nutrit*" (Iacopo da Varazze, *Mariale* c. 66 v.).

Alla fine del Quattrocento fra' Bernardino Busti nel Sermone V, parte VII (pp. 153–168, cfr. Rusconi 1975, pp. 68–95), del suo fortunato Mariale evoca ancora una volta la "*pulchritudo corporalis*" di Maria e si sofferma su un tema consueto quale il "*venter*" e gli "*ubera beatae Virginis*". In altri sermoni del medesimo francescano compare un ulteriore tema tradizionale, quale quello del latte materno indispensabile alla nutrizione del Cristo bambino.

Occorre considerare come la laude della fisicità non si limiti ad essere intessuta dai soli uomini, ma gode di un discreto successo anche nella letteratura mistica femminile. Santa Brigida di Svezia (*Revelationes* VII, 21, 5–8; Bartolomei Romagnoli 2018, pp. 196–197; Di Cosmo 2025, pp. 224–225) non solo pone le basi nel cattolicesimo dell'iperdulia mariana, ma attraverso la visione del parto della Vergine fornisce un catalizzatore atto a permettere di ripensare la traduzione visuale del Natale di Cristo, allorché esalta il corpo di Maria che dà alla luce il Salvatore. Ella non connota la scena con caratteri epici, ma piuttosto descrive i gesti afferibili alla normale prassi con cui una qualsivoglia donna affronta il parto, che sono stati sicuramente condivisi sia dalla mistica (madre di otto figli), sia dalle sue potenziali lettrici.

Su tale scia si inseriscono i componimenti della benedettina ticinense suor Alma Colomba dello Spirito Santo, la quale concentra la propria meditazione "sopra li membri sacratissimi della santissima di Dio Madre". La monaca passa così in rassegna le componenti del corpo verginale partendo dai "santissimi piedi [...] ne quali s'appoggia la nostra speranza, per aver essi portato in tante peregrinazioni il Verbo eterno fatto uomo con tante fatiche". Continua con l'esaltazione delle "santissime genocchia" e del "veneratissimo ventre", nonché delle "sacratissime braccia e mani" che "con tanta tenerezza d'amore teneva [...] il suo figlio, e di Dio insieme" (Suor Alma Colomba dello Spirito Santo, cit. in Zardin 2010, pp. 72–73; ms. 415, quinterno IV, Biblioteca Trivulziana di Milano, cfr. Cortese 1971, pp. 103–177). Il *locus* poetico, unito a quello delle "sacratissime e nobilissime carezze fatte dal celeste Bambino a Maria cingendogli il collo con tenerezza", sublima la quotidianità di una normalissima interazione madre–figlio, ponendola su un piano certamente più alto. La scontata affettività si traduce in un tentativo di visualizzazione — seppur romanticizzato — delle implicazioni del mistero dell'incarnazione, poiché ogni tenerezza si concretizza in una suadente supplica, che è resa visualizzabile dalla formula tradizionale della Vergine *Glykophilousa*.

Non stupisce nemmeno che il tema delle membra di Maria ritorni nei vagheggiamenti mistici di un'altra donna, Elena Caprina, la quale offre ampio spazio al "simbolismo floreale del grembo materno". Il ventre verginale viene così rappresentato come un giardino e reso visualizzabile attraverso un "luogo amenissimo che tutto era rose e gigli

[…] — con — nel mezzo un graziosissimo pergolato tutto de gelsomini […]. Sotto era un bambolino che toccando un'arpa faceva armonia del cielo […]"[2]. La scena, che evoca un tema visuale non certo nuovo, quale l'*hortus conclusus* o il giardino mistico, lascia spazio al tema tradizionale dell'allattamento di Cristo. Non sorprende poi che la mistica — ricalcando un *locus* dell'agiografia di Bernardo di Chiaravalle — possa vedere l'effusione di alcune gocce di questo latte sugli spettatori della scena (*Ci nous dit*, Chantilly, Mus. Condé, 26 [1078], c. 178r). Raffrontiamo un motivo edificante che secondo il padre spirituale della mistica, il gesuita Gregorio Ferrari, acquista il valore di "segno dell'ufficio materno che non sdegna di fare anco verso i peccatori"[3].

Il tema della fisicità di Maria torna in un'altra opera del sec. XIV come la *Coronula beatae Mariae Virginis*, che ne esalta il "*sanctum corpus* […] *totum*", procedendo dagli "*oculi sancti*", con essi ne loda le orecchie, le narici, la bocca e le labbra, in modo da santificare la componente sensoria nella sua totalità, la quale viene così liberata da qualsiasi concupiscenza al peccato. Consideriamo come sul piano più prosastico l'elogio delle orecchie sia collegato all'ascolto dell'annuncio dell'angelo, quello della bocca deve rimandare alla pronuncia del *fiat* della salvezza, il grembo poi può evocare i "gaudii" e la "cognizione sponsale". Gli occhi vogliono significare la "santa contemplazione" di quel Figliolo divino che le sue braccia possono "stringerlo e abraciarlo", mentre le mani procedono ad accudirlo con i normali "servizii" riservati agli infanti. Si giunge così all'"*anima* […] *sancta*" e tramite questa si conclude con la sublimazione dei "*omnes sensus animae et corporis* […] *benedicti*" (cfr. *Coronula beatae Mariae Virginis*, cit. in Zardin 2010, p. 76; Meersseman 1958, pp. 178–179; Visentin 1995, p. 100, nota 23).

La lode della corporeità verginale torna ancora nel *Manuale de' servi di Maria madre di Dio* edito nel 1658 dal cappuccino Ignazio Carnago (Pozzi 1993, p. 75 e p. 344; Zardin 2010, p. 77). La prassi devozionale connessa alla fisicità di Maria, che perdura fino al Seicento inoltrato, culmina nella lode dei "trentasei membri della gloriosa Vergine", com'è evincibile dal C*ompendio di cento meditazioni sacre sopra tutta la vita e la passione del Signore come della Madonna* del padre cappuccino

(2) G. Ferrari, ms. AD.XI.34, Biblioteca Nazionale Braidense di Milano, f. 129v.
(3) *Ivi*, f. 72r.

Cristoforo Verucchino del 1617 (Pozzi 1993, p. 27; Zardin 2010, p. 76). Questo genere di componimenti per il precitato Pozzi delinea una magnificazione della corporeità che si concentra su una "sagoma" da "leggere […] come su di un libro" offerta alla pietà dei fedeli (Pozzi 1993, pp. 17–88).

Osserviamo poi come le diverse *salutationes* si susseguano nella letteratura di genere secondo un ordine fisso e inemendabile, intessuto sull'eccellenza fisica della Madre connotata dalla "proporzionata, luminosa bellezza" delle singole parti del suo corpo (Zardin 2010, p. 72), la quale modella la formula descrittiva adoperata nei documenti visuali. La strategia retorica permette di postulare l'intuizione di alcuni principii della moderna semiotica o, per lo meno, la conoscenza di alcuni suoi rudimenti, che permettono di insistere su caratteristiche come la simmetria, l'equilibrio e la corretta proporzione delle membra del corpo afferito alla Vergine. Se ne deduce che la devozione popolare, attraverso l'esaltazione dell'armonia esteriore spiegata in un'avvenente forma estetica, sintetizzabile nella formula del *Tota pulchra*, vuol esprimere la grandezza del consiglio celeste, il quale ha reso quel corpo un tempio "consacrato" alla divinità cristiana. Attraverso la lode della fisicità della madre si vuol pure proporre una narrativa teologicamente orientata, che deve persuadere il popolo a credere all'effettività dell'eccezionale privilegio della concezione *sine macula*. Tale percezione, già presente in Romano il Melode e nell'epiteto ἄχραντος da lui utilizzato, giustifica nel *Ritratto del bellissimo volto di Maria Vergine Madre di Dio* del padre celestino Placido Padiglia la "compiuta e miracolosa bellezza" del viso materno, quale conseguenza della concessione constante nell'essere "preservata" dalla "commun colpa originale" (Padiglia 1624). Un simile *status*, tuttavia, rimarrà ancora oggetto di acceso dibattito fino all'imposizione per *iussu* papale del 1854, a cui seguirà la necessaria conferma divina a Lourdes (Pozzi 1993, p. 27; Francia 2004; Francia, Fusco e Morello 2005). L'esaltazione della materna *pulchritudo* deve anche rendere visualizzabile il compiersi nella Madonna del primitivo destino dell'umanità, che in lei viene liberata dalla condanna alla naturale decomposizione del corpo, anticipata attraverso l'altrettanto singolare privilegio dell'assunzione.

3. I fenotipi del volto e le Madonne nere: a proposito del piccolo *corpus* estratto dallo *Zodiaco di Maria*

Il presente lavoro analizza un piccolo *corpus* di rappresentazioni mariane ascrivibili al tipo della "Madonna nera" ed utilizza una metodologia che viene orientata dalle categorie cognitive della semiotica, concentrandosi così sul viso della Vergine. Di conseguenza, si vuol dimostrare come il volto materno sia il frutto di una negoziazione tra diverse istanze rappresentative, che coinvolgono il naturale e il simbolico, per soddisfare le aspettative prima di tutto teologiche e culturali, poi le esigenze del culto e, infine, quelle della devozione religiosa dei più. Nel caso delle Madonne nere emerge come il ricorso all'incarnato "color del grano" non si sia limitato a dimostrare l'autenticità storica, ma debba sostenere anche quella culturale del prodotto visuale, poiché capace di convalidare come reale e credibile la formula visiva nel marco della tradizione della Chiesa delle origini. A questa sovente si aggiunge l'enfatizzazione della continuità biologica con Cristo, quale ulteriore fattore di veridicità, che oltre le istanze teologiche legate all'effettività dell'ipostasi divina, deve fornire una certa credibilità storica al ritratto entro una prassi che si cristallizza nell'espediente della riconduzione dell'opera alla mano di san Luca, afferendo così all'immagine il ruolo tanto di archetipo, quanto di ritratto vero e veridico.

Si procede con l'analisi della piccola icona della Madonna di Casaluce, patrona dell'omonima abbazia nell'agro aversano e della città di Aversa dal 1772 (Saviano e Pezzella 1998). Il documento visuale, che vede iscritta una Vergine Odigìtria caratterizzata da uno stile *naif* e traduce con molteplici ingenuità espressive i moduli formali ascrivibili a quell'eterno ellenismo decodificato da Otto Demus (2008, pp. 13–17), è alto 35 cm e largo 25 cm. Pertanto, le sue piccole dimensioni e la fattura non troppo raffinata lasciano pensare ad un'immagine di bottega destinata sicuramente alla devozione privata. Tuttavia, secondo la tradizione è ascritta addirittura alla mano di san Luca e Montorio sostiene che sia giunta in Italia per opera di Ruggero Sanseverino dalla Terrasanta insieme a due giare (Montorio 1715, p. 116), le quali sono identificate con quelle usate durante le nozze di Cana, laddove il Cristo ha compiuto il suo primo miracolo (Gv 2, 1–24). L'immagine

e le reliquie vengono così donate a re Carlo I di Angiò e dopo alcune traversie giungono ai monaci celestini, che si insediano su stimolo di Raimondo del Balzo nel castello dove sorgerà l'attuale abbazia di Casaluce.

L'effige solitamente ascritta al sec. XIV e ricondotta genericamente ad uno stile bizantineggiante, a parere di chi scrive può essere additata a quei prodotti destinati alla commercializzazione seriale, afferibili alla produzione dell'area balcanica. In tal modo, si può giustificare un'ipotetica *translatio* o — cosa non meno probabile — può essere ricondotta al lavoro di manovalanze assuefatte a modelli provenienti dall'area illirica presenti *in loco.* La piccola icona costituisce un'alternativa alle produzioni della scuola campano–cassinese che realizza opere altrettanto pregevoli, come la bella Madonna *Galaktotrophousa* nella viciniore chiesa di S. Francesco in Aversa datata al secolo XIII. L'ascendenza balcanica è dimostrata dalla postura della Vergine, che raffigurata di tre quarti deroga alla ieratica fissità dello schema dell'Odigìtria tradizionale e l'avvicina alla splendida tavola rappresentante la Madre di Dio conservata al Monastero di Vatopedi sul Monte Athos. L'effige, datata attorno al 1300, presenta una prossemica assimilabile e ripete pedissequamente la postura del Bambino, che nel caso aversano viene però costretta dal piccolo spazio ritagliato entro la doppia cornice, allontanandosi dall'ariosità della tavola atonita. Il diretto riferimento ai Balcani è rafforzato dalla tecnica di realizzazione dell'incarnato del Bambino che con le sue velature di terra verde e ocra dimostra affinità formali con gli affreschi del monastero serbo di Studenica, in particolare rimanda alle rappresentazioni dei profeti attribuiti a Michele Astrapas e datati al 1314. La linea del disegno e la tecnica pittorica, nonostante le ingenuità, l'avvicinano anche alla bella Odigìtria affrescata nella chiesa di S. Nicola Orfano (Tessalonica), datata al 1310–1320. Colpisce poi la resa del volto della Vergine, che si mostra molto allungato rispetto ai modelli circolanti, sia nell'area campana, sia nella balcanica a cui gli stilemi fanno diretto riferimento. L'incarnato è difatti caratterizzato da campiture di colore chiaro molto risicate che lasciano trasparire ampie porzioni del fondo di preparazione, mentre le luci, realizzate con brevi colpi di colore bianco, si concentrano su zigomi, fronte, naso e mento. Si raffronta una soluzione alquanto inusuale, rispetto alla consueta tornitura

realizzata con la terra d'ombra o il verde oliva e normalmente adoperata per offrire tridimensionalità al viso materno. Tale tecnica rimanda ancora una volta ad una soluzione d'area balcanica come la miniatura del codice 45 del monastero Stavronikita del Monte Athos del secolo XIV. Ivi la traduzione delle anatomie, enfatizzata con pennellate tanto rapide quanto ingenue di colore chiaro, dimostra inequivocabili affinità stilistiche e testimonia una tradizione visuale diffusa in zone culturalmente affini. Se ne deduce che alla luce di tali riferimenti, l'immagine può essere pacificamente datata al primo quarto del secolo XIV.

Dal punto di vista della semiotica facciale possiamo affermare che l'operazione volta ad immaginare e conseguentemente rappresentare un viso confacente alla Madre di Dio deve essere sempre ricondotta ad un'espressione propria della "cultura del volto", legata all'area geografica in cui viene dipinta o sotto la cui influenza è stato sottoposto il medesimo territorio entro il versante diacronico. Ne evinciamo che il volto della Vergine ipostatizzato prima nelle opere monumentali, poi negli esemplari da cavalletto, deve contemperare tali istanze con le necessità del contesto biologico in cui l'immagine viene prodotta e rispetto all'origine biologica dei fruitori per cui il simulacro è realizzato. Tant'è che il viso risultante non deve apparire come biologicamente "comune", perché inadeguato a raffigurare la Madre santa ma, pur conservando le componenti naturali proprie e gradite ad un pubblico teoricamente illimitato, viene rappresentato come percettivamente "singolare" e capace di trascendere l'individualità del personaggio storico, fino a divenire archetipo di se stesso(4). Al contempo, si considera che le tecniche di costruzione del volto impiegate dalle maestranze devono rendere performante il linguaggio formale con cui si vuol realizzare una traduzione per immagini adeguata a permetterne la visualizzazione, offrendo un prodotto che si inserisce in una "frontiera somatica, emotiva, posturale e gestuale" (Leone 2021, p. 272). Il processo di collazione dei diversi elementi fisiognomici risulta perciò espressione di un'attività necessariamente culturale realizzata "a monte" attraverso la predisposizione di schemi approvati dall'autorità ecclesiastica, che si dimostrano frutto di

(4) Si osserva come la "materializzazione" del volto mariano deve rimandare ad una delle tante forme percettive della religiosità che nella sua materialità può essere ricondotta a quelle che André Vauchez chiama le forme di "attaccamento alla sensibilità del sacro", (cfr. Vauchez 1999, pp. 79–91).

una ponderata meditazione ed appaiono atti a interpretare tali istanze in un volto somatico. Pertanto, le effigi derivanti devono essere ricondotte per ragioni formali a niente più di un prodotto di quella cultura che l'ha posto in essere, ma comunque funzionale allo scopo per cui la relativa produzione è orientata.

Di seguito consideriamo la grande icona della *Materdomini* di Nocera Superiore, alta 100 cm e larga 95 cm (Alfano 1924; De Santi 1905; Rescigno 1950). L'immagine per Montorio sarebbe stata ritrovata nel 1041 da una contadina, che ha goduto di una visione della Vergine, la quale le ordinava di scavare sotto ad una quercia, laddove la giovane solitamente riposava al fine di ritrovare l'icona attualmente venerata (Montorio 1715, p. 271).

L'effige rappresenta una variante dell'Odigìtria, avvolta in un pesante *maphorion* scuro, la quale indica con la sinistra il Figlio divino e si fonde col motivo dell'Eleusa, poiché piega il capo in modo confidente verso il Bambino e sembra quasi sussurrargli la propria supplica. Il divino Infante dalle vesti luminose stende la mano destra per benedire, mentre regge con la sinistra il rotolo della legge e siede, come se fosse intronizzato, sul braccio della madre.

La fattura dell'icona dimostra la persistenza nel Meridione italiano se non di veri e propri prodotti afferibili al *commonwealth* bizantino, almeno di produzioni ascrivibili a quella "lingua franca" già decodificata da Hans Belting (1978; 1979, pp. 2–5; vedi anche Pace 1993, pp. 71–89). Al contempo, si segnala come sia possibile ricondurre la fisiognomica della Vergine direttamente a modelli ciprioti, quali la Vergine Odigìtria datata al secolo XII presso la chiesa di S. Nicola di Kakopetria, con cui condivide la linea tagliente del naso, la morfologia degli occhi, ma soprattutto un dettaglio non trascurabile come la traduzione degli zigomi, che appaiono appuntiti e modellati da rapide pennellate di ocra chiara. Colpisce poi il disegno degli occhi e delle occhiaie in particolare, enfatizzate attraverso un tratteggio di colore più scuro, che deroga ad una consuetudine formale volta ad addolcirne il *visus* con pennellate liquide di ocra gialla e bianco. Osserviamo poi come la tornitura dei volti di entrambi i rappresentati, nonché la traduzione del naso del Bambino possano rimandare ad un'altra effige cipriota come la Panagia Arakiotissa opera di Teodoro Apsevdis datata al 1192. L'effige

evoca anche alcune opere presenti in Puglia ed afferibili ai secoli XII–XIII come la Madonna delle Benedettine di Andria (Milella Lovecchio 1988, p. 105) con le sue raffinate cromie (probabilmente anch'essa proveniente dall'area mediterranea) e il suo plausibile capostipite, costituito dalla Madonna di Pulsano, certamente opera dell'*atelier* monastico di Tremiti (Petrucci 1960, doc. n. 76, p. 227; Di Cosmo 2024, p. 215). Tali stilemi lasciano propendere per una ridatazione dell'icona, riferendola così ad un'epoca precoce e quindi almeno alla prima metà del secolo XIII e non al secolo XIV come fino ad ora ritenuto.

Si procede con l'analisi delle rappresentazioni di due vergini "brune" che configurano una deroga ed al contempo un'evoluzione nel locale delle strategie rappresentative adoperate per descrivere il volto di Maria. Si considera allora la veneratissima icona della "Bruna" (il cui epiteto potrebbe essere una poco credibile corruzione di *Hebron*)[5], meglio nota al popolino napoletano come "*Mamma d'ò Carmine*", famosa per i miracoli contenuti nelle cronache redatte intorno al 1511 dal notar Giacomo nonché da Giuliano Passero e la cui redditività in termini di elemosina è confermata dal Breve papale del 1508 (Foschino 2020, pp. 15–16). La grande tavola alta 110 cm e larga 80 cm rappresenta una Vergine dai grandi occhi sbarrati che sostiene il Figlio, il quale si accosta dolcemente e accarezza il mento materno. Osserviamo come il dipinto della "Bruna" costituisca "un'icona–non– icona" che, metabolizzando formule note come la *Glykophilousa* e la cosiddetta Madonna del gioco (D'Ovidio 2017, p. 235), propone una soluzione formale di successo che, dopo l'intronizzazione nel fastoso baldacchino di gusto rinascimentale scolpito nel 1510 da Andrea Ferrucci, assume un carattere "quasi ufficiale". Lo schema grafico sulla scorta della diffusione dell'Ordine carmelitano si moltiplica all'infinito e non senza varianti nell'area meridionale. Osserviamo come l'eccessiva perpetuazione del modello lasci sopravvivere alcune costanti formali, come il tenero abbraccio del Bambino e l'anomala torsione del suo corpo, mentre la gamba sinistra poggia sul braccio materno, la destra rimane poi (nelle successive riproduzioni) a penzoloni. La traduzione formale, che procede da una serie

(5) Sappiamo che fra la fine del sec. XV e gli inizi del sec. XVI sono esistenti in Napoli ben due Vergini sotto il titolo della "Bruna", una in possesso degli Agostiniani, una dell'Ordine carmelitano. Quest'ultima il 24 dicembre 1500 è oggetto di una donazione della corporazione degli orafi, cfr. Foschino (2020, p. 16).

di schemi rappresentativi romano orientali (come si è visto) reinterpretati con una grazia tutta francese ed assai lontana da quella lessematica "ellenica" tipica del mondo delle icone, deve sicuramente ascriversi ad un prodotto napoletano, realizzato in una bottega nutrita da artisti educati al gusto d'oltralpe. Tali maestranze rimodulano modelli noti e non più di moda per creare un prodotto arcaicizzante, ma assai elegante e volto a venire incontro alle istanze del gusto condiviso dalla raffinata corte napoletana della metà del secolo XIV (anche se non possediamo riferimenti precisi all'immagine prima del 1500). Raffrontiamo un sentore estetico che si incarna in una graziosa rappresentazione della divina maternità, caratterizzata dalla resa dei delicati incarnati "colore del grano" e nell'articolato panneggio della veste rosata con cui il Bambino viene abbigliato. Nonostante i ritocchi ed i rifacimenti successivi, che compromettono la lettura dell'opera originaria, quella risultante non oscura la grazia esecutiva del prodotto originario. Il documento visuale è difatti concepito per presentare al fedele un prodotto suggestivo, dotato del carisma di un'icona, ma che deve rispondere appieno alle istanze formali correnti al momento della sua produzione, allorché la percezione estetica è ormai mutata, in uno con le tecniche esecutive di incarnati e panneggio, che non presentano più le ampie campiture tipiche della tradizione romano orientale. Occorre puntualizzare che tra tutte quelle analizzate, l'icona della "Bruna" è quella più attenta a soddisfare sia le aspettative storiche, sia le esigenze della devozione religiosa attraverso i tratti fisionomici, che vogliono inequivocabilmente dimostrare la continuità biologica con Cristo e l'elevazione spirituale della Madre a figura divina. Il suo volto, plasmato dall'eredità genetica, evidenzia una tradizione visiva che deve stemperare la tensione semiotica, in cui convergono le esigenze tanto dell'evangelizzazione, delle elaborazioni teologiche sull'Incarnazione e della pietà mariana più in generale.

Osserviamo poi come la diffusione massiccia di un nuovo formulario rappresentativo, realizzato in Napoli in concomitanza con l'insediamento di artisti francesi richiamati dalla casa d'Angiò e con le commissioni a Giotto ed alla sua scuola, funga da catalizzatore per lo sviluppo di un polo artistico locale. Ivi, si reinterpretano i modelli noti e si propongono nuove tendenze nella raffigurazione del volto, che — derogando agli *standards* romano orientali — ne creano di differenti, aggiornando

i prototipi. Il contatto fra queste due tradizioni formali accelera l'evoluzione del formulario utilizzato per la rappresentazione dei volti di Cristo e della Vergine, ma anche dei santi. Se ne deduce che la popolarità delle nuove formule descrittive diventate di tendenza, va spiegata tanto nell'*appeal* estetico degli schemi proposti, quanto nell'emotività da essi suscitata.

Tuttavia, si considera come l'Ordine carmelitano scelga di ricorrere ad una formula di compromesso che, nell'intento di attribuire un carisma indiscutibile all'effige mariana posseduta e di donarle inequivoco prestigio, procede da un modello–base autorevole, poi opportunamente modificato per venire incontro alle istanze del gusto in voga al momento della sua produzione. Si opta allora per una precisa strategia che rimanda a modelli più antichi, capaci di evocare non solo Costantinopoli, ma soprattutto la Terrasanta, da cui sarebbe stata portata a Napoli dai religiosi in fuga, e quel Monte Carmelo, il quale costituisce il cuore spirituale dell'Ordine. La volontà di delineare una palingenesi mistica, che si realizza in concreto nel riallaccio della memoria, viene però stentatamente calmierata da una scelta orientata in senso del tutto opposto. L'impiego di una formula sostanzialmente innovativa, che ricorre ad una tecnica rappresentativa nuova, da poco affermatasi nel panorama rappresentativo religioso locale, mitiga appena la sagacità della tattica volta al recupero a medio delle "onde della memoria" di una più generale emotività. La creazione di una soluzione grafica capace di mediare fra schemi rappresentativi difficilmente compatibili differenzia la tavola sia dai prodotti della tradizione, sia da quelli di moda nella cronologia di riferimento.

Colpisce un'ulteriore interpretazione della formula dell'Odigìtria riscontrabile nella Madonna di Costantinopoli venerata nella cripta della cattedrale di Bari. Il dipinto costituito da una tempera su tavola alta 91 cm e larga 66 cm, probabile opera del pittore Onofrio Palvisino di Monopoli, è datato attorno alla metà del 1500, periodo a cui risalgono le prime manifestazioni documentate del culto dell'immagine in città.

Secondo la tradizione l'attuale effige va a sostituire un'immagine più antica, proveniente dall'oriente e giunta secondo la *Cronaca* del prete Gregorio nella città durante la "*prima feria tertia*" del marzo del 733[6].

(6) Per la commemorazione della traslazione dell'immagine della Madonna di Costantinopoli tenutasi nel 1833, l'arcivescovo di Bari, Michele Basilio Clary, commissiona a Michele

Essa è ricordata da Montorio (1715, p. 548) soprattutto per i suoi miracoli a salvaguardia dei propri ori da mani sacrileghe e dunque dei beni terreni della Chiesa. Bisogna poi considerare come la formula rappresentativa alteri il tipo consueto dell'Odigìtria, di cui conserva solo un vago ricordo nella postura della Vergine e nella mano rivolta al Figlio, la quale però risulta cristallizzata in un movimento posticcio e privo di ogni significato teologico. Il tentativo di descrizione delle anatomie dell'arto vuol più rappresentare un pezzo di bravura del pittore che un gesto significante, poiché né indica al fruitore l'Infante, né rivolge a lui la preghiera. Al contempo, il volto materno media fra le soluzioni tipiche delle icone, le quali sono rifunzionalizzate entro le formule in voga al momento della sua produzione, tanto che i tratti somatici si addolciscono. Osserviamo allora il persistere degli occhi grandi e scuri, che presentano però un delicato taglio a mandorla, mentre le sopracciglia costituiscono due archi perfetti molto sottili e disegnati in punta di pennello. Il naso invece è connotato da una linea delicata, ma caratterizzata da ampie narici, a dispetto della bocca che rimane sempre piccola e serrata in un'espressione seriosa. Entrambi i lemmi fisionomici si inseriscono in un volto appena tornito da ombre scure. Il Bambino poi si presenta ritto in piedi e nudo, mentre gioca con un volatile. La nudità che rimanda alla temperie teologica della fine del '400, allorché si esalta l'incarnazione divina attraverso la visualizzazione degli attributi maschili di Cristo, la allontana da ogni riferimento a Bisanzio (Belli D'Elia 1995, pp. 11–23). Salvo qualche sparuto caso di provincia, come la viciniore ed omonima Madonna conservata nella Collegiata di S. Nicola di Mola di Bari (fine secolo XIV) con il suo bambino dalle membra velate e la più famosa Madonna del Pilerio venerata in Cosenza (secolo XII) in cui il corpo infantile è coperto da una veste di velo, questi solitamente indossa indumenti dorati che anticipano la *mise* della resurrezione.

Orbene, se si dà per buona la tradizione concernente l'esistenza di una Madonna più antica venerata nella cattedrale, che il dipinto va a sostituire, la si può immaginare tradotta con l'ausilio di una formula grafica assai simile all'Odigìtria ascritta nel sigillo dell'arcivescovo Elia (1089–1105).

Garruba un'edizione critica della *Cronaca* del prete Gregorio, al fine di attestare vetustà e maggior prestigio della cattedrale rispetto alla basilica di San Nicola, cfr. Garruba (1833).

Nondimeno occorre chiedersi in quale rapporto possa porsi l'odierno dipinto rispetto alla rappresentazione della Vergine di Bartolomeo Vivarini, presente nella basilica di S. Nicola e commissionata dal canonico Alvise Cancho nel 1476. Consideriamo allora alcuni stilemi comuni, quali l'identica inclinazione del capo, le nudità del bambino e il gesto della mano che la Madonna della cattedrale pare reinterpretare maldestramente. E se è impossibile tabuizzare quella suggestione che pone l'Odigìtria in un rapporto di filiazione diretto con la tavola custodita nella basilica nicolaiana poiché ne costituisce un adattamento *naif* e dal sentore popolare, urge chiedersi come questa nuova effige, che non ha nulla a che fare con Bisanzio, ma anche con le produzioni visuali post–bizantine, possa aver sostituito nella devozione popolare un'immagine pregressa, forse venerata con lo stesso titolo. Tutto ciò senza causare spaesamento e reticenze nel popolo assuefatto ad una diversa formula rappresentativa (stando a quanto trasmesso dalla tradizione almeno).

Per quel che riguarda la semiotica visiva deve evidenziarsi come la *facies* assunta dal dipinto per i fruitori — in funzione della preziosa copertura d'argento — possa metabolizzare una tecnica rappresentativa tipica delle icone, allorchè si inserisce il ritratto in uno sfondo privo di eccessivi fronzoli e realizzato con un colore omogeneo, che sostituisce il fondo oro della tradizione romano orientale. E se il ricorso alla soluzione del "fondale" reso asettico dalla riza argentea è pure giustificato dall'inserimento dell'effige barese in un *milieu* di tendenza nella devozione popolare mariana, dobbiamo finanche considerare la funzionalità cognitiva dell'espediente, poiché orientata ad esaltare i volti dei rappresentati. In tal modo si favorisce la concentrazione dell'attenzione dei fruitori sui sacri visi, i quali vengono inseriti in uno scenario privo (o quasi) di elementi di distrazione. La soluzione, che presuppone una conoscenza almeno rudimentale dei meccanismi della neurofisiologia della vista e della cognizione visiva umana (Leone 2021, p. 275), genera un *locus* visuale di successo che perdura nel lungo periodo. Seppur il dipinto in ragione del contesto di fruizione si ponga in continuità con la cultura visuale romano orientale, deve costituire ben altra cosa, non liquidabile in una sua mera evoluzione. Esso configura piuttosto il prodotto di una "cultura di rappresentazione del volto" peculiare sul piano sincronico e diacronico.

Si considera ancora come le formule tradizionali di descrizione della Vergine romano orientali possano evolvere, come dimostrato in quel prodotto ascrivibile ad un modello di successo della scuola cretese, costituito dalla Madonna di San Lorenzo Maggiore, la quale riproduce il tipo della Vergine della Consolazione (Pescitelli 1977; Vigliotti 2001). L'icona originale datata al 1490 ed ascrivibile alla mano di Nikolaos Tzafouris (1468–1501), pittore che ha operato a Candia (Creta), è stata ripetuta in molteplici copie come quella al Kanellopoulos Museum e al Benaki Museum. Ritroviamo sue riproduzioni pure al British Museum, al Lindenau Museum ed al Museo delle icone di Francoforte. Il tipo è ripreso anche da altri pittori famosi della corrente artistica sviluppata dalla "*Byzance après Byzance*", quale Nikolaos Gripiotis.

L'effige di nostro interesse è costituita da una tavola, larga 43,5 cm ed alta 49,5 cm, dipinta a tempera con fondo oro, che raffigura una Vergine *Aristerokratusa*. L'immagine sovverte la tradizione formale, poiché presenta il volto allungato, connotato da un naso che è ora tratto con linee molto morbide e non più taglienti. Intanto, gli occhi — stranamente — si rimpiccioliscono perdendo ieraticità, contrariamente alla bocca che assume dimensioni maggiori, facendosi sinuosa e quasi accenna un sorriso. L'ovale poi appare incorniciato da un velo trasparente che deroga alla cuffia consuetudinaria nella tradizione romano orientale. Il classico *maphorion* è invece sostituito da un manto con chiusura a gioiello, mentre il Bambino benedicente tiene nella mano un globo d'oro. Secondo la tradizione confluita in Montorio, l'immagine è ritrovata a seguito di una visione goduta da una pia donna, che viene invitata — ancora una volta — a scavare per ritrovare il dipinto (Montorio 1715, p. 159). L'effige, che ripete in modo ingenuo il modello prestigioso, può essere datata al massimo attorno alla metà del secolo XVI. Se non viene direttamente importata da Creta, risulta con tutta probabilità opera di una bottega di artisti veneto cretesi presenti *in loco,* poiché è noto che tanto in Venezia, quanto nel Meridione italiano, in particolare in Puglia e Sicilia, operano maestri di quella scuola. Ivi, i committenti — sovente di origine levantina — riescono ad attirare artisti di spessore, tra i quali si ricorda Michele Damasceno (1530–1593). Questo genere di produzioni è frutto del lungo processo di "acculturazione da contatto" delle genti cretesi sottoposte al dominio della

Serenissima, laddove le maestranze pittoriche — a seguito della prolungata esposizione ai prodotti dell'arte veneziana e del cattolicesimo romano — decidono di rompere la monotonia della *performance* artistica ortodossa "classica". In tal modo, propongono una ridefinizione ed un aggiornamento delle soluzioni fatte proprie dalla cultura visuale locale e concernenti la descrizione degli episodi della vita del Cristo, della Vergine e dei santi.

Già Michele Bacci ha avvertito che ogni semplicistica liquidazione di questo processo di ridefinizione delle formule iscritte nei documenti visivi, allorché lo si riduce alla proposizione di banali ibridi, deve essere scartata come frutto di mera ingenuità (Bacci 2014, pp. 73–106). La realtà è molto più complessa e le potenzialità dei variegati "lessemi" del linguaggio visuale — utilizzati per comporre le formule grafiche riformulate e rinnovate — non possono esaurirsi entro stringenti ed inadeguate definizioni. Pare perciò più razionale parlare di documenti visivi "compositi" o persino di natura "mista". Anastasia Drandaki poi ha visto nel novello idioma pittorico della scuola cretese un tentativo concreto di visualizzazione delle istanze del clima politico e sociale del periodo. Una simile produzione deve perciò riflettere le esigenze sia delle *élites* filo–unioniste, sia della politica pontificia, orientate a persuadere anche attraverso l'arte il maggior numero possibile di levantini, riportandoli in seno alla Chiesa di Roma (Drandaki 2017, pp. 367–406). Gli stessi prodotti, una volta proposti all'estero, devono risultare alquanto interessanti, poiché percepiti come esotici dagli autoctoni e — in quanto tali — possono suscitare una vera e propria frenesia al loro accaparramento. Per quel che riguarda i levantini "fuorisede", la proposta di prodotti connessi al gusto artistico della propria patria deve soddisfare una determinata domanda, che va ad assicurare agli artisti cretesi immigrati una nuova fetta nel mercato dell'arte italico, repentinamente occupata e saturata dalle loro produzioni.

Infine, si considera l'unica delle statue ammesse in questo parvo *corpus* oggetto d'indagine: la Madonna del Sacro Monte di Viggiano in Val d'Agri (Colangelo 1984; Tramice 1995). Questa effigie della Madre di Dio, patrona della Basilicata dal 1892, è stata connessa da Pierluigi Leone de Castris ad un gruppo di Vergini in trono, inquadrabili nella tipologia della "*Sedes Sapientiae*" di gusto romanico (De Castris 2004a,

pp. 3–26; De Castris 2004b, pp. 92–95). Le rappresentazioni, presentate nella mostra di Matera del 2004, — a suo dire — farebbero capo alla Madonna di Banzi, dimostrando affinità con le statue della Vergine di Armento e Guardia Perticara. Il gruppo di effigi mariane viene ricondotto così ad una scuola scultorea locale, con centro forse nella stessa Val d'Agri, che fra i secoli XII–XIII si richiama a modelli iberici, catalani in particolare. Le opere, riconducibili con un ottimo margine di probabilità ad un'unica bottega, hanno come caratteristiche distintive l'estrema geometrizzazione del volto, i cui zigomi risultano altissimi, gli ovali — al contempo — si prolungano a dismisura, come accade anche al naso, che si fa lungo e sottile, assumendo quasi la forma di un prisma. Ciò fa sì che, contrariamente alla consuetudine locale, gli occhi risultino assai più piccoli, lasciando presupporre il ripensamento da parte delle maestranze della tradizionale economia somatica del volto mariano, la quale vede negli occhi fissi, grandi e spalancati un *Leitmotiv* della cronologia di riferimento.

La precoce datazione al secolo XIII non sembra convincere almeno per il caso di Viggiano, giacché la morfologia del volto mariano si distacca dai modelli citati. Il naso lungo e sottile, gli occhi grandi, gli zigomi simmetrici che si stagliano sull'ovale paffuto, i capelli divisi in ciocche ondulate, poste ad incorniciare il volto, costituiscono stilemi inequivocabilmente capaci di allontanarla dai prodotti presi in esame. La sua fisiognomica pare metabolizzare ed aggiornare piuttosto la grazia dei modelli francesi, come Santa Maria Patrona di Lucera con i suoi grandi occhi sbarrati (Calò Mariani 2008, pp. 81–96) o ancora la statua detta Sipontina, che è connotata anche questa dagli ieraticissimi occhi spalancati (Calò Mariani 2017, pp. 33–34), la quale rimanda però — a parere di chi scrive — a modelli formali più antichi, che affondano nella tradizione visuale più tipica delle icone(7). La sopravvivenza di un tale riferimento formale non è però utile alla datazione, ma la riconduce piuttosto alla consuetudine rappresentativa che perdura *in loco* nel lungo periodo. Alla luce del differente modellato della fisionomia deve perciò postularsi una cronologia più tarda, sicuramente più vicina alla fine del secolo XIV, allorché le Madonne assumono carattere arioso e non vengono più oberate dal pesante manto. Una simile idea è rafforzata dalla graziosa espressione, che appare aliena

(7) Per le madonne lignee di Capitanata, cfr. Calò Mariani (2004), pp. 33–66.

da ogni austera ieraticità. La bocca poi, seppur rimane piccola, diversamente dai precedenti dei secoli XII–XIII mostra al fruitore che le si pone innanzi una più moderna compiacenza.

Occorre specificare che non è chiaro quando si sia scelto di annerire il volto di questa effige. E sebbene sia stata considerata di poco aiuto la tela del 1714 presente nel santuario, che inscrive una Vergine dall'incarnato pallido fra i santi Gennaro e Francesco da Paola, gli inequivocabili rimandi formali alla statua della titolare possono comunque fornire un credibile termine *post quem*. Al di là di tali considerazioni, le indagini archeometriche sulle mani e sul viso hanno dimostrato la stratificazione di diverse pellicole pittoriche. Particolarmente interessanti risultano i dati acquisiti da uno dei tre frammenti analizzati[8], quale il campione MV2 (prelevato dal mento della Madonna) da cui si deduce una sequenza di 8 strati, che si somma alla preparazione–base in gesso. Il primo strato pittorico è realizzato con biacca e cinabro, ciò fa dedurre che in origine il derma della Vergine doveva essere ascritto alla tipologia caucasica (van der Werf *et al.* 2010, p. 53). A questo si aggiungono due mani pittoriche di un colore più scuro. Segue uno strato di vernice imbrunita, un altro di pittura color rosa, un ulteriore velo di vernice ed un'ultima mano — alquanto sottile — di color bruno, sicuramente riferibile alla ridipintura effettuata durante il restauro del 1965.

L'immagine conta su una stratificata *legenda* sistematizzata nel 1711 dal vescovo Donato Anzani, che è confluita nella relazione inviata al citato padre Serafino Montorio per la composizione dello *Zodiaco di Maria*. Nel 1892, a seguito della proclamazione a patrona della Lucania, il canonico Giuseppe Spera — su stimolo dell'arciprete Giovanni De Cunto — traduce in versi la *legenda* e scrive un inno per la liturgia della Vergine. La tradizione vuole che i pastori di Viggiano attirati da una gran luce sulla cima della montagna, informino il santo vescovo locale, che si reca sul luogo unito a clero e popolo. Qui "trovarono con indicibile stupore ed allegrezza una statua tutta di legno indorato, che dava splendori superanti quelli dell'oro […]" (Montorio 1715, p. 300). I dati archeometrici in nostro possesso (campione MV3) hanno pure permesso di evincere che il

(8) Il campione MV1 prelevato dal collo del Bambino mostra 16 strati. La lettura effettuata sia con luce visibile, sia luce blu mostra numerosi strati di tinta rosa a base di cinabro e biacca, uniti a sottili mani di colore scuro che li intervallano, seguiti da altri di tinta bruna, cfr. van der Werf *et al.* 2010, p. 52.

panneggio della statua presenta tre strati di doratura, inframezzati da una stesura pittorica uniforme di color azzurro. E se la prima doratura doveva risultare opaca in ragione della sua realizzazione con porporina o polvere d'oro, l'effige per un certo periodo si è presentata policroma, come attestato da una stampa colorata del secolo XVIII. A questa segue una doratura, realizzata con foglia d'oro poi brunita, datata con certezza al 1828, che è stata sostituita dall'attuale "corazza" dorata nel citato restauro del 1965, allorché con fare invasivo sono stati rimossi gran parte degli strati precedenti (Calò Mariani 2010, p. 45).

4. Conclusioni

Osserviamo come il volto delle Madonne Nere venga ascritto ad un campo semantico complesso, in cui la memoria storica delle produzioni romano orientali, le reminiscenze pre–cristiane legate ai culti della fertilità, rispetto ad un più moderno gusto eurocentrico per la resa della fisiognomica e delle vesti, si fondono in una produzione visuale dalla valenza semiotica assoluta. Raffrontiamo prodotti dotati di un carisma trascendentale, atto a mediare fra le differenti tradizioni di visualizzazione, che nella loro datità semiotica e visiva invitano a riflettere sulla ricchezza del patrimonio connesso alla cultura materiale della cristianità d'oriente e d'occidente. Nelle effigi mariane caratterizzate dalla *negritudo* si metabolizza dunque la molteplicità delle esperienze percettive vissute dai fedeli e si sperimentano strategie rappresentative dal grande potere di affabulazione, che finalizzano un lungo processo di selezione. Sovente a queste si affianca la costruzione di una *legenda* di fondazione del santuario assai convincente, che verte sull'antichità e/o sulla potenza taumaturgica delle rappresentazioni.

Eppure, le qualità vantate da queste famose effigi non sono in grado di garantire l'immutabilità delle relative formule descrittive, ma come si è delineato attraverso le rappresentazioni confluite nel *corpus*, le soluzioni — anche le più venerate — possono essere oggetto di pacifico adattamento e quindi evolvono, derogando agli schemi fissati dalla tradizione.

L'analisi semiotica ci permette poi di decodificare le strategie rappresentative sottese alla costruzione del volto mariano, che appare così come

il frutto di una negoziazione tra il naturale e il simbolico, volta a soddisfare sia le aspettative culturali, sia le esigenze legate al culto e alla devozione religiosa. In tal senso l'incarnato "color del grano" diventa un marcatore visivo che rafforza la nozione di autenticità, poiché appare capace di convalidare la formula visiva prodotta come storicamente credibile. In questo contesto si evidenzia la duplice natura della citata rappresentazione, che si mostra come luogo di tensione semiotica, in cui si incontrano le istanze connesse alla continuità biologica con Cristo e le necessità sottese alla creazione di una formula descrittiva atta ad elevare spiritualmente l'effigiata, fino a farla assurgere a figura divina. Orbene il suo volto, plasmato dall'eredità genetica, deve bilanciare due istanze opposte, quali la "naturalezza" della fisionomia umana — capace di ispirare empatia ed ammirazione — e la "trascendenza" della stessa — al fine di rendere la rappresentazione un simbolo divino dalla valenza universale — in linea con i valori cristiani. In quanto simulacro sacro, il volto mariano viene così pensato per porsi come termine medio fra genetica, biologia e spiritualità.

Gli elementi fenotipici attribuiti alla Vergine Maria come la carnagione scura, ma anche i tratti regolari del viso e l'empatica compostezza dell'espressione devono corrispondere ad un codice simbolico ritenuto universale, pensato per ottimizzare le strategie di persuasione dei fedeli. La ricerca accademica contemporanea, che integra semiotica, neuroscienze e storia dell'arte, ha messo in luce come questi attributi visivi siano capaci di attivare processi cognitivi legati alla percezione non dei soli fattori emozionali, ma soprattutto devono permettere al fruitore di apprezzarne nell'immediato la sacralità. Riscontriamo allora la ricorrenza di *patterns* comuni, come la simmetria degli elementi della fisionomia e/o l'equilibrio cromatico delle diverse componenti, che rafforzano con l'iconicità anche la percezione del divino *in nuce* all'effige.

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Figura 1. Madonna di Casaluce, abbazia–santuario di Santa Maria di Casaluce.

Figura 2. *Materdomini*, santuario dell'Assunta, Nocera Superiore.

Figura 3. Madonna detta la "Bruna" o del Carmine, basilica–santuario del Carmine Maggiore, Napoli.

Figura 4. Madonna di Costantinopoli, cattedrale, Bari.

Figura 5. Madonna della Strada, parrocchia S. Lorenzo Martire, San Lorenzo Maggiore.

Figura 6. Madonna di Viggiano, santuario della Madonna del Sacro Monte, Viggiano.

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DISQUISICIONES SOBRE LA CORPOSFERA PAPAL: CUERPO, SIGNOS E INDICIALIDAD EN EL *CADAVER SYNOD*

José Enrique Finol

Abstract: In the present work, the historical trial of the corpse of Pope Formosus, the so–called *Cadaver synod* (870 AD), is analyzed from a new point of view. We have examined the corporeal representation of Formosus from a semiotics point of view or Corposphere (Finol 2013, 2014, 2021, 2024). For this, fundamental texts that analyze from different points of view the synod that condemned Pope Formoso — legal, historical, theological, and political — were studied. Then the famous painting by Jean–Paul Laurens, titled *Formoso and Esteban VI* (1870) was also analyzed. Both types of texts served as sources for semiotic analysis and interpretation. The analysis shows the processes of resignification of the remains of Pope Formosus carried out through various sign systems (clothing, corporal, spatial, etc.), the splitting of the remains into *body* and *corpse* and the consequent transformation of papal corporeality into an anti–sign.

Nel presente lavoro si propone un'analisi inedita del processo storico al cadavere di papa Formoso, noto come Sinodo del cadavere (870 d.C.). La rappresentazione corporea di Formoso viene esaminata da una prospettiva semiotica, con particolare riferimento al concetto di Corposfera (Finol 2013, 2014, 2021, 2024). A tal fine, sono stati presi in esame testi fondamentali che affrontano il sinodo da prospettive diverse — giuridica, storica, teologica e politica. Successivamente, è stata analizzata anche la celebre opera pittorica di Jean–Paul Laurens, Formoso e Stefano VI (1870). Entrambe le tipologie di fonti hanno costituito la base per l'analisi e l'interpretazione semiotica. L'indagine ha messo in luce i processi di risignificazione dei resti di papa Formoso, attuati attraverso diversi sistemi di segni (vestimentari, corporei, spaziali, ecc.), la scissione simbolica dei resti in corpo e cadavere, nonché la conseguente trasformazione della corporeità papale in un anti–segno.

Keywords: Formoso, Corpse, Body, Corposphere, Index

Parole chiave: Formoso, Cadavere, Corpo, Corposfera, Indice

> «Le cadavre est un narrateur muet en attente
> de son interprète, l'enquêteur, le légiste,
> ou tout autre vivant qui parviendra enfin
> à lui donner symboliquement la parole».
> (Maud Desmet 2015, p. 88).

> «L'outrage fait au corps de Formose représentait
> un instrument de rétablissement de l'ordre : exposer
> la dépouille putréfiée de Formose constituait un
> moyen de le rendre monstrueux aux yeux de tous,
> de le déshumaniser afin de mieux souligner sa
> culpabilité. Le succès d'un tel processus
> passait par une mise en scène de l'outrage».
> (Laurent Jégou 2015, p. 505).

1. Introducción

Numerosos análisis jurídicos, históricos, teológicos y políticos se han realizado sobre el juicio al cadáver del papa Formoso (816 d. C.– abril 896 d. C.), cuyo papado se extendió entre 891 y 896 d. C., los cuales nos servirán de referencia a la presente investigación, que tiene como propósito realizar un análisis de las representaciones del cuerpo antes, durante y después del proceso judicial llevado a cabo en el siglo IX. En el marco de una semiótica del cuerpo o Corposfera (Finol 2013, 2014, 2021, 2024) nos proponemos analizar la legibilidad del cadáver de Formoso y las condiciones de productividad semiótica en las que la corporeidad y la corporalidad papal se construyen en los procesos judiciales que buscaban castigar al papa fallecido.

Para el análisis es de relevancia referirnos al contexto histórico durante el cual se produce el famoso sínodo y también rescatar algunas de las múltiples referencias, comentarios y análisis del proceso judicial realizados por distintos autores, las cuales nos permitirán construir una hipótesis interpretativa más afinada.

Para los efectos de esta investigación nos apoyaremos en dos tipos principales de textos, unos de carácter escrito y otro de carácter icónico. Los primeros incluyen textos históricos que cuentan y analizan los procesos realizados para juzgar al papa Formoso, para lo cual, en vista

de su fallecimiento para el momento del juicio, se desenterró su cadáver, se le vistió con las prendas papales y se le colocó en un trono en una sala del juicio. El segundo texto es el cuadro *El Papa Formoso y Esteban VI* (1870), de Jean–Paul Laurens, que hoy se encuentra en el Museo de Bellas Artes de Nantes, Francia.

2. El contexto histórico

Formoso, cuyo nombre original se desconoce, fue nombrado por el papa Nicolas I como obispo de Portus, puerto que servía a Roma. Además, fue un enviado de ese papa a importantes misiones diplomáticas. En 877 d. C. se enfrentó al papa Juan VIII al apoyar como rey de Italia a Arnulfo de Carintia (858 d. C–899 d. C), emperador carolingio, lo que le valió la expulsión de su diócesis y la excomunión, el máximo castigo impartido por la Iglesia Católica a un feligrés, con lo que Formoso quedó privado de recibir los sacramentos y de participar en la vida de su comunidad religiosa.

Seis años más tarde, el papa Marino I le levantó la excomunión a Formoso y fue restablecido como obispo de Portus. En 891 fue elegido unánimemente como el papa número 111 de la Iglesia Católica. El papa Formoso murió en 896 d. C.:

> Nine months later, in January 897, his successor, Pope Stephen VI (VII) had the body taken from its grave and put on trial, by an assembly of clerics: an event which came to be known as the *Cadaver Synod*. The event coincided with a period of rivalry and military conflict among newly emerging kings in the post–Carolingian world (Moore 2022, p. 315).

Sarramía describe el proceso judicial de la siguiente manera: "De hecho, nueve meses después de su muerte — a fines del año 896–principios del 897 — Formoso había sido acusado por Esteban VI, en ocasión del famoso sínodo del cadáver (único en su especie, al juzgar a un pontífice, y rico en gestos simbólicos), no solo de haber violado post–mortem el juramento efectuado en el sínodo de Troyes (878) y de no haber

respetado su deposición, sino también de haber cambiado de sede contra lo establecido en los cánones" (Sarramia 2017a, p. 2).

Michael Edward Moore resume así el juicio realizado en febrero del año 897 al cadáver del Papa Formoso.

Las diatribas políticas y familiares en el seno de la Iglesia Católica encontraron formas de expresión y luchas que lejos de los preceptos religiosos se convirtieron en enconadas batallas, venganzas y represiones que parecerían inimaginables en el seno de una institución donde debían prevalecer la caridad, la fe y la esperanza.

> After it was retrieved from the Tiber River, the body was preserved in the monastery of Aconta, but later Pope Formosus continued his itinerary: a council in Rome under Pope Theodore II declared that the acts of Formosus should be recognized as valid. Theodore then returned Formosus to St Peter's. The body was clothed once more in papal garments. A consecrated host was placed in his mouth, and with candles and incense burning, Formosus was laid to rest among the papal bodies – his fourth burial according to some accounts (Moore 2022, p. 320).

Es interesante hacer notar que los dos papas que castigaron a Formoso, Juan VIII y Esteban VI, sufrieron terribles muertes[1]. Poco después del juicio del cadáver de Formoso, el papa Esteban VI fue hecho prisionero por una turba y asesinado. Por su parte, el papa Juan VIII conoció la muerte a manos de su propia familia: "For at Rome, the bishop of the apostolic see, John by name, was first poisoned by his relatives and then struck with a hammer until his skull was bashed in, and he died". (*Annals of Fulda*, 883 d. C., citado por Moore 2022, p. 316).

(1) La violencia no es extraña en la historia de los papas, especialmente en la temprana Edad Media. "Five popes were assassinated in office or deposed and then murdered. John VIII, the first pope to be assassinated, was poisoned by his entourage; when the poison did not act quickly enough, his skull was crushed by blows from a hammer. Both Stephen VII and Leo V were deposed, imprisoned, and strangled. John X was deposed, imprisoned, and suffocated by being smothered with a pillow. Stephen IX was imprisoned, horribly mutilated by having his eyes, nose, lips, tongue, and hands removed, and died of his injuries. (Bunson 1995, citado por Wilkes 2001, p. 3). Uno de los más extremos ejemplos es el del papa Sergio III: "Sergius III was also the only pope to order the murder of another pope, and also the only pope to father an illegitimate son who became a pope" (Wilkes 2001, p. 7). Entre 872 y 1048 veinticinco papas sufrieron o protagonizaron actos extremadamente violentos que incluyen asesinatos, secuestros y encarcelamientos. Al respecto, ver Brook 2003.

Según algunos historiadores, el propio Formoso estaba involucrado en la conspiración para matarlo (Reardon 1971).

3. La expoliación de los significantes corporales

El cuerpo de Formoso sufrió diferentes procesos mutilatorios, unos carnales o físicos y otros simbólicos. El primero es la mutilación del cuerpo papal. En efecto, una vez condenado de todos los cargos que se le atribuyen, al cadáver de Formoso le cortan los dedos de la mano derecha que usaba para bendecir y ordenar: "Alors que la consécration attribue au pape le pouvoir de bénir, le concile romain lui dénia symboliquement ce droit en sectionnant les doigts de la main droite qui étaient utilisés par les prélats pour procéder à ce rituel" (Jégou 2015, p. 508). También Moore señala la misma mutilación: "According to Liutprand of Cremona, the fingers used to make the sign of episcopal blessing were cut from his right hand, to demonstrate the nullification" (Moore 2022, p. 316).

Una forma de mutilación simbólica se realiza cuando se extrae el cadáver de su tumba:

> "*L'Invectiva in Romam* (écrite après 914), les *Annales alémaniques* (rédigées après 926) comme la *Chronique d'Hermann Contractus* (milieu du xie siècle) relatent toutes trois que le corps de Formose fut tiré de son sépulcre par les pieds" (Jégou 2015, p. 508).

El mismo autor, citando otro trabajo anterior, señala que el acto de tirar del cadáver por los pies es un acto ultrajante:

> on peut constater que dans les sources des Xe-XIe siècles, l'action de tirer le corps d'un défunt par les pieds n'est pas anodine: le geste est réservé aux dépouilles des excommuniés qu'on exhume pour les jeter hors du cimetière (Jégou 2015, p. 509).

Una tercera forma de mutilación, también simbólica, se da cuando el concilio romano declara inválidas las condiciones sagradas que su cuerpo

había producido en la sacralidad de otros cuerpos, específicamente las ordenaciones sacerdotales que Formoso había realizado durante su papado: "Not only was Formosus condemned, but so were his allies, and all the clerics he had ordained. These men were labelled as Formosiani, and denounced as sacrilegious, fornicators and traitors" (Moore 2022, p. 316)[2]. Según Jégou, el papa Esteban VI "décida que tous ceux qui avaient été ordonnés par lui seraient dégradés de leurs ordres" (Jégou 2015, p. 499). Más aún, el papa Esteban VI ordenará a los clérigos condenados que reconozcan públicamente la invalidez de sus ordenaciones religiosas.

Una cuarta forma de mutilación es la orden de borrar el nombre de Formoso[3] de la lista oficial de papas romanos. La eliminación del nombre de Formoso se articula congruentemente con la mutilación de sus dedos y con la invalidación de los actos sagrados que el papa juzgado había realizado durante los cinco años de su pontificado.

Una quinta forma de mutilación se expresa en el enterramiento del cuerpo de Formoso, quien es privado de ser sepultado en el cementerio vaticano destinado a los papas. Según una versión, después del juicio Formoso fue enterrado en un cementerio común, donde se daba sepultura a los pobres: "The body was then dressed in common clothes and buried in a *pauper's grave*" (Reche Ontillera 2019, p. 3. Subrayados nuestros). En otra versión, Formoso fue sepultado en un cementerio para extranjeros: "the corpse was cast into a grave in the cemetery for strangers" (Kirsch 1909, p. 3). Una tercera versión señala que Formoso fue "buried in a common grave" (Wilkes 2001, p. 5). En todo caso, se trata, como dice Sarramia, de que el cadáver fuese sepultado "in terra sconsacrata" (2017b, p. 1)[4].

(2) Al menos tres papas fueron asesinados por ser partidarios de Formoso: Romanus, Benedicto IV y Leo V (Reardon 1971).

(3) Irónicamente, en comparación con el aspecto del cadáver, el nombre Formoso significa hermoso. El epitafio colocado en su tumba resalta sus virtudes: "Formosus, the bishop, distinguished with high praises, pious, frugal, bountiful to the needy, is carried up. He scattered the seeds of faith to the Bulgarian people, destroyed pagan shrines, drew up his people in array with heavenly arms as he endured countless dangers, resolute, showing example, so that adversity might be overcome, and no trouble might be rendered to whoever leads a good life." (Trans. Ruth Yeuk Chun Leung)" (en Reardon 1971, pp. 135–36).

(4) Los cuerpos de otros dos papas sufrieron enterramientos similares. Uno de ellos fue el papa Pascal I: "Because of his harsh reign, Paschal had many enemies and was so unpopular in Rome that when he died the Romans would not allow his body to be buried in St. Peter's" (Reardon 1971, p. 124). Al papa Pio VI se le negó un entierro cristiano: "In December of that year one of Napoleon's

Una sexta mutilación, de carácter vestimentario, se expresa en la privación del cuerpo de Formoso de su indumentaria papal y, en su lugar el papa Esteban VI ordena que el cadáver sea vestido con ropajes baratos:

> The sentence imposed by Stephen VII was that all Formosus's acts and ordinations as pope be invalidated, that the three fingers of Formosus's right hand used to give papal blessings be hacked off, *and that the body be stripped of its papal vestments, clad in the cheap garments* (Wilkes 2001, p. 5. Subrayados nuestros).

Una séptima mutilación se manifiesta en la destrucción de las imágenes del papa: "[…] on prit soin de détruire les images du pape" (Jégou 2015, p. 517). Esta mutilación es muy importante para Esteban VI, "'Porque el honor de la imagen se dirige al original' y el que adora una imagen, adora a la persona en ella representada" (Acta final del Concilio de Nicea II, citada por Ziegler 2009), tal como había establecido el segundo concilio de Nicea convocado por Irene, reina regente del imperio bizantino, y destinado a zanjar las discusiones entre iconoclastas e iconófilos. Ese mismo principio será reconocido por Santo Tomás de Aquino cuando afirma que "el movimiento que se dirige a la imagen en cuanto tal, no se detiene en ella, sino que tiende a la realidad de la que es imagen" (*Summa theologiae*, II-II, 81, 3, ad 3, citado por Buston 2016). De modo que en una estratégica decisión semiótica para erradicar de forma absoluta la memoria de Formoso, así como su lugar en la historia de la iglesia católica, Esteban VI ordena que toda representación de Formoso sea esta icónica, la imagen, o verbal, el nombre, sea borrada para siempre.

4. Formoso: un anti–signo

Como se ve, las sanciones impuestas al cadáver de Formoso apuntan hacia sus manifestaciones semióticas, a sus capacidades simbólicas y sacramentales. Por un lado, hay una mutilación corporal que tiene no solo un carácter

earliest decrees as first consul called for funeral honors for the bones of Pius VI, which were still lying unburied in a sealed coffin in the cemetery of Santa Caterina in Valence. The local constitutional clergy, however, refused Pius a Christian burial so the town prefect registered the death of "Citizen Braschi, Exercising the Profession of Pontiff" (Reardon 1971, p. 470).

carnal, sino fundamentalmente simbólico, pues, como se ha dicho, se mutilan los dedos de bendecir, los dedos que producen el tránsito entre lo profano o secular y lo sagrado o santificado; se trata también de los dedos con los cuales se reproduce la cruz, el símbolo máximo de la fe católica.

Esa mutilación de los dedos hace contraste con la forma en que se extrae el cadáver del cementerio vaticano, ubicado entonces en la Basílica de San Pedro. Dicha extracción se hace tomando el cuerpo por los pies, el extremo opuesto de las manos, un elemento corporal sin prestigio sagrado alguno, y es por ello por lo que deben ser lavados, como lo hace Jesús durante la última cena cuando lava los pies de los apóstoles o el papa cuando lava los pies de doce personas el Jueves Santo. En la morfología del cuerpo papal los dedos tienen la capacidad de consagrar y reproducir la cruz, mientras que los pies solo son relevantes para mostrar humildad y vocación de servicio.

La invalidación de las consagraciones y ordenaciones hechas por Formoso se apoyan sobre el valor simbólico, sagrado, que tales actos tenían. Al invalidar esas consagraciones se dejan sin efecto también las hechas, a su vez, por los sacerdotes ordenados por Formoso. Bautizos, comuniones, matrimonios, misas realizadas por los sacerdotes que habían sido ordenados por Formoso como papa y obispo de Roma quedarían también sin efecto.

Igualmente, al borrar el nombre de Formoso de la lista de papas al igual que su representación en imágenes se simboliza su anulación semiótica, una suerte de grado cero de la existencia papal y de las consecuencias de su anterior existencia. Formoso queda así convertido en un anti–signo, en un significante sin significado. Esa transformación de la condición papal en anti–signo se refuerza con la privación de los signos vestimentarios propios de la dignidad papal. Con la anulación nominal se apareja una anulación temporal, pues el período papal de Formoso se hace a–histórico, inexistente, nulo.

Finalmente, la exclusión del cadáver de Formoso de una sepultura en tierra consagrada manifiesta una privación de la espacialidad que es propia de su condición de papa. Ese tránsito, de un espacio sagrado a un espacio secular o profano, es la culminación de una anulación semiótica en la cual los signos propios de la identidad papal son anulados, borrados. El historiador peruano Waldemar Espinoza relata un caso similar en la

cultura inca: "Colla Topac, capitán y hermano de Huayna Capac, ordenó exhumar de su mausoleo el cadáver momificado del Apo Chuquimis. Y en efecto fue sacado de su urna funeraria hecha de arcilla con figura humana, y que estaba colocada en una cueva situada en unos altos peñascos. A ese cadáver, para deshonra y vilipendio lo mandó enterrar bajo tierra, como a cualquier hombre plebeyo" (Citado por Torrejón Pizarro s/f).

Todas estas formas de nulificación semiótica, de invalidación de los signos papales, buscan no solo castigar a Formoso; buscan también borrar su memoria de los recuerdos colectivos, de la historia y de las instituciones vaticanas. Como dice Sarramia, "la spettacolarità della sua condanna suggerisce che non si era voluto unicamente modificare quanto da lui fatto (cosa fattibile anche senza giudicare il suo cadavere), ma che si era anche voluta realizzare, in modo pubblico e ufficiale, una delegittimazione radicale della sua persona e del gruppo a lui legato, incidendo fortemente sugli equilibri — o squilibri — di potere romani" (Sarramia 2017b, pp. 1–2).

Cuando posteriormente el papa Teodoro II invalida el juicio de Formoso y restituye la validez de sus actuaciones se produce un proceso inverso, gracias a una segunda resignificación del cadáver papal:

> After it was retrieved from the Tiber River, the body was preserved in the monastery of Aconta, but later Pope Formosus continued his itinerary: a council in Rome under Pope Theodore II declared that the acts of Formosus should be recognized as valid. Theodore then returned Formosus to St Peter's. The body was clothed once more in papal garments. A consecrated host was placed in his mouth, and with candles and incense burning, Formosus was laid to rest among the papal bodies — his fourth burial according to some accounts (Moore 2022, p. 320).

Esa nueva resignificación es *actorial*, pues se reconoce la validez de sus actos y su condición de papa; *vestimentaria*, pues se le viste de nuevo con las ropas papales, y *espacial*, pues se le sepulta en la tierra consagrada de donde había sido exhumado. Con esos dispositivos significantes se restaura también la sacralidad de su cadáver, lo que simbólicamente lo transforma en cuerpo, una transformación sobre la que volveremos más adelante.

Más aún, el imaginario popular romano crea formas de resignificación de la cualidad papal de Formoso. Esa resignificación ya expresada en la colocación de las vestimentas papales en el cadáver del papa y en la colocación de una hostia consagrada en su boca, tal como señala Moore, se complementa con historias reseñadas por Jégou y Moore.

> Ce schéma narratif, emprunté aux légendes hagiographiques romaines et orientales, se retrouve plus d'un demi–siècle plus tard dans l'Antapodosis, avec des accents très byzantins lorsque Liudprand écrit que le corps du pape avait été trouvé par des pêcheurs et porté à Rome, où *ses restes furent accueillis par l'inclination des images des saints présentes dans l'église Saint–Pierre* (Jégou 2015, p. 520. Subrayado nuestro).

También Moore cita esta leyenda: "The ever–reliable Liutprand tells us that as the body of Formosus entered St Peter's, the images of the saints bowed respectfully as he was carried past" (Moore 2022, p. 320). En estas narrativas, en las cuales los santos de la iglesia de San Pedro expresan corporalmente su respeto por el papa reivindicado, muestran cómo el imaginario popular construye una resignificación que haga justicia al cadáver tan vilmente tratado.

El investigador italiano Agostino Paravicini–Bagliani (1994), después de estudiar rituales, crónicas y documentos, ha señalado que el cuerpo de un papa es, al mismo tiempo, físico y metafórico. Siguiendo ese punto de vista, podríamos decir que el juicio de Formoso exige la presencia de su cuerpo físico para poder anular su cuerpo metafórico.

Para Esteban VI el cuerpo de Formoso es presentado como huella y territorio (Nava Sánchez 2021). El cuerpo es huella, pues en él se encarna la memoria de sus actos, y es territorio, pues allí reposan los signos de su condición papal. Para destruir sus huellas y anular su territorialidad, Esteban VI necesita un proceso judicial que borre y nulifique no solo su existencia sino también su memoria.

Más aún, Esteban VI hace reposicionar el cadáver con todos sus ornamentos papales, pues lo necesita vivo, con voz, vestimenta y, sobre todo, presencia, pues, como dice Francesco Galofaro "the boundary between life and death is a semiotic border" (2012, p. 279). Son los signos los que delimitan esa frontera entre la vida y la muerte.

Figura 1. *El papa Formoso y Esteban VI.* Óleo sobre tela por Jean-Paul Laurens.1870. Museo de Bellas Artes, Nantes. Wikimedia Commons.

5. La representación icónica del juicio al cadáver: El cuadro de Jean–Paul Laurens

Jean-Paul Laurens (1838–1921) fue un pintor academicista francés, conocido por su anticlericalismo y antimonarquismo. El ignominioso juicio papal le daba una oportunidad para criticar ciertas prácticas de la iglesia Católica. En el lienzo (figura 1) nos interesa analizar algunos de los componentes semióticos que hemos resaltado previamente y que nos ayudan a construir una legibilidad de signos e hipotetizar sobre las corporalidades que sirven para construir una corporeidad en el cuerpo papal.

Lo primero que llama la atención en el cuadro de Laurens son las dos figuras principales que dan título al cuadro: los papas Formoso y Esteban VI, ambos ataviados con la vestimenta papal, pero mientras uno aparece de pie el otro aparece sentado, mientras uno aparece en movimiento el otro aparece en reposo, mientras uno apunta y acusa, el otro aparece inerte y pasivo, mientras uno está vivo el otro está muerto.

Si bien apuntar con el dedo no es un signo universal ni una conducta natural (Wilkins 2003), en occidente, tal como han señalado algunos investigadores (Rivas Salmerón 1994, Finol 2021, Mbaye y Mamoudou Thiam 2022), en determinados contextos, el signo del dedo índice apuntado hacia un espacio u objeto concreto puede indicar direccionalidad, acusación, identificación, énfasis, entre otros significados. Combinado con movimientos, el dedo índice también puede indicar negativa o afirmación, y adornado con ornamentos puede significar preferencias estéticas, como en el caso de las uñas pintadas. En combinación con los otros dedos y otras partes del cuerpo puede constituir un lenguaje, como el utilizado por los sordos. Es conocido también el papel semiótico de los dedos en la identificación de criminales gracias a las huellas dactilares (Leone 2021), y, junto con la palma de las manos, en quiromancia. La posición del dedo índice cumple también, en algunos contextos, una función político–religiosa(5).

En el caso del cuadro de Laurens, el dedo acusatorio, rígido y extendido del papa Esteban VI, en el marco de los otros elementos propios de una sintaxis corporal (brazo extendido, postura rígida y mirada en la misma dirección), apuntando agresivamente hacia el papa Formoso, es el de la mano izquierda, el cual se contrapone a los dedos de la mano derecha posteriormente cercenados del acusado; como si el pintor Laurens quisiera establecer una oposición entre el dedo que acusa y los dedos que bendicen, entre la mano derecha y la mano izquierda, una articulación visual que se refuerza con la posición erguida del primero y la posición sedente del segundo.

Los otros actores — los obispos que asisten al juicio que aparecen al fondo y el clérigo vestido de negro que debe responder las acusaciones en lugar de Formoso — son eclipsados por las dos figuras dominantes que dan título al cuadro.

6. Presencia, indicialidad corporal y eficacia semiótica

La Semiótica ha insistido en la dinámica dualidad dialéctica entre presencia y ausencia. Para Greimas y Courtés la existencia semiótica se

(5) Los grupos yihadistas del Estado Islámico han utilizado el dedo índice de la mano derecha apuntando hacia arriba como símbolo de sus creencias político–religiosas. Ver al respecto el artículo de F. J Calero en el diario "ABC" del 19/09/2014, titulado: *¿Por qué los yihadistas del Estado Islámico señalan con el dedo índice hacia el cielo?*.

expresa como *presencia* o como *ausencia*, esta última llamada "existencia virtual" (Greimas y Courtés 1979, p. 138). Como sabemos, la ausencia es un dispositivo semiótico de una gran eficacia simbólica y comunicativa y adquiere diferentes formas expresivas que van desde la ausencia total a formas como la sombra y el camuflaje (Finol 2016). Para Jacques Fontanille "La presencia, cualidad sensible por excelencia, es una primera articulación semiótica de la percepción" (1998, p. 38), lo que Maria Isabel Filinich confirma: "percibir una presencia es, ante todo, ser afectado en el propio cuerpo por el cuerpo del otro" (2008, p.45).

Las formas de mutilación que hemos visto previamente son también ocurrencias específicas de la dialéctica semiótica *presencia/ausencia*; ellas implican una transformación negativa de la *existencia*, pues al privar al cuerpo de Formoso de partes físicas (ej. los dedos) o simbólicas (ej. el nombre) se produce una transformación que va de la primera a la segunda. Las mutilaciones, entendidas en el sentido estricto que les da Marzano : "Dans une conception étroite, la mutilation ne concerne que la perte partielle ou complète d'un membre, d'un segment de membre ou d'un organe externe (nez, oreille, testicule …)" (en Muller 2014, p. 43), constituyen, sin duda, operaciones semióticas, pues buscan dotar de sentidos a la corporalidad afectada, sea esta de un cuerpo vivo o muerto. Al mismo tiempo que la mutilación es una privación del significante corpóreo es también una operación de construcción de sentido que tiene que ver con la sintaxis corporal (qué partes del cuerpo se mutilan), y con la paradigmática corporal (qué significados se atribuyen a las partes mutiladas en el repertorio semiótico de la Corposfera). Ambas, sintaxis y paradigma, son fecundadas semióticamente por los contextos históricos y culturales donde las mutilaciones se producen[6]

¿Por qué para el sínodo papal convocado por Esteban VI era necesaria la presencia del cuerpo del papa Formoso, incluso cuando ya este estaba muerto? Como ocurre en aquellos casos en los que no es posible recuperar el cadáver, casos en los cuales se sustituye por representaciones de este (fotos, ropas, objetos pertenecientes al difunto, etc.), Esteban VI podría haber utilizado vestimentas, fotos u otros objetos pertenecientes a Formoso sin necesitar así la presencia del cadáver. Sin embargo, para

(6) Por ejemplo, para un estudio histórico de las mutilaciones y sus tipos en la Grecia clásica ver Muller (2014).

él la presencia del cadáver era decisiva. Como dice Adriano Favole al referirse al cadáver mutilado de Mussolini, debido a su capital simbólico "la manipolazione dei resti abbia rappresentato un'operazione politica di importanza cruciale" (Favole 2003, p. 164).

El desenterramiento del cuerpo del papa Formoso revela la necesidad de la corte papal de tener la presencia del cuerpo como testigo, como realidad. Se trataría de una *indicialidad corporal* que garantizase la eficacia semiótica y, de allí, la efectividad judicial, un proceso donde aún no era posible enjuiciar en ausencia: la corporalidad papal daba plena justificación al juicio, de modo que sobre él y en él se pudiese construir una corporalidad visible, juzgable y castigable.

Para acentuar esa *indicialidad corporal* y potenciar la "eficacia semiótica del cadáver" (Bolens 2011, p. 158), los restos putrefactos son vestidos con las prendas papales y sentados en un trono, dispositivos necesarios para crear una corporeidad caracterizada por su nulificación, por su inexistencia, por su no-ser. Es en ese sentido que hablamos de la transformación del cadáver papal, gracias a una primera resignificación, en un anti-signo, en un significante privado de todo significado. "La présence du cadavre entier ou partiel est donc susceptible d'activer la capacité réflexive, mémorielle et narrative de celui qui regarde. L'efficacité sémiotique du corps mort passe alors de la menace accusatrice à la garantie d'une mémoire, parce que sa charge affective et le danger que cette charge représente ont été reconnus" (Bolens 2011, p. 170).

La corporalidad presente de los restos del papa Formoso en el juicio, carne y huesos, así como en la representación pictórica de Laurens, muestra la eficacia semiótica del cadáver, su capacidad para darle sentido al espectáculo mediático medieval que Esteban VI necesita para hacer el tránsito de la presencia a la ausencia, de la existencia presencial de Formoso a su nulificación, a su completa ausencia.

7. Una doble corporeidad: cuerpo y cadáver

El proceso acusatorio desafía la sacralidad del cuerpo papal y de la tumba, reconocidas durante siglos, en particular por el Código Justiniano (534 d. C.), para lo cual se valen de una suerte de subterfugio semiótico al

atribuirle al cuerpo y al cadáver sentidos distintos. Puesto que Formoso había sido enterrado en la galería de tumbas papales, su condición delictiva equivalía a una profanación de ese lugar reservado a los papas honestos. Ello les daba a Esteban VI y demás obispos la potestad de desenterrar a Formoso considerado así un cadáver y no un cuerpo sagrado. "La tradition juridique romaine, relayée par Isidore de Séville, stipule que ce qui figure dans le tombeau est un corps ; ce qui en est privé est un cadavre […] les auteurs de cette profanation déniaient au corps de Formose la sacralité que lui conférait l'inhumation ad *sanctos pontifices*, et entendaient redonner au sépulcre des papes son éclat, après qu'il avait été souillé par le corps de leur ignoble ennemi" (Jégou 2015, p. 511).

Vemos aquí un desdoblamiento sígnico: cuerpo y cadáver aparecen distintos: "Le corps change définitivement de substance et de fonction: il n'est plus élément constitutif de la personne, il est cadavre" (Ciancio 2019, p. 461). En el caso de Formoso se trata de dos corporeidades opuestas, pues al exhumar los restos de Formoso del espacio sagrado donde estaba enterrado estos pierden su condición de cuerpo para convertirse en cadáver. Así, en tanto *cuerpo*, los restos son accesibles a la sacralidad, pertenecen al orden de lo divino, pueden descansar en la Basílica de San Pedro; en cuanto *cadáver*, los restos pertenecen al orden de lo terrenal, deben enterrarse en tierra no sagrada. Además, en cuanto cadáver el papa Formoso pierde todas las condiciones especiales, propias del cuerpo papal, que le permiten separar lo terreno de lo divino.

Otra hipótesis interpretativa que explicaría la desemantización del cuerpo de Formoso, mediante la cual se le presenta como cadáver, la encontramos en un dispositivo semiótico que buscaría alejar la sacralidad corporal del papa juzgado de la noción de cuerpo propia de la fe católica, en la cual el cuerpo divino es, por antonomasia, el de Jesús. En efecto, en Lucas 22, 19, Jesús mismo afirma: "Esto es mi cuerpo, que será entregado por ustedes. Hagan esto en memoria mía". De modo que para desacralizar, anular y reducir a un grado cero de sentido el cuerpo de Formoso, las sentencias de Esteban VI lo convierten no solo en un cadáver, sino también en un anti–signo y, más aún, en un no–cuerpo, carente absolutamente de sentido.

Por otra parte, la exposición indiciaria de la corporalidad papal tenía que ser completa, requería, al menos una exposición visual reconocible,

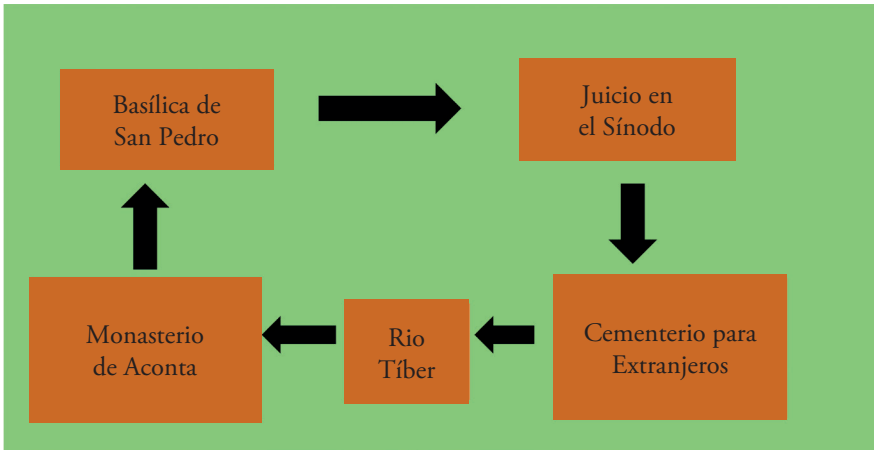
y por ello el cadáver es vestido con el traje pontificio y se designa un diácono para que asuma la voz del acusado y, de ese modo, responda las preguntas de los miembros del tribunal. Como dice Bolens, "Si le cadavre disparaissait à la vue, alors toute culpabilité pourrait être éludée" (Bolens 2011, p. 168).

Se trata de una indicialidad que se expresa no solo con la presencia del cuerpo, sino que esta se refuerza con tres tipos de signos. En primer lugar, están los signos vestimentarios que hagan reconocible la cualidad papal para la cual un cadáver no es suficiente. En segundo lugar, la voz que el diácono articula en lugar del papa muerto y, en tercer lugar, el trono papal donde el cadáver es colocado. Esos signos contribuyen a la creación de la corporeidad papal, pues constituyen el proceso semiótico de construir un sentido a partir de dispositivos indiciales y simbólicos.

8. Un cadáver transeúnte: la espacialidad funeraria

En el marco de la Corposfera es posible distinguir entre el *cuerpo entitario*, donde prevalece el sentido filosófico de *quiddidad*, entendido como esencia; el *cuerpo vital*, entendido como fenómeno, como lo que aparece y puede ser percibido; y el *cuerpo vivido*, entendido como experiencia en el mundo. La semiogénesis corporal y la producción de sentido se sitúa en el centro dinámico de ese triple acontecer que es el cuerpo. En el caso de Formoso su cadáver es presentado por Esteban VI como un *cuerpo entitario*, como esencia, que el juicio quiere reivindicar como susceptible de encarnar su historia vital, para lo cual los signos de vida (vestimenta, pose, voz vicaria, etc.) se utilizan como simulacro, como representación imaginaria de un *cuerpo vital*.

Es interesante analizar el itinerario espacial del cadáver de Formoso, pues nos muestra un recorrido circular en el cual cada espacio se categoriza en diversos valores que afectan también su corporalidad fenomenal. Como dice Jankélevitch, el espacio es "principe d'exil et de séparation" y al mismo tiempo "voie de communication qui relationne" (1977, p. 103). El cadáver itinerante semiotiza cada uno de esos espacios y los transforma en lugares, dotados de sentidos particulares.



Itinerario espacial del cadáver del papa Formoso. Finol 2024

El itinerario espacial del cadáver de Formoso muestra un desplazamiento que va de un lugar *sagrado* (la Basílica de San Pedro) a uno *judicial* (el juicio en el sínodo), para luego ser llevado a un lugar *secular* (cementerio para extranjeros), al que le sigue un lugar *natural* (el rio Tíber), luego va a una suerte de espacio *liminal* (donde el cadáver reposa después de ser rescatado por un monje de las aguas del Tíber). Finalmente, los restos mortales regresarán a la sacralidad de la basílica de San Pedro, donde, una vez más, el *cadáver* deviene, otra vez, *cuerpo*.

El itinerario transformador de un conjunto de espacios y lugares dotan al cuerpo papal de unos rasgos específicos que, en su conjunto, marcan su corporeidad, una corporeidad dinámica en la que se repite el proceso vital que pasó de su consagración a su excomunión y, más tarde, a la recuperación de su condición sagrada. Se trata de una homologación entre el recorrido espacial y el recorrido vital.

9. El cuerpo/cadáver como signo mediático

Como dice Hernández, "El cuerpo es palabra y discurso. […] Habla su propio lenguaje" (2014, p. 111), un lenguaje que potencia su eficacia simbólica, que construye su espectacularidad cuando se le

coloca en un contexto mediático tan poderoso como un concilio vaticano. "La spettacolarità della sua condanna suggerisce che non si era voluto unicamente modificare quanto da lui fatto (cosa fattibile anche senza giudicare il suo cadavere), ma che si era anche voluta realizzare, in modo pubblico e ufficiale, una delegittimazione radicale della sua persona e del gruppo a lui legato, incidendo fortemente sugli equilibri — o squilibri — di potere romani" (Sarramia 2017b, pp. 1–2).

Además de la espectacularidad de la condena, el juicio mismo a un cadáver putrefacto, con toda la parafernalia vestimentaria y protocolar, constituye un proceso signado por una *espectacularidad mediática* medieval: el sínodo convocado es un equivalente cercano de los medios de comunicación social de hoy, es una manifestación *urbi et orbi*, pues apunta a Roma y también al mundo que, en la Edad Media, es, en buena parte, el mundo católico. Esa espectacularidad es, en más de un modo, la misma que ocurre cuando se utilizan los cadáveres desmembrados y violentados en la prensa amarillista de hoy. "El potencial de acción simbólica del cadáver mediático está en la posibilidad de producir vínculos y conexión entre los seres humanos para imaginar relatos" (Hernández 2014, p. 112).

La presentación real del cuerpo de Formoso obedece a una suerte de pulsión espectacular, de modo que, por contraste, su nulificación sea absoluta. La exhibición del cuerpo putrefacto lo convierte en signo dramático, escénico, un acto espectacular con el cual se busca, como en la prensa sensacionalista, un efecto de realismo, un efecto que, específicamente, va dirigido a los ojos, y que en consecuencia se relaciona con una pulsión voyerista. Se trata de un proceso semiótico que también hoy la prensa amarillista explota abundantemente. Hay una equivalencia, por ejemplo, entre la exhibición del cadáver de Formoso en el concilio convocado por Esteban VI y la exhibición que los medios hicieron en 2011 del cadáver de Muamar el Gadafi (figura 2), el dictador libio[7].

(7) He tomado el ejemplo del cadáver de Muamar el Gadafi del artículo de Hernández (2014).

Figura 2. Cadáver de Muamar el Gadafi. Foto tomada con fines académicos de *La voz de Galicia.* https://www.lavozdegalicia.es/noticia/internacional/2021/10/20/.

Así mismo, en cuanto a la mutilación corporal y al ocultamiento del cadáver es posible comparar el caso de Formoso con la mutilación y ocultamiento sufrido por el cuerpo del dictador italiano Benito Mussolini: "Il 29 aprile 1945 il cadavere orribilmente mutilato di Mussolini che già presentava i primi segni di decomposizione segnò, secondo alcuni storici, la data di nascita rituale del nuovo Stato italiano […] Per altro, non concluse la propria vita sociale con la prima inumazione. Dopo la trafugazione della salma da parte di nostalgici fascisti e il suo ritrovamento nell'estate del 1946, la nuova Repubblica occultò il cadavere fino al 1957" (Favole 2003, p. 160).

Un caso similar fue el del cadáver de Eva Perón, mutilado (también le cortaron un dedo) y secuestrado durante 14 años, después que un golpe militar derrocó a su esposo Juan Domingo Perón. Los golpistas secuestraron el cadáver después de orinar sobre él y desde ese momento inició un extenso itinerario que lo llevó hasta Italia, España y, finalmente, a Buenos Aires.

Los cadáveres de Mussolini y Eva Perón son cadáveres políticos, capaces de producir revoluciones aún después de muertos. Son también reliquias capaces de producir adhesión, veneración y culto. De allí la necesidad de mutilarlos, profanarlos y ocultarlos. El cadáver de Formoso es también, sin duda, un cadáver político, pues en él, en el proceso judicial que se le siguió y en su peregrinaje corporal se encarnan las luchas políticas entre las poderosas familias romanas, en el marco de

la desintegración del Imperio Carolingio construido por Carlo Magno (768–814 d. C.), donde el poder papal se veía necesariamente envuelto y donde los papas debían tomar partido: "Because of their capacity to crown the emperors of the west, the popes were frequently engulfed in violent politics" (Moore 2022, p. 317)[8].

10. Conclusiones

Un cuerpo es un lenguaje polivalente, diverso y heteróclito, cuya legibilidad es solo realizable en el marco de los contextos históricos, políticos, religiosos y culturales donde él ocurre y discurre. Ocupa un lugar privilegiado en los procesos de semiogénesis, tanto en la *anasemiosis* como en la *catasemiosis* (Édeline y Klinkenberg 2015; Klinkenberg y Édeline 2018). El cuerpo puede adquirir diversas formas significantes en la dialéctica *presencia/desintegración/ausencia*, entre ellas vemos formas de cadáver, esqueletos, reliquia, despojos, momia, restos, etc.

Como hemos visto, el cadáver del papa Formoso aparece como un *cadáver mediático* inserto en un conjunto de operaciones semióticas mediante las cuales sus enemigos tratan de borrar para siempre su memoria, su legado. Entre esas operaciones semióticas hemos mencionado siete, las cuales van desde la anulación de su nombre hasta la desaparición de sus imágenes. Ellas se expresan también en la mutilación de los dedos que bendicen y consagran, en la doble sepultura en tierra no consagrada y en el agua del Tíber, después que su cuerpo ha sido desenterrado de la basílica de San Pedro, lugar donde tradicionalmente se sepulta a los papas, un proceso simbólico mediante el cual los despojos de Formoso franquean los límites entre cuerpo y cadáver.

Se puede decir que el cadáver del papa Formoso es la encarnación de las luchas políticas, personales y religiosas entre las poderosas familias romanas, los reyes y emperadores que debían someterse a la consagración papal. Ejemplos mencionados, como el caso de Benito Mussolini y Eva Perón, muestran claramente las capacidades políticas que un

(8) Para un análisis de la situación política en la que se produce el juicio al papa Formoso ver Moore (2022), Wilkes (2001) y Sarramia (2017b).

cadáver puede cumplir en el marco de un contexto histórico y cultural. En esos procesos el cadáver de Formoso cumple también una función política, pues expresa las luchas entre poderosas sectores de la vida romana.

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OBSERVABLES AND ETHNOSEMIOTICS
THE ORTHODOX LITURGY OF VESPERS

Francesco Galofaro

Abstract: The description of an Orthodox ceremony through the method of the participating observation is problematic, since the observation and the writing process are linear, while the structure of the ritual is nonlinear. In these cases, there is an unavoidable uncertainty in the description of meaning, forcing the writer to postulate structural stability to reconstruct the meaning by catalysis. From the uncertainty principle follows the notion of observable, mediating between the observed world and the point of view adopted by the observer.

La descrizione di una cerimonia ortodossa attraverso l'osservazione partecipata è problematica; l'osservazione e la scrittura sono due processi lineari, mentre la struttura del rituale non lo è. In questi casi sussiste un'incertezza inevitabile nella descrizione del significato, costringendo chi scrive a postulare una stabilità strutturale per ricostruire il significato tramite catalisi. Dal principio di incertezza deriva la nozione di osservabile, che media tra il mondo osservato e il punto di vista adottato da chi osserva.

Keywords: Experience, Catastrophe, Uncertainty, Structural stability, World

Parole chiave: Esperienza, Catastrofe, Incertezza, Stabilità strutturale, Mondo

1. Objectives

Ethnosemiotics can be defined as an inquiry on the condition of possibility of ethnographic writing. As Francesco Marsciani (2020, my translation) writes, "these are nothing less than the significant conditions of life in common, conditions that are significant to the extent

that they articulate and categorize the intersubjective experience of the lived world." To this purpose, the present paper[1] explores the limits of observing participation in the case history of the rituals of the Polish orthodox church. During the Ukrainian war, many Ukrainian refugees went to Poland, where they were helped by the Polish orthodox minority. These methodological notes have been inspired by the problem of analysing the relation between Ukrainians refugees and Polish society.

2. Problems

In general, the kernel notion of semiotics is meaning. However, since meaning is not observable, its description implies the observation of a *manifesting* plane.

The observation of the manifesting plane is not a straightforward operation: every observed practice can foresee simultaneous events: consequently, it is not always possible to observe everything at the same time.

For this reason, the relation between the observed events and the point of view of the researcher gives birth to *observables*. In what follows, a more precise conceptualization of this notion will be proposed.

The relation between the observed world, the observable, and the observer calls into question the ethnographer. According to Geerz, there is a hiatus between the ethnographic writer and experience:

> The "I's" these writers then invent — "invent", of course, in the sense of construction, not imposture — to serve as the organizing consciousness of these works, Barthes's ham actors and seducing selves, correspond in turn to the text–form employed. Indeed, they define it (Geertz 1988, p. 93).

In what follows, the selection of the observables and their assemblage will determine the distance between the ethnographer and the observed object as well as the experience and the subjectivity of the latter.

(1) This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 757314). It also received funding from the Department of Communication, Arts, and Media of the IULM university of Milan.

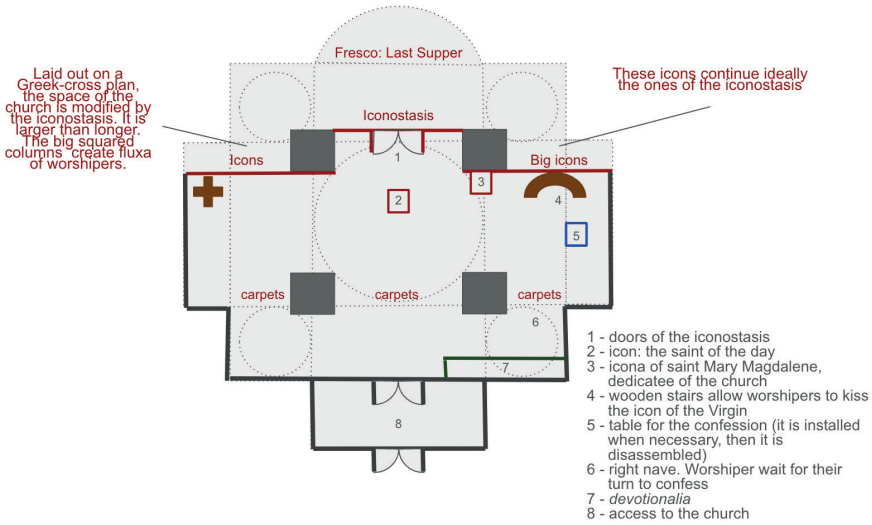

Figure 1. The Orthodox cathedral of St. Mary Magdalene in Warsaw (plan with field notes).

3. The Orthodox cathedral of St. Mary Magdalene in Warsaw

The map of the Orthodox cathedral exemplifies the practical impossibility to observe every point of the space (fig. 1). The Iconostasis and the large columns transform the plan of the building, a classic Greek cross layout, so that the internal space appears to the viewer to be larger than longer. When the observer's point of view is placed in the side aisles, it is not possible to perceive wether the doors of the Iconostasis are open or not.

4. *Ektenia* and confession

The following field notes were taken shortly after the observation on July 21st 2023.

When I arrived, after 5:30 p.m., a different rite was taking place than my last visit. The doors of the iconostasis were open. In line, worshipers kissed the icon placed in the center of the church by kneeling, then turned to the celebrant, placed on the left, who sprinkled them with a brush dipped in a small silver container held by his helper. Some

kissed the brush or the priest's hand — it wasn't very clear from my position. At the end, the priest crossed himself with the remaining water and kissed the icon in turn. As always, while this was happening, the elder chanted and the cantor responded. Finally, the celebrant closed the doors of the iconostasis.

At that moment, a younger priest crossed the church with a book in his hand and placed himself in the right arm. He placed the book on the lectern. In turn, the faithful (mostly elderly women; some young people) approached, kneeling in front of the volume. The priest placed a stole on their heads, touched them four times with his index finger, and listened to them — it seemed to be confession. Then he placed the stole on their heads again, touched them four times, and let them go. One woman walked away in tears.

Of course, while I was interested in this, I completely missed what was happening in the center of the church. When I returned, the doors of the iconostasis were open again and inside the *sanctum sanctorum* the priest was reciting an *ektenia* (it always ended with a word similar to Polish *prosimy,* meaning "let us pray," and sometimes it was understood that the prayer was addressed to God or Christ). So, I finally understood something quite important: the priest recites the intentions of the vows and it is the cantor who responds on behalf of the faithful people — called *laòs* in the Greek text of the liturgy. In reality, however, since they do not understand the sacred language, the actual faithful do not necessarily know what they are praying for and simply bow and cross themselves.

5. Unobservables

My orthodox informer helps me to annotate some elements not directly observable:

– material: the substance in which the celebrant dips the brush is oil, and not water.
– variants: some worshipers kissed the celebrant's sleeve. It is a Ukraine custom. Thus, it is possible to estimate the number of Ukraine worshipers.

– content plane: the rite spiritually reinforces the worshiper in view of a solemn feast. The Orthodox church of the Praga district in Warsaw adopt the Gregorian calendar: the feast is the Assumption of the Virgin.

The informer also confirms two hypotheses:

– I probably observed an Akathist hymn in honor of the local saint;
– in the Orthodox tradition, confession does not foresee penance. After the confession, women returned to the principal rite.

The role of the informer is fundamental, since the observer does not share the codes of the ceremony and has to control the presuppositional efforts and the risks of aberrant presuppositions (Eco 1976, p. 142). To clarify the complex relation between observation and ethnographic writing, one should note that both the roles of informer and observer can be considered as delegates of the enunciator of ethnographic writings (Greimas and Courtés 1982, p. 168).

6. The nonlinear syntagmatic structure of the Orthodox service

The syntagmatic structure of the Orthodox service can be represented as a Thom graph (fig. 2).

Since time is reversible, the five syntagms of the graph are an assemblage of only three different *sections* of catastrophes (cf. Thom 1975, pp. 297–330 and 1983, pp. 163–191):

– *the border*: an *actant*[2], a *subject,* begins or comes to an end. In the present case, it represents the start and the end of the ceremony, performed by the celebrants of the Akathist, considered as the subject of the action.
– *the rift*: emission or absorption of an actant: in the present case, the graph represents a second celebrant who leaves the first to perform the confession.

(2) René Thom borrowed the term *actant* from the structural syntax (Tesnière 1959). According to this view, any action implies up to three actants. In language, traditional syntax identifies them with subject, direct and indirect object. Here I prefer to identify them with sender, object and receiver, in line with narrative semiotics (Greimas 1987).

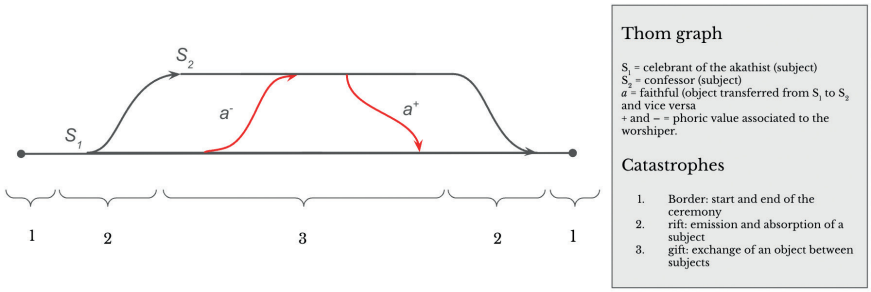

Figure 2. The nonlinear syntagmatic structure of the Orthodox service, represented as a Thom graph.

– *the gift*: exchange of an *object of value* between the two subjects (a sender and a receiver). In the present case, it represents worshipers leaving the *ektenia* to confess and re–joining it shortly after.

The characters + and – represent a change in the value associated to the exchanged object: in the confession, this *phoric* value turns from dysphoric to euphoric.

It is important to underline how the syntagmatic structure is nonlinear: some events happen simultaneously. This creates a friction between ethnographic observation and narration, since linguistic writings are forcedly linear. It follows from the structure that the participant observer cannot perceive everything at the same time: consciously or not, the observer selects what to observe between different possible *observables*.

7. The noncommutative syntagmatic structure of the observation

The order of the observations is relevant. If the observer changes them, the result will influence the description of meaning. To demonstrate this, two *observables* will be defined:

– *L*: the doors of the Iconostasis. Possible values: 1 (open); 0 (closed).
– *G*: presence of faithful to the confession. Possible values: 1 (present); 0 (absent).

If one observes the confession first, and then the iconostasis, one can see the line of worshipers (G = 1), then the open doors (L = 1) as a function of time. To demonstrate noncommutativity, let us multiply the two observers:

$$GL = 1$$

If one observes the iconostasis first, and then the worshipers, one can see the doors closed (L = 0), then no worshipers, since the confession ended (G = 0). Let us multiply the two observes again:

$$LG = 0$$

The observation is noncommutative. In fact:

$$GL - LG = 1$$

or, according to a simpler formalism, [G, L] = 1. Of course, in case of commutativity, one would expect:

$$[G, L] = 0$$

8. The uncertainty principle

There is a general uncertainty principle regarding participant observation. In the case study, if one observes G in state 1 (there are believers in the confessional), there is uncertainty (i.e., standard deviation) about state L (I do not know whether the doors of the iconostasis are open). In this sense, observables are paradigmatically opposing each other: in each place of the syntagmatic succession of the observable, the observer can select either G or L.

As an operator, the notion of observable is defined in opposition to the unobservable that semiotic theory has placed at the heart of its theory: the plane of the content, manifested and requiring a plane of manifestation: for example, the memory is manifested by the monument.

A good question concerns the semiotic existence of the structure represented by Thom's graph (fig. 2). In fact, while each part can be analyzed by the observer, the whole structure cannot be observed in its entirety, due to the uncertainty principle. The structural stability of the actants while unobserved can only be presupposed: for example, the observer presupposes that the ceremony performed by S1 continues as the observer attends to the confession performed by S2. This presupposition may seem a metaphysical claim about structures. However, it is a consequence of the requirement of an exhaustive description. According to Hjelmslev (1969, p. 94), some results "cannot be reached by a mere mechanical observation of the entities that enter into the actual texts". For example, in the case of the aposiopesis, "the analysis must likewise register the outward relations which the actually observed entities have, the cohesions that point beyond the given entity and to something outside it". Hjelmslev calls such presuppositions *catalysis.* This operation is the condition of possibility of the description of the content plane, since it is unobservable.

The uncertainty principle leads to further research questions on the criteria to distinguish necessary and unnecessary presuppositions, as well as correct and wrong hypotheses about unobservables, in compliance with Hjemslev's empirical principle.

9. Relevance to ethnography

According to Greimas and Courtés (1982, p. 171), semiotic theory is subdivided into four different levels:

- the level of the object language upon which the analytic procedures will be applied.
- the descriptive level, where the object language is paraphrased in the form of a semantic representation.
- the methodological level, where the concepts and procedures that make possible the construction of the level of representation are elaborated.

– the epistemological level, where the coherence of the body of concepts is tested and the description and discovery procedures are evaluated.

The present paper started from a problem in the observation of the Orthodox liturgy (object language) resulting in a friction between a nonlinear object and its linear description (descriptive level). This leads to rediscuss the limits of observing participation (methodological level) since there is a limit to what it is possible to know by direct observation (epistemological level).

Is the epistemological notion of observable relevant to our starting point, i.e., the interpretation of Orthodox liturgy? The answer is positive. The Orthodox cathedral is similar to a public square, where different social activities take place at the same time. Some worshipers participate in the litany, others go to confession, others meet their saints represented by icons. The rite is not as programmed as in Catholic mass. For example, faithful do not understand the *sacred language,* and perform a *proskynesis* when they are so inclined.

The description of such a multidimensional object requires a "cubist representation", renouncing to naturalism to analyze and reassemble the world it in an abstract form, capable of depicting the object from multiple perspectives.

10. The world as unobservable

As a consequence of the uncertainty principle and of the paradigmatic opposition of the observables, during any observation there are observables and unobservables. Some observables cannot be known simultaneously: the observer cannot know everything about a particular system: the observer must choose what to observe and what to observe not.

It follows that the choice of the observable also determines the knowledge of the observer and the ability to describe the world.

It is not sufficient to speak of a "constitution" or a "construction" of the object of study by the ethnographer: observables resist us.

At the same time, observables are not relevant to ontology, but to phenomenology: they depend on the relation between the world and the position of the observer.

Considered as a totality, the world in itself is not observable.

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"SQUARING THE CIRCLE" BETWEEN GREIMAS AND LOTMAN: A SEMIOTICS OF THE FIRMAMENT

Marilia Jardim

Abstract: The article explores two geometric and sacred forms — the square and the circle — and the theoretical and methodological vocabulary derived from and enabled by them through two distinct semiotic paradigms, inaugurated by Algirdas J. Greimas and Juri Lotman. Starting from the mystical and mathematical axiom of "squaring the circle", I reflect on the extent to which the form and vocabulary adopted by a theory determine what worldviews, as well as what forms of analysis are enabled (or interdicted) by it. Utilising Greimas's and Lotman's postulates as its case study, the article reflects on the traces of cosmologies, mystical, hermetic, and religious principles contained in the representations adopted by these theories. Furthermore, through the theoretical leaps demonstrated in Greimas's work *De l'imperfection* and Lotman's image of the *explosion*, the article outlines an argument for what could be the *firmament* of the Semiotic theory: a holistic approach in which the spherical and plane aspects of phenomena can be integrated into analysis. Beyond the goal of falsifying competing theories, this proposition aims to reflect on the union of forms, striving to weave in connections that permit analyses contemplating both the planar and spherical aspects of our discourses and other meaning–making manifestations.

L'articolo esplora due forme geometriche e sacre — il quadrato e il cerchio — nonché il vocabolario teorico e metodologico da esse derivato e da esse reso possibile, attraverso due distinti paradigmi semiotici inaugurati rispettivamente da Algirdas J. Greimas e Juri Lotman. A partire dall'assioma mistico e matematico della "quadratura del cerchio", si riflette sulla misura in cui la forma e il lessico adottati da una teoria determinano non solo le visioni del mondo che essa rende accessibili, ma anche le forme di analisi che essa abilita o interdice. Prendendo come caso di studio i postulati di Greimas e Lotman, l'articolo indaga le tracce di cosmologie, principi mistici, ermetici e religiosi contenute nelle rappresentazioni adottate da tali teorie. Inoltre, attraverso i salti teorici presenti in *De l'imperfection* di Greimas e nell'immagine dell'esplosione di Lotman, si delinea un'ipotesi di

quello che potrebbe configurarsi come il *firmamento* della teoria semiotica: un approccio olistico, in cui gli aspetti sferici e planari dei fenomeni siano integrabili nell'analisi. Al di là dell'obiettivo di falsificare teorie concorrenti, questa proposta mira a riflettere sull'unione delle forme, cercando di intessere connessioni che consentano analisi capaci di contemplare congiuntamente gli aspetti planari e sferici dei nostri discorsi e delle altre manifestazioni di senso.

Keywords: Generative semiotics; Semiotics of culture; Semiotic Square; Semiosphere; Explosion

Parole chiave: Semiotica generative, Semiotica della cultura, Quadro semiotico, Semiosfera, Esplosione

1. Introduction

Beyond the everyday utilisation of "beauty" and "elegance" to classify theories, postulates or written works, James McAllister (1996) presents the argument that, when selecting between theories of similar empirical success, scientists resort to aesthetic criteria as a decisive factor — among which he includes the affiliation to a specific cosmology. Whether that means the aesthetics of a specific form and what it represents, or the esoteric, occult, and alchemical meanings that shape contains, when it comes to semiotic theories, an interesting case study emerges from two readings of the Saussure–Jakobson paradigm: Algirdas–Julien Greimas's "quadratic" and "algebraic" postulates, and Juri Lotman's "spheric" and "explosive" theories.

Rather than an application of those theories to an analysis of religion and its discourses, I aim to reverse this axiom in search for the "Religion of Semiotics" — more specifically, how different theories have adopted elements from different cosmologies, through the selection of geometric forms that modelled them. Although it is possible to argue that Lotman's theory of the semiosphere is aligned with the concepts of *biosphere* and *noosphere* made popular by Vladimir Vernadsky, or for the Aristotelic origins of Greimas and Rastier's semiotic square, my objective is not to track the historical origins of these models. Through a Greimasian (1986, p. 98) argument, I accept that whether the complex isotopy of a discourse is present by the conscious intention of the

interlocutor or that it is installed without their knowledge, that does not change the structure of its manifestation. In other words: a historical or epistemological explanation of why a square or a sphere cannot override the potential connotations the choice of a polygon or solid can imprint in the image of a theoretical postulate.

In his essay about the mechanism of connotation, Greimas (1969) recovers the arguments that man does not utilise language but, rather, is partly constituted by it — a logic that can be easily applied to other "languages", such as that of theoretical models. For him, this "veil of appearance" constituting a second plane of signification or a "deforming system" possesses double methodological importance: besides obligating us to conceive connotative systems as an autonomous domain, it maintains the researcher in a state of "benefic mistrust" (Greimas 1969, p. 134), which supports the impulse justifying this analysis. As researchers use but are also partly constituted by theoretical models, it is of interest to examine what "confused designations" and "sliding of perspectives" (Molino 1971) the use of the square and the sphere can effect on semiotic models.

Solids and polygons are not "innocent", purely denotative signifiers; rather, their appropriation as a theoretical model's foundation draws from an already complete language. In pre–Abrahamic cosmologies, as well as in Pythagorean Mathematics, numbers, polygons, and solids are understood as keys containing a significant configuration of reality. Diogenes Laertius (Thomas 1991, pp. 173 and 175) presents a commentary of Pythagoras' Geometry as a progression from the indeterminate dyad of *monad* and *cause*, which originates numbers, points, lines, planes, and solids. From these "raw materials", Plato (1888) argues, sensible bodies formed by the four elements emerge, thus constituting our reality. Following the Pythagorean tradition, in which geometry appears tied to a project of ascension and development of humankind (Thomas 1991, pp. 175 and 177), Plato (1888) formulated his theory of the universe, its creation, and its creator. In the *Timaeus*, objects of a material nature appear as the result of a union between a principle of *form* and a *formless substrate* ready to accept the determination that is impressed upon it: the duality between *Teras*, a kind of "empty structure", and *Eidos*, which contains formal principles that cannot

be separated from the object. The mystical understanding Pythagoras and Plato derived from number and form could support an argument in which what is called the "occult meaning" — thus, interpreted as a connotation — can be reversed into a primary language that constitutes the base from which interpretations of those numbers and forms are constituted. This argument is supported, for example, by McAllister's (1996) assessment of scientific visualisation of phenomena as a relation of *metaphor*, which is, in essence, one of the many faces of connotation.

The appropriation of geometrical forms — and, intentionally or not, its *eidetic* significance, which, for Plato, cannot be expelled from those units — we are also invited to reflect on the *Teras* and *Eidos* of such models. The ways of seeing "inherent" to the shapes theoretical paradigms appropriate cannot be isolated from the form, thus imprinting its objects with the *Eidos* of its own determinations. Such realisations lead us back to some classic semiotic postulates (see Greimas 1986; Hjelmslev 1966) asserting that the operations of semantic description and analysis, to an extent, also "create" the object. In the efforts of uncovering relations by making them methodologically visible, new relations emerge *because* of the description and analysis: the analysed object is always more than what it was prior to its analysis. Yet, such an increase is not an increase of the thing itself, but an iteration of what inventory of relations is possible (or impossible), depending on the image in which the theory and its mechanisms are shaped.

The square, the octahedron, the cross — all shapes present either in realised or actualised form in Greimas's semiotic theory — are connected, in Plato's (1888 and 2013) philosophy and in various cosmologies, with the structures of reality: the elements, their stable articulation to produce lived experience, and the balance between forces and polarities. The number four — and its geometric representation in a square or a cross — is concerned with the materialisation of those substances in a tangible space, and the necessary operations of construction, work, and collaboration requiring this passage from the spiritual to the material[1]. Both an energetic representation of the human body and of the

(1) The vast corpus informing the practice of Numerology, as well as the exhaustive study of numbers and their manifestations in the Hebrew language present in scripture and commentary, cannot be appropriately reviewed in the space of this manuscript. However, I opted to include the account presented by Rachel Pollack (1997) in her study of the Tarot. Through her analysis of Major

perfect balance of polarities (masculine and feminine, spirit and matter, divine and terrestrial, and so forth), the tetrahedron — the three–dimensional manifestation of the number four — is, for Plato (1888), the primal element of life. The same principles are represented, two–dimensionally, in the cross: two lines converging in the centre, creating 4 points — another discursive manifestation of polarity, intersection, encounter, combination, and union.

When it comes to the sphere and its two–dimensional representation as the circle, the meanings that can be apprehended or generated are not as straightforward as the four, which also marks an important distinction between the planar and notably algorithmic reading of Jakobson–Saussure found in Greimas, and the somehow *multi–dimensional* semiotics Juri Lotman derived from the same paradigm. It is possible to read the sphere as the number $1^{(2)}$: the monad or first element that either divides or multiplies itself into 2 to make 3 in the *Vesica Piscis*, continuing this movement into the other sacred shapes formed by circles, such as the egg of life, the flower of life, the grid of life. However, the circle and the sphere are also the $0^{(3)}$: the indistinguishable force that is All and the Void

and Minor Arcana in the traditional Rider–Waite–Smith deck, Pollack presents a detailed account of the numerical value — which relates simultaneously to Numerology, Astrology, and the meaning of numbers in Abrahamic scriptures and its Kabbalistic commentary — in its connection with the archetypes represented in the figures. In the Major Arcana, the 4th card is *The Emperor*: a masculine archetype representing the father and nature married to the social world; the card signifies control over the physical world and the material aspects of reality, the laws of society, and the power that enforces them. Through each suit of the Minor Arcana, the 4s represent "structure", or equilibrium and stability in each of the four elements: fire (wands), water (cups), air (swords) and earth (pentacles).

(2) In the tarot (see Pollack 1997), the number 1 is connected with the idea of *root* or *basic quality*: it is the beginning, represented by the Aces of the Minor Arcana. Each Ace appears as the "first gesture" of a suit and, in the traditional Rider–Waite–Smith deck, the cards portray a hand coming out of the clouds, which represent "heaven" or the "above", and offering One of the suit — a Wand, a Cup, a Sword, or a Pentacle. In the Major Arcana, the 1 represents *The Magician*: another masculine archetype that signifies the trickster–wizard, a conjurer who can channel the "creative spark" or moment of ignition that propels creation. In the Rider–Waite–Smith deck, the Magician raises his arm to the sky and, in the altar in front of him, he has the four elements (a wand, a cup, a sword and a pentacle), which represent his ability to mediate between the above and below, to channel the divine forces into the material reality.

(3) Some tarot decks, including the Rider–Waite–Smith analysed by Pollack (1997) contain a 0 card: *The Fool*; in other decks, this Arcane is "numberless", which represents a very special attribute of this card as somehow "outside" of the world. For Pollack (1997), the Fool represents spirit completely free which, historically, has been embodied by the Court Jester: the only one allowed to pervert the codes and to challenge existing structures. In readings, the Fool symbolises the leap into beginnings, but it also signifies the end: the 0 or numberless is the

in one. Whether as 0 or 1, the sphere realises the union of beginning and end: it is both the First and the Nothingness from which everything originates — a problem approached by Leibniz (1948) in his *Monadology*, where the process of genesis is understood in mathematical terms.

Irrespective of the intentionality behind the choice of a square or a sphere, selecting a solid or polygon to model phenomena enacts an adoption of the limited possibilities that are realised in that form — even if, as is the case of Lotman's cultural semiotics, the selected metaphor is one that conjures *infinity*. Secondly, there is the problem of *dimensionality*, and the challenges and limitations of each mathematical dimension: a two–dimensional model, such as the square, guides the analyst or researcher into a space and the relations that are possible there, whereas a three– or four–dimensional model, such as the semiosphere, enables relations that are only possible when we reach these higher levels. In sum, the form and dimension of a theory are connected to the degree of *expansion* or *contraction* of the research object, which is given by the postulate — which, in turn, determines whether the analysis is causing the object to be revealed in ways that are consistent with the phenomenon or, on the contrary, if they are forcing a "flattening" to ensure the object can be "contained" in the theoretical model.

Rather than crystallised theories, Greimas and Lotman followed trajectories of expansion and the gaining of the higher dimensions in their postulates. Those points of breaking free from the geometric limits of their own theories approximate the axiom of "squaring the circle": one of the many representations of this operation, the octagon embodies the archaic opposition of the two cosmic shapes, and universal fusion of a pair of opposites — the earthly realm of the material (square) and the metaphysically understood heaven (circle) (Woynarowski 2023). Classified under "special problems" in the *Greek Mathematical Works* (Thomas 1991), this dilemma occupied many ancient philosophers, as well as in the Indo–European mystical, esoteric and hermetic traditions. Contemporary spiritual teacher Sarah Elkhaldy[4], transposes this

"link" between The World (21) and The Magician (1), as the figure through which the journey through the Major Arcana comes full–circle.

(4) See her video "The Esoteric Science of Space and Planets (Squaring the Circle)" from 20 February 2024, available at: https://youtu.be/nIHutRLeUlU?si=cV1zWTJ_CQTzY5sZ (last access 27 February, 2025).

problem to the diatribe around whether the world is flat or spherical, by highlighting that "squaring the circle" means the simultaneous, co-existing presence of spherical and planar elements in reality. One of the most known representations of this vision can be found in Leonardo DaVinci's *Vitruvian Man*, in which the human figure appears inscribed simultaneously in a circle and a square.

To an extent, the split between Greimas and Lotman transposes the dichotomy of narrower preoccupations with the *planes of reality* versus the *dislocation of centre and periphery*. From a holistic perspective, not only does that reiterate the need for tools addressing *all* the dimensions of cultural and textual problems, but it welcomes the opportunity to consider and discuss the implications of a two– versus three–dimensional (and beyond) approach to reality through theory. For Wassily Kandinsky (2000, p. 105), who publicly divulged his affinity with Theosophical principles(5), "taking a distance" from an object — in essence, what the theoretical exercise entails — results in the exclusion of a third dimension: to fixate all potentials on canvas is, in fact, to *limit* them. In the *Sémantique structurale*, Greimas (1986, p. 139) presents a very similar understanding of this paradox, when he argues that the linear character of discourse, although at first sight requiring an "algebraic formulation", once described, will demand a geometric, multi-dimensional visualisation.

In Kandinsky's (1947 and 2000) pictorial grammar, analysis is seen as the search for the "inner pulsation" of an artwork. The process of turning semiotic theories on themselves and their chosen models can yield insights into the implications of symmetries and specific elements, directions, and dimensions preferred by semioticians adopting each form and the paradigm they originate. Through this exercise, I intend to expose a critical view of what each theory can geometrically contain, while also exploring the cases in which the effort to break free from the geometric boundaries of a model was attempted: Greimas' theory of the aesthetic emotion presented in *De l'imperfection* (1987) and Lotman's *Culture and Explosion* (2009). Both works enact their own "squaring of

(5) In *Concerning the Spiritual in the Art* (see Kandinsky 2000, p. 47), Kandinsky attributes the base of his new vision of the arts to the Theosophical theory, introduced by Helena Blavatsky, which he claims to be a source of precise answers to the most complex questions.

the circle" as zones (re)conciliating impossible paradoxes. When theories approach this space of transition to the next dimension, they become equipped to appreciate reality as neither linear nor reductionist, but a constant dance of "conciliating the irreconcilable", collapsing a multiplicity of realms into one experience.

2. Semiotics of the plane

The vocabulary of structuralist semiotics and the worldview it generates tends towards planar or two–dimensional images. The generation of meaning is described either in terms of *planes of expression* and *content* (see Hjelmslev 1966) or in the *levels of a generative trajectory* (see Greimas and Courtés 1993). The Saussurean foundations of these concepts originate perceptions of *difference as duality* — before the plane, comes the one–dimensional concept of *contrast*, originating the definition of *structure* as the presence of two terms and the relation between them: two points and one line. However, although only one postulate in this tradition, the *semiotic square* introduced by Algirdas–Julien Greimas in collaboration with François Rastier (see Greimas 1983) is probably what Jean–Marie Floch (1995) would recognise as an "element of instant identification" of Structuralism, and specifically of Greimas's works and the Paris School of Semiotics. Throughout his writings, this structure appears in various iterations (fig. 1): an intersection of two diagonal lines uniting the four terms; the same intersection of diagonal arrows surrounded by curly brackets representing the categorial generations; or the elaborate representation formed by the two intersecting diagonal arrows, two solid vertical arrows pointing upwards, and two horizontal dotted lines.

The *carré sémiotique* is described as a visual representation of a semantic category's logical articulation, whose elementary structure of signification is defined as a relation between at least two terms (Greimas and Courtés 1993, pp. 29–30). From those initial relations, second and third generations are derived. Rather than four sides of a polygon, the four vertices, four lines, and the intersection in the centre represent four terms and six possible relations between them. "[The square]

emerges at the same time from the epistemological problem governing the conditions of existence and production of signification, and from the methodological doing applied to concrete linguistic objects" (Greimas and Courtés, p. 33, our translation). The statement above identifies an entanglement in a theoretical structure that simultaneously creates a method and is derived from it, originating a loop in which theory, method, and the objects it approaches shape and are shaped by one another in a relation of mutuality, which also includes the researcher. In turn, this cycle of mutually presupposed elements is directly linked to the range of epistemological problematizations of the conditions of existence that are made possible by such choices.

In his theory of form, Kandinsky (1947, p. 115) argues that the square, with its equalised sounds of vertical and horizontal resulting in a balance of warmth and coldness, is the *most objective form* of the typical basic plane. This form's stable equilibrium of two verticals and two diagonals is marked by the orientations above and below and left and right, which manifest different *tensions* and *densities*. As much as the different zones of Greimas's schema represent different relations, Kandinsky identified the different directions and locations of the square plane with different qualities of that pictorial element (fig. 2). The first division, between *above* and *below*, manifests a contrast of looseness and lightness (up) versus heaviness and constraint (down). A similar relation is identified in the verticals: the left repeats the characteristics of the above, whereas the right is a continuation of the below, generating resistance that increases from the centre downwards and towards the right, and decreases upwards and towards the left.

Starting with Greimas' first categorial generation, the four terms — S1, S2, $\bar{S}1$, $\bar{S}2$ — are distributed in the two semantic axes marking the opposition between the mutually presupposed terms: the contraries (top) and subcontraries (bottom). The diagonal lines represent the contradictions or the impossibility that two terms will be together, and implication (vertical lines) as a form of assertion between the subcontraries and the primitive terms that presuppose them. The simultaneous verifiability of *all* relations validates that the terms genuinely form a category. Furthermore, the geometric representation of the semiotic square is an attempt to visualise different degrees of tension between

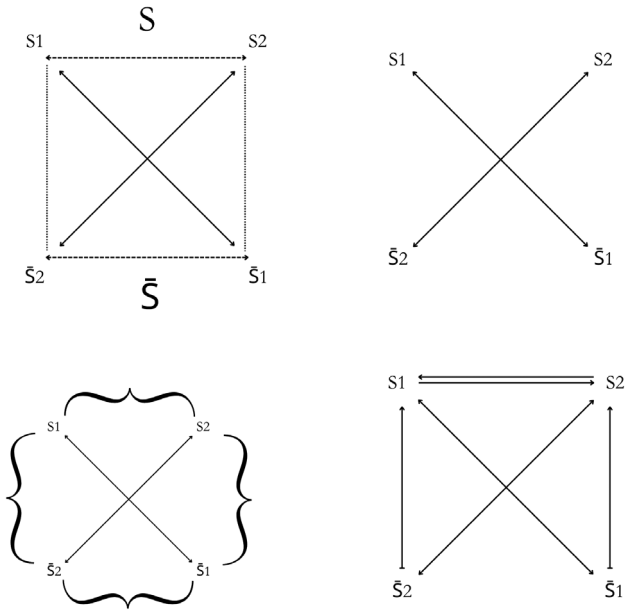

Figure 1. Iterations of the semiotic square. Elaborated by the author.

the terms. Semantically, there is a stronger tension between the contraries — whose union originates a "complex term" in the third categorial generation — than the subcontraries — whose union results in a "neutral term". Equally, the top right side(6) of the square is traditionally occupied by the euphoric term of the discourse, whereas the left is reserved for its opposite, the dysphoric term.

Kandinsky (1947, p. 118) remarks that composition can either *reiterate* tensions by utilising elements and directions of similar qualities or that the use of opposites may cause the same characteristics to be *equalised*. Intentionally or not, the choices made by Greimas and Rastier (1968) tend towards this equalisation of forces, betraying a certain ideological bias towards harmonising (rather than dramatising) the terms and their contrasts and contradictions — an inclination that is also aligned with the number 4 and its esoteric meanings (see Pollack 1997).

(6) In his theory, Kandinsky (1947, 2000) specifies that the basic plane is a living thing, thus we must consider their sides in the same manner as we consider the sides of other persons, animals, or plants: in line with this principle, the right side of the semiotic square is not on the right side of the page, but opposite the viewer's left hand side.

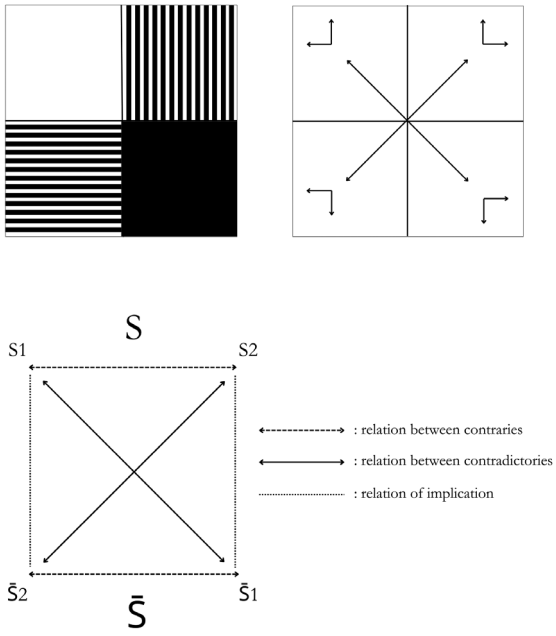

Figure 2. The directional tensions of the square according to Kandinsky (top) versus the logical relations of the semiotic square (bottom). Elaborated by the author.

In other words, the aim of this model is not to produce statements reinforcing hierarchies of relations, but representing them in *a level plane*, in both geometric and semantic symmetry of terms and relations.

However, the model also utilises the isomorphism of elements and tensions. In Kandinsky's (1947) vocabulary, the movement to the left represents a gain in intensity and speed as a journey towards the outside, constituting the biggest contrast in the plane or a *dramatic tension* (fig. 2). In the square, this disharmonious diagonal marks the passage from S1 to S̄1, or the denegation of the euphoric term that mediates the movement towards S2, the (dysphoric) opposite of S1. The second triangle marks the denegation of S2 through S̄2, and its reversal back to S1: a much less charged operation, which is represented in the movement towards the right, identified by Kandinsky with the "fatigue" of *returning home*, or a *lyric tension*. In the corpus of folk tales originating this theory (see Greimas 1970 and 1983), the tensions and contrasts identified by Kandinsky are verifiable: while the operation S1–S̄1–S2 is

much more complex and charged with tensions, S2–$\bar{S}$2–S1 constitutes a return to the "customary surroundings" of the discourse.

A similar pursuit of equilibrium is found in the representation of the second categorial generation, in which the four terms of the first generation are arranged as the outcomes of relations. As much as the four isolated terms form relations of contrariety and contradiction, so do the terms originated by their relations. The space containing the base opposition, the axes of contraries (top) and the space containing the contradictory terms, the axes of subcontraries (bottom) form significant zones which consist of contradictory metaterms. Equally, the positive (right) and negative (left) deixes constitute a similar correspondence as contrary metaterms. Those spaces generate a second set of relations, adding an internal mapping of tensions that repeats Kandinsky's (1947) contrast of looseness and constraint between directions. Finally, the union of horizontal oppositions, generating a *complex term* (above) and a *neutral term* (below) constitutes the third and final categorial generation represented in the square.

Despite the structure's name, the simultaneous representation of the three categorial generations would result in a schema that is no longer a square, but a flat representation of Plato's octahedron (fig. 4): two square–based pyramids joined by the bottom. While the first and second categorial generations consist of properly "square" relations between the lines and angles of a plane, a three–dimensional vocabulary emerges through the third generation of *complex* and *neutral* terms, which enable the analysis of *positive* (assertion) and *negative* (denial) relations. If visualised three–dimensionally, these metaterms would project, above and below, in relations of "ascension" or "descension": the transcendence of those terms is marked by their writing outside of the top and bottom axes (fig. 2). This movement pushing above and below the two–dimensional space of the square accompanies the complexification of the analysis and the nuances that emerge when this structure is utilised to its full potential: rather than conforming the terms to a two–dimensional space, the progressive categorial generations *increase* the object, creating the conditions for its leap toward the sphere.

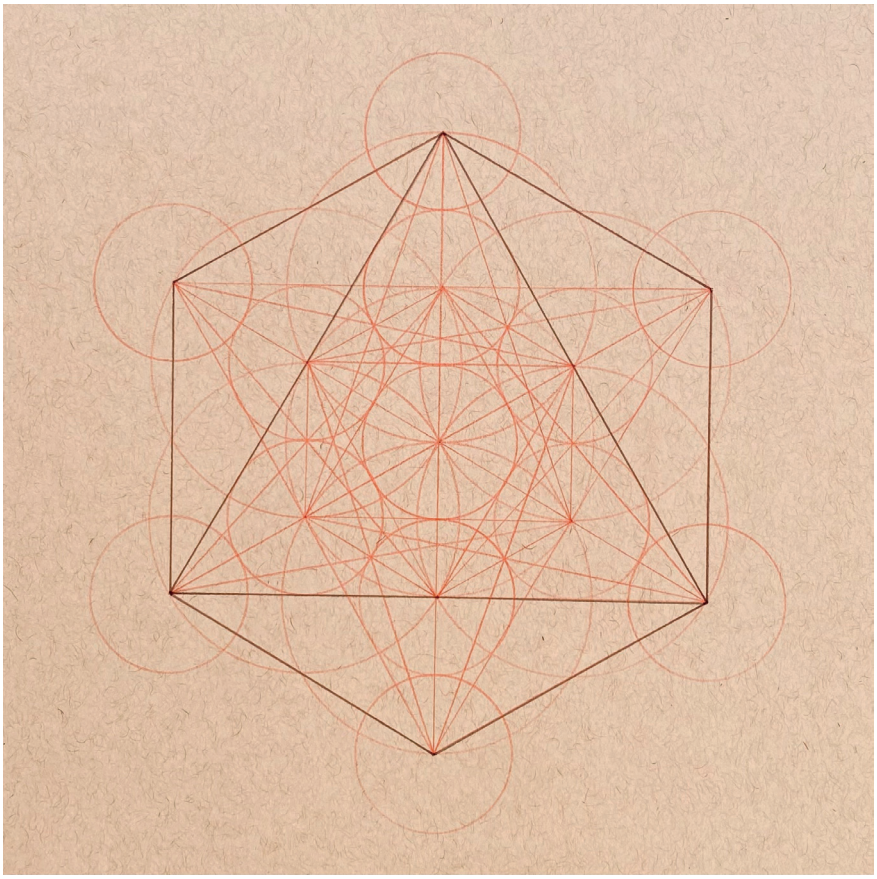

Figure 3. Two–dimensional representation of the Octahedron. Elaborated by the author.

This moment of complexification that leads the object from one dimension to the next is discussed by Rudolf Steiner (2000) in his exploration of mathematical problems. In his anthroposophical approach, in which geometry anchors our perception of relations in reality, a problem such as flattening a circle appears as a matter of perception and perspective. Squaring a circle, thus, can be a simple problem of distance and proximity, which was also noted by Kandinsky (2000): our perception of what is flat and what is curved resides in the dimensions (in the sense of size) and locations of objects in relation to one another. The problem of perspective also

determines that each dimension of space comes through the loss of the next higher dimension: in order to perceive a one–dimensional reality, one must place oneself *outside* of the first dimension — thus implying that the observer must be at least two–dimensional, and so successively. Similarly, the opposite movement of transposing three–dimensional objects into plane drawings, photographs or, even, theoretical schemas, is an operation of *flattening*, which, in Steiner's terms, "sacrifices the circle". To recover dimensionality, space must be *folded* or *recurved*.

The successive operations losing or recovering dimensionality in analysis constitutes a chain of literal operations of "squaring the circle": the inductive procedure of semantic description (see Greimas 1986; Hjelmslev 1966) is a process of "dilapidating the sphere", reducing it into its fundamental contrasts. However, it is the researcher's squaring — flattening, reducing to fewer dimensions and elements — of the sphere — a totality that has an affinity with the entirety of space — that generates the described object *in the image of the model*. Nevertheless, this flattening of the object is not the final step of a semiotic analysis: in his reading of the criterion of exhaustivity, Greimas (1986) specified that the reduced analysis must be reintegrated with a totality, thus verifying the pertinence of the clipped *corpus* to the larger section it belongs to. The passage from a representative *corpus* to its exhaustion can be read as the practice of re–curving the theoretical space, reversing the flattening of description so as to bring back the complexity of the elements by reestablishing their relationship to a three–dimensional (or higher) existence.

Although a "desire for three–dimensionality" has been present since Greimas's early works, it is his final individual text (Greimas 1987) that fully realises the "curving" of the theoretical plane. Noteworthily, *De l'imperfection* first essay opens with a meticulous analysis of a sphere: the water clock in Tournier's *Vendredi ou les Limbes du Pacifique*, and the drop that "refuses to fall", enacting a literary effect of *enlargement* and *suspension of time and space*, which Greimas (1987) postulates as the *dazzlement*. In his analysis of this narrative sequence, he remarks on the importance of the eidetic formant, encapsulated in the sphere — the key to all classicism

and the idea of *perfection*. In terms of phenomenological mysticism, however, Greimas's analysis addresses first the exit from the literary two–dimensional apparatus by welcoming the body and the corporeal experience of Robinson, thus entering the third dimension. Secondly, the analysis exits the third dimension, by describing the dazzlement as an action that comes from the outside. As much as something coming from above would appear as a mystery that defies reason and rationality for a flat being, this suspension of the rules of space described in the sequence appears, to Robinson, as an exterior intervention that defies the immanence of three–dimensional space and the existing parameters of that reality.

This enlargement of the actants' parameters is described, by Greimas, as an exceptional aesthetic perception — which, in Steiner's anthroposophical vocabulary, can be associated with the "higher dimensions" where time, empathy, and self–awareness reside. This immobilisation of the world is a moment in which the character becomes aware of his own existence beyond the three dimensions of space, resulting in a discontinuity of represented life. In theoretical terms, the planar postulates forming Greimas's theoretical toolkit to that point are curved into a three–dimensional space, which is then further expanded to approach the fourth dimension represented in the literary work. Through the analysis of Robinson as a 4D being, the theoretical model is curved into the domain of the sphere, becoming the "3D projection" needed by the represented higher–dimensional object.

3. Semiotics of the sphere

The circle with a point in its centre is an ancient symbol for the Sun, which, in pre–Abrahamic religions, is practically synonymous with the concept of "God" and "Creation". In the Hindu matrix, this central dot (*bindu*) symbolises the moment in which creation begins (see, for example, Feuerstein 1998; Finger and Newton 2018) — a notion reiterated in Kandinsky's (1947) understanding of the point as that which "impregnates" the plane, the primal gesture of artistic creation. The

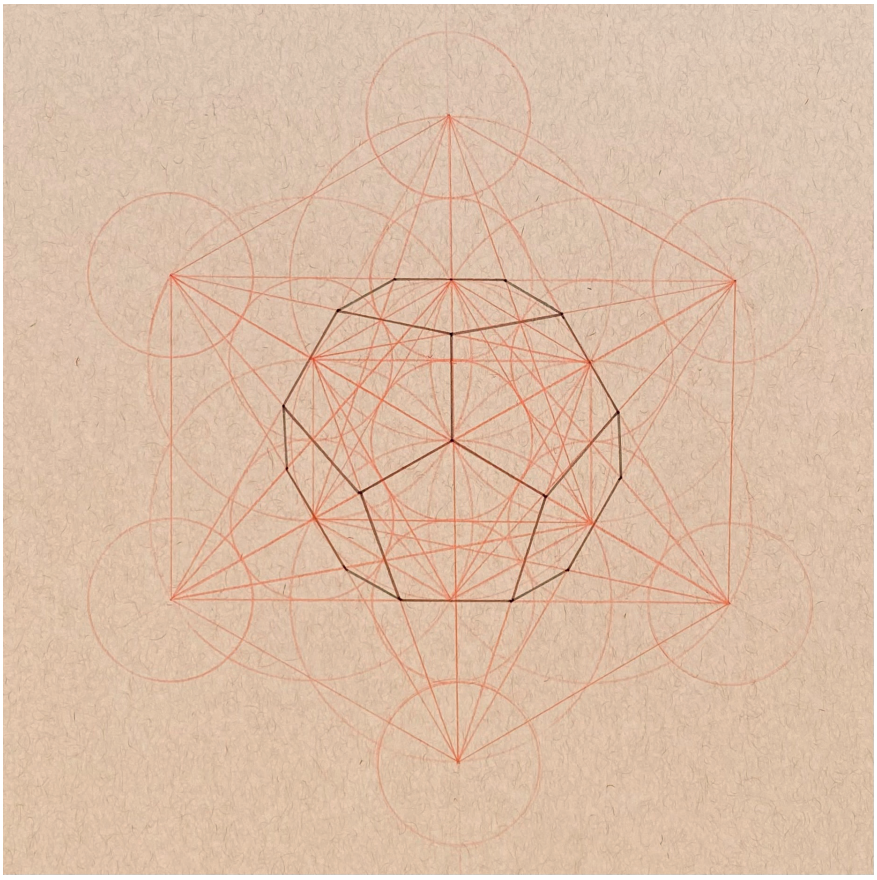

Figure 4. Two–dimensional representation of the dodecahedron. Elaborated by the author.

many two–dimensional iterations of the multi–directional rotations of a sphere around its own axis represent the *torus*. As the shape of natural phenomena, its motion can be identified in sections of our bodies (in the formation of our cells and tissues), in natural objects (the spatial relation between the roots and crown of a tree or the shape of an apple), in the relations between astral bodies, and the shape of magnetic fields. As a symbol, the torus signifies the convergence of the micro and macro, the endless rapport between the mundane and divine, the one and many, centre and periphery.

In a reading considering the multidimensionality of those shapes, different relations that challenge the standard mathematical understanding of geometry can emerge. Steiner (2000, p. 39) argues, for example, that the relation between point and sphere is one of opposition: while the point is something that radiates in all directions toward infinity, the sphere is that which comes back from infinity, actively flooding space from all directions. Thus, the sphere is the point returned from infinity, in a dynamic that approximates the multi–dimensional cycles the torus represents. Although Kandinsky (1947, p. 124) associates the circle with a form that tends to *rest* — an opposite image to the constant flow of activity Steiner sees in the sphere — he acknowledges that such is the result of two forces that always act in uniformity, the opposite of the "violence of the angle".

Whether equilibrium is active, as in Steiner's image, or tending to stillness and silence, as in Kandinsky's, this symmetry between centre and border or inside and out is at the foundation of Juri Lotman's (1990) theory of the *semiosphere*: a semiotic space, marked by heterogeneity and composed of conflicting, complex structures. In Helena Blavatsky's (1878, pp. 56–57) interpretation of the *Timaeus*, the dodecahedron (fig. 4) is the geometric model utilised by the Primal Being — *Nous*, Demiurgic Mind, the Deity — to hold the pattern of the Ideal World; it contains in its structure the eternity of the idea of a "to–be–created–world" and its correspondence with the forms of its manifestation as space, time, and causality. Like in Plato's (1888) theory of creation or in the mystical and hermetic traditions Steiner (2000) draws from, the sphere is origin and end — the cyclical dynamics between a centre and infinity.

Lotman (1990, p. 150) recognises the semiosphere is *not* an organised space: it does not act according to mapped–out and pre–calculated plans and, thus, it cannot be analysed using an algorithmic formula. Although he starts at the same structuralist foundations of a binary semiotic dynamic, in his theory bound by the laws of asymmetry, duality paradoxically functions as an indissoluble unit (Lotman 1990 and 2013): culture is a relationship between multiplicity and unity (Lotman, 2009, p. 3), in which two–way connections between a spatial image of the universe is "copied" and an image of the universe is constructed as

an analogy of our own cultural constructs (Lotman 1990, p. 203). In his semiosphere, a second metaphor becomes fundamental to the understanding of culture — that of the *boundary* (Lotman 1990, 2009 and 2013): a temporal *and* spatial distance, demonstrating Lotman's resistance to postulate space and time as separate elements to be pulled apart and reconstructed later. The temporal axis, past–present–future, and the spatial axis, internal–external–boundary, constitute relations between centres of metastructures, or rigidly organised and self–regulating sections of the semiosphere, and its periphery, zones of increased semiotic activity (Lotman 1990 and 2009). In such definitions, we see how Kandinsky's dynamic between the silence of the central point and the violence of the angle, as well as Steiner's point of return from infinity are reconciled in Lotman's (1990, p. 79) image of the mirror or reading in reverse: the palindromic relation changes the semiotic nature of a text into its opposite, also marking the relationship between centre and periphery as the dynamic between a set of norms and an "anti–world".

Beyond Lotman's prolific appropriation of occult terminology and imagery, his theory and its vocabulary are multi–dimensional from the start, recognising that both time and space are multi–directional — thus, governed by a principle of plurality. In his view, hard boundaries of temporalities and spatialities — and their linear, polarising, one–dimensional understanding — are not consistent with reality and, even when he adopts structuralist concepts such as synchrony and diachrony, these categories are endowed with fluidity and an understanding that only the present has a genuine reality (Lotman 1990, p. 238). Continuing the argument presented in this manuscript so far, it could be inferred that the new paradigm inaugurated by the semiosphere is one of three–dimensionality: rather than attempting to make the analysed object lose its next higher dimension to conform to the two–dimensional mechanisms of literary and schematic representation, Lotman recovers and maintains the dimensionality of cultural projections, utilising a 3D model to describe the relations they produce.

In Lotman's (1990, p. 45) system, complex intersectional occurrences grant texts, language, culture, or artefacts a simultaneous existence in two spheres of consciousness: one earthly "normal", and its Faustian, "infernal" existence, which constitute the friction through which new

ideas emerge, to then be tested and incorporated in the canon. Lotman (1990) himself outlines the equivalence of these dynamics with the *internal* and *external* in esoteric texts: the interpretation occurring from an "external semantics" that is incapable of touching a "hidden meaning" that is internal, and only available to the initiates. Whenever the internal meaning is touched by the external semantics, which belong to the normal space, the meaning changes.

This process is at the origin of Lotman's reading of centre and periphery changing places: a problem belonging to the sphere of cultural dynamics which, nonetheless, aligns with the mathematical paradoxes Steiner (2000) associates with the four–dimensional aspects of reality. Although Lotman describes this semiotic operation in three–dimensional terms, Steiner specifies that, geometrically, a point and a circle cannot swap places in the two–dimensional space, as much as the same cannot occur with a point and a sphere in the three–dimensional space: for that operation to occur, objects must pass through the fourth dimension. Thus, a more effective representation of the phenomenon Lotman aims to postulate is the *tesseract*: a cube containing a smaller cube in its centre, with all the eight vertices of both cubes connected by lines. When this object is simultaneously rotated in the 3rd and 4th axis, thus simulating the presence of a fourth dimension, the passage of the central cube to the periphery creates the visual effect of the solid turning itself inside out, with the periphery being swallowed by the centre and the centre enclosing the outside(7). This paradox of the inside being brought out illustrates Lotman's understanding that, when the centre becomes the periphery, not only does the meaning change, but so does the form.

The movement of the tesseract is also iterated in Lotman's understanding of the horizontal and vertical sectioning of the cultural space in *axes* constituting diachronic (chronological) and synchronic (simultaneous) cuts through the semiosphere. Rather than linear layers of manifestation, Lotman recognises the effect of semantic currents across directions: the semiotic space is multi–dimensional in both synchronic and diachronic processes. Furthermore, in his system, cultural spaces

(7) It is impossible to convey the rotation of the tesseract in a still image. Animated versions of the figure are widely available online, for example, on the Wikipedia page dedicated to the Tesseract: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tesseract (last access 27 February, 2025).

are not enclosed formations, but dynamic dances between explosions and gradual development alternately superseding one another, constituting relations developed in the synchronic space. Similar to Greimas' dazzlement, Lotman's (2009, pp. 23–24) image of the explosion is a phenomenon that creates a window in the semiotic layer, which causes a sharp increase in the informativity of the entire system; at this moment, the incompatible becomes adequate and the untranslatable translatable, in an image that, similarly to the cubes swallowing one another, realises the squared circle as a phenomenon excluded from time and, simultaneously, making its re–entrance in the axis of time.

The ternary structures resulting from explosions generate a mechanism of gradual development, in which the ideas from the outside can enter the centre and develop into a new centre: an operation constituting the "folding" of three–dimensional cultural spaces. The formulation of this problem in terms of binary or ternary systems, when transposed to geometry, communicates the passage from the line, a one–dimensional binary system, to the plane, a two–dimensional ternary system (the triangle). The vision of the catalyst of the explosion as the introduction of a fragment that functions as a generator or instigator of new meaning appropriates Plato's (1888) cosmological view, in which the construction of the sphere from, and its decomposition into triangles becomes the story of the universe's origin — noteworthily, Lotman chooses the image of a "universe of the mind" when describing such processes.

As an iteration of the squared circle, the re–entrance of the triangle — the two–dimensional element — into the sphere — the three–dimensional element — causes the collapse of the whole system. In Greimas, the dazzlement is a process of curving the space so as to gain the next dimension. In Lotman, his inverted mirror, it is the attempt to lose the higher dimension, through the re–introduction of the two–dimensional element, that causes the system to collapse: the explosion is the violent occurrence marking the system's resistance to being flattened, which reiterates Lotman's epistemic resistance to the algorithmic, two–dimensional, algebraic formulae. Instead of regressing to the triangle and the line, in Lotman's vision, cultural systems explode and are rearranged into new spheres: in such a model,

existing *forms* are sacrificed so that the dimensionality of phenomena is maintained.

A quasi "anti–model", as in Lotman's (2013) own definition, the explosion refuses the reductionist reasoning and its accompanying loss of dimensionality. Beyond the three dimensions of space, Lotman includes the fourth dimension that, on the one hand, seems to refer to the inseparable temporality of cultural artefacts and, on the other, overtly incorporates the vocabulary of magic, mysticism, and occultism — the elements Steiner (2000) attributes to the fourth and higher dimensions. In Lotman's holistic theory, problems belonging to the lower dimensions are rapidly resolved into infinity and unity at the centre of the *paradox of the sphere*. Not only does his semiotics accept the multi–dimensionality of texts and the forces that produce them, but his postulates offer a point of resistance that refuses the loss of dimensionality for the sake of representation.

4. Conclusion. The circle and the line: a semiotics of the *firmament*

In the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria, reality appears as the dynamics of circle and line in a dance of creation (see Klein 2005) — a teaching that, in Marc Gafni and Kristina Kincaid's (2017) contemporary reading, reemerges as the different levels of consciousness translated into different forms of "Eros". Circle and line, thus, constitute the polarities of allurement and autonomy, attraction and independence, cycle and direction. The square — a two–dimensional iteration of the line — and the sphere — the three–dimensional iteration of the circle — thus, could be read as two qualities of *Eros*, of *Philia Sophia*, that enamoured Greimas and Lotman in their readings of the Saussure–Jakobson paradigm.

Through this exercise of exploring the symmetric, mathematical, and esoteric connotations produced by geometric forms in Greimas and Lotman, the important matter of dimensionality of semiotic theories emerges through these choices. A critique already prominent in the space of Critical Studies — whose analyses often identify *one–dimensional stereotypes*, or *polarised discourses* — this discussion is nonetheless enclosed in a problem of "ideological bias", which responds to

one–dimensionality with a palindromic one–dimensionality. However, as demonstrated in the sections above, the mathematical dimensions where theories are located can be correlated to relations of complexification (or *de*complexification) of the object and the analysis, with each new *level* providing challenges and limitations to the analysis which can either flatten the object or provide a space for its increase. More than an instrument "used" by the researcher, theoretical models are also a system through which one's view is formed; through the entanglement of theory, object, and researcher, the processes of gaining dimensionality in the analysis are also reflected in the development of individuals.

Similar to Luria's image of circles and lines interpenetrating one another to generate reality, the Abrahamic image of the firmament — a domed plane in which the sphere and the square coexist — offers a breakthrough image in which a process of "inter–dimensionality" occurs as either the origin or effect of the paradoxes of lived reality. To square the circle — to attempt the impossible — is to embrace the paradox of higher dimensions: in the case of theory, such can be interpreted as a gesture of reaching beyond the established (or "permissible") problems of a discipline, through paradigmatic cases that defy the norms. This crack of the two–dimensional space — Greimas's *dazzlement*, Lotman's *explosion* — constitutes a point of opening in which the planar and the spherical become married as two indissoluble faces of phenomena. This perhaps unusual analysis aimed to create a similar crack, to invite the interrogation of what contribution Religious Studies can make to Semiotics — not as an object of research, but as a paradigm through which the semiotician can fold their theoretical and methodological space.

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SEZIONE 2
ON AWE: SEMANTIC FAULTLINES AND THE AFFECTIVE INFRASTRUCTURE OF PARADIGMATIC SHIFTS

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INTRODUCTION
ON AWE: SEMANTIC FAULTLINES AND THE AFFECTIVE INFRASTRUCTURE OF PARADIGMATIC SHIFTS

Massimo Leone

In the affective architecture of human experience, awe occupies an interstitial semantic space wherein the limits of language, perception, and cognition are both suspended and reconstituted. Neither strictly definable nor entirely ineffable, awe is a liminal affect that simultaneously destabilizes and realigns the semiotic structures by which subjects orient themselves in the world. This volume, gathering contributions to the panel "On Awe" held at EUARE 2024 (Palermo) within the Bruno Kessler Foundation's 2024 research theme *(Dis)Enchantment in Religion and Ethics*, interrogates awe not merely as an emotion but as a psycho–social and psycho–cultural vector through which the undifferentiated — what Agamben might call the "whatever–being" — is momentarily staged. In its capacity to disarticulate established patterns of sense–making, awe emerges as a condition of possibility for what Thomas Kuhn termed paradigmatic transitions: it does not "belong" to a paradigm, but rather perforates its coherence, allowing new epistemic configurations to precipitate. The essays in this collection exemplify how awe functions as a semantic hinge in fields as diverse as theology, ritual practice, digital media, and biotechnology.

Nicholas Buck's essay explores awe as a metaphysical and epistemic experience rather than a functional emotion. He argues that awe suspends the subject's habitual posture of concern, rendering it receptive to the givenness and intrinsic value of objects and of existence itself. Drawing on thinkers such as Marion, Heschel, Marcel, and Desmond,

Buck shows that awe destabilizes the self as origin and reveals it instead as a recipient. This receptivity, he contends, discloses the abundance and gratuitousness of being. Awe thus becomes a source of insight that should inform both our understanding of the world and our ethical orientation within it.

Arkaprava Chattopadhyay's essay interrogates the techno–ritualistic metamorphosis of Durga Puja during the Covid–19 pandemic as a paradigmatic instance of the mediatization, digital secularization, and ethnosemiotic reconfiguration of Hindu religious practice. Combining traditional and digital ethnography with a social semiotic framework, the study examines how immersive technologies — VR sanctums, AR filters, livestreamed rituals, and digital performative aesthetics — generated a digitally constructed grandeur that invoked awe while simultaneously unsettling traditional sacerdotal hierarchies. Through granular analysis of user engagement, symbolic participation, and communal negotiation, the paper reveals a hermeneutic hybridization wherein virtual rituality not only preserved spiritual catharsis under constraint but also redefined sacred space as algorithmically mediated and universally accessible. Theologically, this shift disrupted caste and ritual exclusivity while aesthetically amplifying the festival's mythological imaginaries through digital opulence and transmedia symbolism. Ultimately, the study posits that the digital augmentation of Durga Puja was not a contingency–bound adaptation, but a constitutive transformation that rearticulates the ontosemiotic fabric of ritual in the networked age.

Accursio Graffeo's essay examines the entangled trajectories of science and religion through the lens of awe, proposing that contemporary AI– and technology–centered new religious movements function as narrative ecosystems in which metaphysical and empirical paradigms coalesce. Tracing a genealogy from Copernican decentering to quantum cosmology and the anthropic principle, the essay maps the progressive erosion of human exceptionalism and the concurrent re–emergence of transcendence in technological imaginaries. The study analyzes movements such as the Turing Church and Theta Noir as proto–religious assemblages wherein digital eschatologies, posthuman soteriologies, and techno–animistic ontologies converge to reconfigure the sacred under conditions of informational abstraction. These phenomena

are interpreted as semiotic incubators of synthetic religiosity — composite structures that re–inscribe spiritual meaning within algorithmic cosmologies, speculative science, and collective imaginaries of the singularity. Ultimately, the essay suggests that awe operates as the epistemic and affective hinge enabling a rearticulation of the sacred in post–metaphysical technoculture.

Sara Hejazi's essay articulates a bold anthropological and epistemological reframing of human centrality through the lens of quantum theory, arguing that the historical "awe of displacement" induced by scientific decentering is now being countervailed by a participatory ontology. Tracing a trajectory from paleoanthropology to quantum physics, she destabilizes both theological and Darwinian hierarchies, proposing that the observer effect repositions human cognition as an ontic operator within the fabric of physical reality. Culture is reconceived as vibrational energy — an entangled system of symbolic, biological, and technological interactions — capable of transforming not only social structures but planetary ecosystems. Within this framework, the Anthropocene emerges not as a symptom of human hubris but as a moment demanding a recalibration of agency grounded in quantum entanglement and ethical responsibility. Hejazi's synthesis advances a radically interdisciplinary paradigm, wherein recentralization no longer entails supremacy but rather recursive participation in the co–constitution of matter, meaning, and futurity.

Giulio Mariotti's essay examines the *Shirot 'Olat HaShabbat* as a literary and theological artifact articulating a form of "realized eschatology" through ecstatic liturgical communion with angels, grounded in the precise observance of a revealed, solar–based sacred calendar. Analyzing the systematic deployment of the Hebrew root *pl'* (פלא) within the second section of the text (Songs 6–8), Mariotti demonstrates how the repetition of this lexeme — semantically linked to awe, wonder, and divine transcendence — operates as both a linguistic marker and an experiential trigger for altered states of ritual consciousness. Through the juxtaposition of disenchantment with the corrupted Jerusalem Temple and the re–enchanted angelic communion of the *yaḥad* community at Qumran, the essay argues that sacred temporality and linguistic liturgy merge to instantiate a performative mysticism. The repetitive stylistic

architecture of the Songs, especially the obsessive invocation of "sevenfold" praise and wondrous acts, reveals a deliberate strategy for inducing participatory entry into divine order. Ultimately, Mariotti contends that awe is not merely thematic but structurally embedded in the text as the semiotic and spiritual hinge of liturgical transformation.

Luís Neiva's essay offers a psychoanalytic and ideological critique of Renaissance liturgical polyphony as a site of sublime corruption, revealing the structural fissures of belief within Catholic ritual. Drawing on Lacan and Žižek, the essay argues that sacred music destabilized the performative mechanisms through which objective faith was sustained, exposing a void at the heart of liturgical semiotics. Polyphony, with its fracturing of the voice and suspension of textual clarity, is read not merely as aesthetic excess but as an ontological threat that ruptures the imaginary unity of the sacred. The resulting ecclesiastical anxiety reflects not a fear of beauty per se but of music's capacity to render audible the absence upon which theological certainty rests. Neiva ultimately posits that awe, in this context, emerges not from divine plenitude but from the traumatic confrontation with the sacred as lack.

Boris Rähme's article posits that awe, while frequently interpreted through religious or spiritual lenses, is not inherently tied to either; rather, it is a cognitive–emotional response to perceived vastness that triggers a need for accommodation. Building on Keltner and Haidt's two–component model, Rähme argues that the categorization of awe as religious, spiritual, or *tout court* (neither religious nor spiritual) depends not on the elicitor but on the conceptual resources mobilized by the subject in processing the experience. He operationalizes "religious" as involving supernatural transcendence and "spiritual" as involving self–authenticating subjectivity, thereby isolating a residual category of awe that refuses both interpretive strategies. This "awe *tout court*" remains open to empirical, secular, or agnostic frameworks of meaning–making and is thus conceptually significant for a non–confessional phenomenology of affect. Ultimately, Rähme reframes awe as a site of epistemic pluralism, where interpretive latitude reveals the underlying metaphysical predispositions of the subject rather than the essence of the emotion itself.

Finally, Tommaso Ropelato reframes awe as a pivotal lens through which to reassess reproductive–genetic biotechnologies, arguing that

awe — understood as a radical intensification of epistemic wonder — serves as both an ontological and ethical resource. Contrasting the reductionist stance of Dawkins with Einstein's reverent embrace of mystery, the paper posits awe as a modality of epistemic humility that resists both religious absolutism and technoscientific totalization. By analyzing awe's moral affordances — its capacity to decenter the self, foster intergenerational responsibility, and re–enchant human agency — Ropelato articulates a normative framework in which biotechnology does not efface, but rather amplifies, the ethical gravity of procreation. He advances a critique of liberal eugenics by positioning awe as a corrective to genetic narcissism, urging a model of self–making rooted in alterity rather than optimization. Ultimately, awe becomes not a theological relic nor a cognitive illusion, but a crucial affective infrastructure for navigating bioethical thresholds in an age of reproductive mastery.

As this collection attests, awe eludes capture yet enables transition. It is not merely an emotional reaction but a semiotic faultline — an infra–conceptual resource — through which cultural systems rupture and regenerate. In moments of profound awe, the symbolic dissolves into the real only to be reabsorbed in a new configuration, rendering this emotion not residual but constitutive of paradigmatic evolution.

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BEING ON THE RECEIVING END: AWE AS DISCLOSURE

Nicholas Buck

Abstract: Recent studies of awe in psychology and philosophy help to clarify and refine our understanding of the experience and its impact on human life. However, these disciplines tend to offer functional or broadly transcendental accounts of awe that trace its significance rather directly back to the self. This sits in some tension with awe centrally involving the experience of being drawn out of oneself by and toward what lies beyond it. In this paper I endeavor to remain longer with the experience itself and speculate about awe as a source of insight. Drawing on a range of philosophical, religious, and literary voices, I set out to consider what it might be that experiences of awe characteristically disclose about the world that includes yet transcends the self. By virtue of the profound state of receptivity they prompt, I propose that in experiences of awe persons become available to and increasingly aware of the givenness, abundance, and intrinsic value of some particular awe object(s) and, more broadly, of existence itself. After unpacking these ideas and their connections, I consider some ethical and existential implications of awe and advocate that its disclosures root and inform whatever views of the world we may construct. I conclude by suggesting that perhaps the most profound disclosure of awe involves the awareness of one's own self as given.

Studi recenti sul senso del sublime in ambito psicologico e filosofico contribuiscono a chiarire e affinare la nostra comprensione dell'esperienza e del suo impatto sulla vita umana. Tuttavia, tali discipline tendono a fornire interpretazioni funzionali o genericamente trascendentali del sublime, riconducendone il significato in modo piuttosto diretto al sé. Ciò appare in certa tensione con il fatto che l'esperienza del sublime implica in modo essenziale l'essere tratti fuori di sé da ciò che si colloca oltre. In questo saggio, mi propongo di soffermarmi più a lungo sull'esperienza in quanto tale e di riflettere in via speculativa sul sublime come fonte di comprensione. Attingendo a una pluralità di voci filosofiche, religiose e letterarie, intendo interrogarmi su ciò che le esperienze del sublime tendono a rivelare del mondo, un mondo che include il sé ma lo trascende. In virtù dello stato profondo

di ricettività che esse suscitano, propongo che, nel vivere il sublime, le persone divengano disponibili a percepire e progressivamente consapevoli del carattere donato, dell'abbondanza e del valore intrinseco di uno o più oggetti del sublime e, in senso più ampio, dell'esistenza stessa. Dopo aver articolato questi concetti e le loro interconnessioni, considero alcune implicazioni etiche ed esistenziali del sublime, sostenendo che le sue rivelazioni dovrebbero costituire fondamento e orientamento di qualunque visione del mondo si possa costruire. Concludo suggerendo che forse la rivelazione più profonda connessa al sublime consista nella consapevolezza del proprio sé in quanto donato.

Keywords: Awe, Metaphysics, Givenness, Abundance, Value

Parole chiave: Stupore, Metafisica, Donazione, Abbondanza, Valore

Awe is, irreducibly, an experience, something persons undergo, and a rather idiosyncratic one at that. Saying anything meaningful about awe therefore requires remaining open to its varying manifestations without becoming mired in indeterminacy. Relatedly, any such attempts must also be wary of tendencies toward subjectivism or sentimentalism.

To avoid these pitfalls, I will embrace what psychological research has shown are the basic contours of awe, which will help to keep my speculations grounded. However, if psychology can effectively capture the experience of awe, why pursue these speculations at all? Although helpful in numerous ways, I find functionalist considerations of awe like those provided in the psychological literature inadequate. Such accounts strike me as decidedly incomplete on their own, if not contradictory, for considering awe in such a way that primarily and so directly traces its significance back to the self, given that awe is the experience of being drawn out of oneself by and toward what lies beyond it.

As I will explain, I find some prominent philosophical accounts of awe similarly constrained, insightful though they are. I note two strong tendencies in philosophy to focus either on awe's effects or on what its experience reveals about the necessary conditions for knowledge, experience, and even selfhood. In contrast to these broadly functional and transcendental approaches, I will pursue a rather different agenda that attempts to remain longer *with* the experience itself.

I begin by noting that awe is bound up with perception. Along with evoking a range of affective responses, awe involves or is associated with

an increased awareness of some seemingly novel dimension, feature, or context pertaining to the objects of perception. Although what it brings to awareness may not be initially conceptual or linguistic, awe usually involves or precipitates at least some rudimentary reflective processing of its experience, which the psychological literature shows. I aim to pursue the idea that awe contributes something to a person's awareness and/or knowledge and to inquire after awe as a source of insight. More specifically, I set out to consider what it might be that experiences of awe disclose about *the world*.

I surmise that awe does not regularly disclose much by way of detail belonging to some object(s) of perception. Instead, I propose that awe's disclosures are best understood, at least in part, as metaphysical, by which I mean they indicate something pertaining to what it is *to be*, that is, *to exist*[1]. In what follows, I will proceed in the spirit of Henry Bugbee's rather bold and provocative suggestion for a construal of awe "not merely as a provocation for reflection, but also as containing the germ of fundamental truth" (Bugbee 1999, p. 40)[2]. I will leave open and unresolved the relation between what is disclosed in an experience of awe and things "as they really are," although I should say in passing that I find such a dualistic and simplistic correspondence construal unsatisfactory.

I maintain that awe's metaphysical disclosures occur in a distinct manner. As has been convincingly argued by others, we humans are the sorts of creatures whose lives tend to be lived in a state or mode of concern — oriented to practical tasks, motivated by specific interests, and grounded in fidelity to certain commitments and/or communities — that filters our perceptions and disposes us toward objects and others in consequent ways[3]. For such creatures as we seem to be, awe characteristically arrives as a disruption, however temporarily and partially. I take this to be the reason why we often resort to language like that of being

(1) Mary–Jane Rubenstein opposes metaphysics and awe, a result of our different understandings of metaphysics, aside from which we share several key ideas (Rubenstein 2008).

(2) In this instance, Bugbee uses the term "wonder," but he appears to mean basically the same thing I mean by awe.

(3) Most immediate to mind is Martin Heidegger's account of the human person's (*Dasein*'s) "Being towards the world" in the mode of "concern," which manifests "concernful dealings" with things (Heidegger 1962, pp. 78-107).

"struck" or "stunned" when describing it. Experiences of awe are thus interruptions whereby a person's default posture of *being concerned* is briefly loosened, slackened, or forgotten(4). Because of this, although its experiences can surely manifest a number of effects, awe can be understood in the first instance as perhaps the non–pragmatic and non–utilitarian experience *par excellence*.

In a state or mode of concern, persons are actively (better, *pro*actively) disposed, but experiences of awe render them otherwise, cast in a state of receptivity(5). As a result, moments of awe provide opportunities for encounters far less constrained, conditioned, or overdetermined by one's operative agendas(6). My core proposal is that in experiences of awe, in virtue of the state of receptivity they prompt, persons become available to and increasingly aware of the givenness, abundance, and intrinsic value of awe objects (those directly tied to the experience) and, more broadly, of *existence itself*(7). I will build toward these points by first surveying the relevant psychological literature and engaging with select philosophical perspectives.

Before doing so, however, a word about the terrain ahead. Owing to the nature of our subject matter, I will (must!) proceed in the manner of description, suggestion, and speculation rather than formal argumentation. The success of my proposals will rest not only on the

(4) Take, for instance, Annie Dillard's account of an experience of awe she had while gazing at fish as they reflected glints of sunlight in a remote creek: "So I blurred my eyes and gazed toward the brim of my hat and saw a new world. I saw the pale white circles roll up, roll up, like the world's turning, mute and perfect, and I saw the linear flashes, gleaming silver, like stars being born at random down a rolling scroll of time. Something broke and something opened. I filled up like a new wineskin. I breathed an air like light; I saw a light like water. I was a lip of a fountain the creek filled forever; I was ether, the leaf in the zephyr; I was flesh–flake, feather, bone" (Dillard 1998, p. 34).

(5) Without space to unpack this point, I flag an important difference between receptivity and passivity.

(6) I am not claiming that the more persons perceive some object or other as independent of or unrelated to themselves the more "accurate" the perception might be. Such a view trades on an atomistic and dualist account of selves and others that I reject. Rather, I am arguing that the construal of objects and others foremost in terms of how they serve, benefit, or impact oneself is, at minimum, always a disfiguring reduction.

(7) There are notable connections between my account of awe and Sophie Grace Chappell's account of epiphanies (of which she claims awe is one kind), especially regarding the elements of givenness and value, but we come to these points by way of rather different routes (Chappell 2022, pp. 8–9, 11).

strength of the relations between ideas but also on their resonance with experiences of awe, including those of my readers. Along the way, I will gesture in the footnotes to various writers whose first–personal descriptions of awe inform or support the points being made.

1. Awe in recent psychology

The field of psychology has recently taken up the topic of awe in earnest and shed light on its characteristic features. In an early influential study, Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt show that experiences of awe tend to consist of two core components: perceptual "vastness" and a felt "need for accommodation" (Keltner and Haidt 2003, pp. 303–304). In other words, they demonstrate that awe occurs as something like a response to an excess of perceptual content that resists full cognitive account.

It is now commonly held that a key feature in experiences of awe is a diminished or "small" sense of self. As one group of researchers explains this, awe characteristically has the effect of "broadening the individual's perspective to include entities vaster and more powerful than oneself and diminishing the salience of the individual," which, they show, has a tendency to generate "prosocial" effects (Piff *et al.* 2015, pp. 895–896). As such a conclusion indicates, awe has considerable potential moral impact, which has become a prominent area of research. One team of researchers, for example, shows that awe often has the effect of cultivating humility by "shift[ing] self–perception in the opposite direction [than something like pride], causing an individual to fully appreciate the value of others and see themselves more accurately" (Stellar *et al.* 2018, p. 266). On a similar note, others have shown that experiences of awe quite often include a "relational component" that can generate a sense of interconnectedness with others (Liu *et al.* 2023, pp. 2, 8–9).

In his recent survey of this literature, Keltner writes that in experiences of awe the sense of "small self" is bound up with a "boundary–dissolving sense of being part of something much larger" (Keltner 2023, p. 31). He concludes that "the substance and structure of awe's epiphany," what he calls "its big idea," is that "awe locates us in forces

larger than ourselves" and thereby "integrates us into the systems of life — communities, collectives, the natural environment, and forms of culture" (Keltner 2023, pp. 243, 249). Keltner argues that awe is therefore evolutionarily beneficial for helping to raise awareness about the way persons are interrelated with and dependent upon natural, physical, cultural, and social systems, which proves to be helpful for navigating, sustaining, and relating well to them (Keltner 2023, p. 248).

This rather brief overview of the psychological literature on awe, incomplete though it is, evinces three things. First, there seems to be broad agreement that awe involves experiences of perceptual vastness, the need for accommodation, and a "small" self. Second, there is considerable evidence that experiences of awe lead to increasing awareness of the self's connectedness to others and/or its locatedness within a broad context. Third, psychological research maintains methodological commitment to a functionalist account of awe, meaning that its significance is foremost a matter of its impact on or the role it serves for those experiencing it.

2. Awe in recent philosophy

The topic of awe has long been of interest to philosophers, along with related notions like the sublime[(8)]. I discern that the most generative subfields or traditions of philosophy to bring into dialogue on our topic are cognitive science and phenomenology. Philosophy of cognitive science is apt for taking the brain and behavioral sciences among its primary interlocutors and connecting empirical insights with philosophical reflection. Phenomenology, a tradition of philosophy committed to capturing the richness of perception, is relevant for plumbing so decidedly an experiential topic. Given the limitations of space, I will engage one figure from each of these subfields, respectively.

Helen De Cruz's book, *Wonderstruck: How Wonder and Awe Shape the Way We Think*, astutely brings the psychological research on awe

(8) Andrzej Karpinski provides a comparison of Immanuel Kant's account of the sublime and Jean–Luc Marion's account of the saturated phenomenon, the latter of which I consider below (Karpinski 2022). On this comparison, see also Desmond 2020, pp. 209–211.

into conversation with some prominent figures and themes within and beyond Western philosophy. De Cruz contends that awe and its companion, wonder, are "epistemic" and "self–transcendent" emotions that "motivate us to explore our environment and learn more about it" by "help[ing] us move away from a focus on ourselves and our own concerns" (De Cruz 2024, pp. 5–6). Her overall argument is that "awe and wonder are emotions that we harness by means of cultural practices, that we nurture deliberately, and that are part of a positive feedback loop. Because we feel awe and wonder, we come up with ideas and inventions in the sciences, arts, and other domains of human cultures. Those ideas in turn become objects of awe and wonder, and push us to ever further heights" (De Cruz 2024, p. 12). De Cruz convincingly explains how these emotions contribute to the expansion of human knowledge by following this recursive pattern.

Informed by evolutionary biology, De Cruz maintains that "the function of emotions is to help organisms thrive, flourish, take care of their offspring, and avoid situations that cause them injury or death" (De Cruz 2024, p. 48). Although she supplements this biological picture with a socio–cultural dimension, she nevertheless settles on a functionalist account of emotions. So following, De Cruz ultimately construes awe and wonder as "cognitive technologies" that "allow us to control ourselves and our environment, by changing how our mind engages with the world" as well as "our frame of reference" (De Cruz 2024, pp. 15, 115).

De Cruz insightfully demonstrates this by tracing how awe and wonder show up in the writings of Rachel Carson. De Cruz draws out the idea in Carson's work that awe and wonder at the natural world involve a "recognition of something beyond the boundaries of human existence," and that "[t]hose who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts" (Carson 1965, p. 98, quoted in De Cruz 2024, p. 163). According to Carson, awe and wonder motivate responses of conservation and preservation and stand at odds with contrary impulses, which she identifies with a "lust for destruction" (Carson 1999, p. 163, quoted in De Cruz 2024, p. 163). De Cruz reads Carson as making the case that awe and wonder enable persons to become "properly attentive to the intrinsic value of

natural beauty," which is transformative for leading to the cultivation of corresponding moral virtue (De Cruz 2024, p. 164)[9].

Building off these ideas, De Cruz argues that awe and wonder — albeit in some tension with her functionalist framing — are "non–utilitarian emotions" that "help us to see things not as means to economic or other ends, but as valuable in themselves" (De Cruz 2024, pp. 169–170)[10]. In the spirit of Carson, De Cruz writes, without saying much more about where this sense of value comes from, that "[n]ature is worth wondering at [and, ostensibly, worth being in awe about], and by engaging earnestly with its diversity of life forms, we can become more aware of their intrinsic worth" (De Cruz 2024, p. 171). I find the connection De Cruz identifies between awe and intrinsic value an important one, but I am interested in an explanation for it. The account of awe that I pursue below, which includes its relation to value, will also contrast with De Cruz's mostly functionalist account.

Jean–Luc Marion is a notable figure in contemporary phenomenology and is especially relevant for his account of a distinct form of experience that has considerable overlap with awe. Much of his work, including what is relevant to our topic, is developed in dialogue with and as a response to Immanuel Kant's influential philosophical framework.

On Marion's explanation, Kant argues that the subject (the "I" of first–person experience) is transcendental for providing and/or deploying the necessary conditions for knowledge. As Marion presents it, according to this transcendental scheme such conditions not only structure what is known in a given instance but also they determine what *can* be known. This extends even to experience more broadly, the contents of which, like knowledge, depend for their appearance before the subject's awareness upon the satisfaction of certain formal conditions set by reason (Marion 2008b, pp. 19–20). Ultimately, Marion sees this leading to an aporia: "the possibility of appearing never belongs to what appears" (Marion 2008b, p. 21). In other words, we are left in

(9) De Cruz is here drawing on the reading of Carson offered by Kathleen Dean Moore (Moore 2005).

(10) Similarly, Bugbee writes, "Things exist in their own right; it is a lesson that escapes us except as they hold us in awe" (Bugbee 1999, p. 164). There is some explanatory distance between something existing in its own right and it having value, but De Cruz's interest in this point seems to be largely descriptive.

the unsettling position where the very *possibility* of some objects appearing before a subject's conscious awareness is determined ahead of time by certain formal conditions independent of the objects themselves. At this conclusion, the status of objects *as such* is radically undermined.

According to Marion, the tradition of phenomenology is able to overcome such constraints by turning exclusively to the contents of experience (referred to as phenomena) themselves. Revealing the full implications and guiding aspiration of this turn is what Marion calls the *saturated phenomenon*, which refers to a form of experience that defies any aforementioned transcendental conditions by "exceed[ing] all categories and the principles of understanding" (Marion 2008b, p. 34). In such an experience, he explains, the self is confronted with its own conceptual limitations in its inability to account for what overwhelms its knowledge and awareness (Marion 2008b, p. 44)[11]. Along with this being a presumably relatable experience, albeit paradoxical on a scheme of transcendental subjectivity as Marion identifies, we can see considerable resonance with what has been described as the experience of perceptual vastness and the accompanying felt need for accommodation[12].

In his book, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, Marion pursues the saturated phenomenon as a paradigm for revealing how to understand the contents of experience. The details of his argument are quite technical, but its core ideas can be summarized for our purposes. For Marion, the saturated phenomenon leads us to conceive of the contents of experience most fundamentally as *given*, a term that appeals to allowing an object of perception "its right and its power to show *itself* on its own terms" (Marion, 2002, p. 19, emphasis original). This is the radical ideal Marion locates at the core of the phenomenological tradition that the saturated phenomenon demands: the possibility of transcendentally impossible experiences; that is, the possibility for objects of experience to appear entirely on their own terms, without imposed, preemptive constraint by the experiencing subject.

(11) In his essay "Walking," Henry David Thoreau describes the experience of "a novel and grand surprise on a sudden revelation of the insufficiency of all that we called Knowledge before" (Thoreau 2012, p. 583).

(12) Marion (in translation) uses terms like "amazement" and "bedazzlement" to describe the experience of the saturated phenomenon. (Marion 2008b, pp. 35, 36).

Marking a decisive break with a core feature of Kant's transcendental philosophy, this entails an inversion of the subject's priority over its object(s)[13]. As a result of this inversion, Marion argues that the self is shown to be most accurately not "subject" but rather "the gifted," that is, the recipient of what is given, not only for being that which receives its object(s) of perception but, moreover, for coming to see it is precisely in such receiving that selfhood takes shape[14]. "Far from being able to constitute this," he writes about the saturated phenomenon, "the *I* experiences itself as constituted by it. […] The *I* loses its anteriority and finds itself, so to speak, deprived of the duties of constitution, and is thus itself constituted" (Marion 2008b, p. 44, emphasis original). In phenomenological terms, Marion argues that the saturated phenomenon reveals an inversion of intentionality's priority over intuition, a move that not only inverts the priority of subject over object but that ultimately results in understanding the self — *à la* Emmanuel Levinas and Jean–Louis Chrétien — as that which responds, as that which is constituted by response, to what it receives (a "call") from what is other (Marion 2002, pp. 282–290).

Two ideas from Marion's work are especially relevant to our discussion. First is the notion of givenness, which refers to an encounter with objects of perception exceeding the self's full knowledge and awareness on non–self–derived terms. Second is the line of reasoning whereby the self is understood to be *that which receives* its objects of perception, and even itself. I will return to these below and identify points of similarity and difference with my own perspective. However, I first want to draw out an important point of contrast between Marion's view and mine.

Our differences boil down to the matter of fidelity to the formal tradition of phenomenology and its location downstream from the

(13) Marion: "Kant's determination of the transcendental I was and still is, even in its aporias, the counter–model of the gifted" (Marion 2002, p. 278).

(14) Something like the awareness of oneself as recipient is evident in Helen Macdonald's description of awe as involving those "times in which the world stutters, turns and fills with unexpected meaning. When rapturousness claims a moment and transfigures it[…] the pattern of hailstones by my feet upon dark earth; a certain cast of light across a hillside through a break in the clouds; the face of a long–eared owl peering out at me from a hawthorn bush – things whose fugitive instances give me an overwhelming sense of how unlikely it is that in the days of my brief life I should be in the right place at the right time and possess sufficient quality of attention to see them all" (Macdonald 2020, pp. 286–287).

broadly Kantian framework noted above. Marion is a thoroughgoing phenomenologist, having pushed and developed the tradition from within. That is a critical point because of the methodological commitments (i.e., via the "phenomenological reduction") that determine his framing of the contents of experience in terms of phenomenality, and thus always and only as or how things appear (present or give themselves) to an experiencing subject or self. Even though he moves to invert the noted priority of the Kantian "I" and traces the wide–ranging effects of doing so, proceeding from so resolutely *within* the frame of transcendental subjectivity leaves him (by my lights) overly constrained regarding what can and should be said about the self, "the world" and its objects, and relations among them. Otherwise put, I have doubts about whether Marion's approach is able to finally escape the orbit of the transcendental subject(15). The major worry here concerns the residue of the dualism between mind and world that the Kantian perspective posits and Marion unsettles(16). Rather than pursuing a way in and through the Kantian transcendental framework, hewing so closely to the domain of (and conditions for) subjectivity, my own view locates the self more firmly *in* the world and, although less salient for present purposes, constitutively related to others.

3. Reconsidering awe in a metaphysical register

I now turn to consider awe as a potential source of insight about what lies beyond the self. Drawing on select thinkers who approach these matters metaphysically, I will elaborate on my suggestion that experiences of awe disclose the givenness, abundance, and intrinsic value of awe objects and, moreover, of *existence itself*. In so doing, my task is to draw out and give voice to at least part of what is often unarticulated

(15) William Desmond raises a version of this concern about Marion's position, tracing the difference between them to his following a Hegelian rather than Kantian trajectory (Desmond 2020, pp. 199–203).

(16) This dualism takes on several forms: phenomenal/noumenal, rational/empirical, subjective/objective, gifted/given. It is almost as if Marion is concerned not so much with there being a strong dualism but rather with its priority; genuine alterity, he might be taken to suggest, requires its inversion rather than its dissolution.

but intuitively present in experiences of awe, which, I intend to show, is supported by an array of interrelated reasons. I wager that speculative considerations of the sort presented here are not only potentially insightful, albeit neither fully conclusive nor exclusive, but also that they are required to adequately honor the experience of awe itself.

First, to the matter of givenness, about which Abraham Joshua Heschel's descriptions of and reflections on awe are instructive. Heschel describes awe as an encounter with "grandeur" that arrives with a "compulsion to pay attention to that which lies beyond our grasp" (Heschel 1951, pp. 3, 4)[17]. He writes that such "radical amazement" involves "the state of maladjustment to words and notions" and further to being "amazed at seeing anything at all; amazed not only at particular values and things but *at the unexpectedness of being as such*, at the fact that there is being at all" (Heschel 1951, pp. 11, 12, emphasis original). Resonant with numerous comments above, awe, for Heschel, involves coming into contact with awe objects on profoundly non–self–referential terms, writing that in such instances "[w]hat we perceive is objective in the sense of being independent of and corresponding to our perception," which "we do not create" but "encounter" (Heschel 1951, p. 20).

Notable in Heschel's description is the connection between awe and attention. He identifies a point numerous writers have noted, that the experience of awe is *attention grabbing*, that it takes hold of one's awareness seemingly without or even against one's intention[18]. Awe dawns as a surprise, as a sudden overtaking of one's awareness. This relates to the characteristic receptivity prompted by awe, experiences of which are best described as *happening to* persons.

I especially want to consider the aspect of awe that, on Heschel's account, has us "amazed at seeing [...] particular values and things" relating to a sense of surprise or "unexpectedness" about their very existence. He suggests that awe has us look not simply (or even much at all) with more acuity at awe objects but, moreover, that the experience

(17) Heschel clarifies that he means more by this than the mere constraints of language: "What smites us with unquenchable amazement is not that which we grasp and are able to convey but that which lies within our reach but beyond our grasp" (Heschel 1951, pp. 4–5).

(18) For example, Macdonald writes of awe involving experiences "in which my attention has unaccountably snagged" (Macdonald 2020, p. 287).

brings to our awareness as remarkable their very being[19]. To elaborate this in a parallel idiom, we might say that experiences of awe involve confrontation with what reason and the subject cannot get behind: the very *being* of awe objects[20]. As an addition or additional dimension to the felt "need for accommodation" that characteristically accompanies its experience, I submit that a key feature — perhaps, we might say, the very texture — of awe is an encounter with some object(s) *as given*. There is overlap between my use of givenness and Marion's, but I want to nuance its meaning. Along with referencing their *being* (rather than their "appearance," on which the anti–metaphysician Marion insists) as not traceable to and fully knowable by the self, I also incorporate Heschel's point that such an awareness of the inexplicable *being there* of awe objects gives rise to increasing alertness to the surprise of *being itself*. That is, Heschel suggests awe has us become alert to the very existence of awe objects, which gives rise to a sudden and perhaps jarring alertness to there being *anything at all*.

This connection between awareness of the being of awe objects and *being itself* is an important and recurring theme in depictions of awe, which we see explicitly when Heschel writes that the amazement at "particular values and things" evoked by awe often leads to a sense of surprise "that there is being at all" (Heschel 1951, p. 12)[21]. Experiences

(19) In what appears to be both an ontological and biological sense, Dillard remarks, after so diligently observing the whims of muskrats, that, "The great hurrah about wild animals is that they exist at all" (Dillard 1998, p. 195).

(20) Similarly, Marion argues, "any phenomenon is without *why*, since any phenomenon is as it gives itself" (Marion 2008a, p. 5, emphasis original). He and I are running parallel on this point, although we mean something different by the term "being." What I am referring to here is more robust than but has overlap with what De Cruz calls "a sense of firstness" that often accompanies awe (De Cruz 2024, p. 19).

(21) To give one example, in Thoreau's account of his ascent of Mount Katahdin he writes about an experience of awe he had as he came upon a sudden clearing. On his description, the experience involved not just particular awe objects (such as particular plants and trees) but also reflective confrontation with what he calls "matter" itself, which brought him to a state of astonishment about very fact of existence and his own participation in it: "We walked over it with a certain awe, stopping, from time to time, to pick the blueberries which grew there, and had a smart and spicy taste […] I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become so strange to me. I fear not spirits, ghosts, of which I am one, — *that* my body might, — but I fear bodies, I tremble to meet them. What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature, — daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, — rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! The *common sense! Contact! Contact! Who* are we? *where* are we?" (Thoreau 2012, p. 61, emphasis original).

of awe have a tendency to raise the lights, as it were, on *being itself*, in which individual awe objects participate. In other words, a notable feature of the experience of awe is that the typically indirect and tacit cognizance of being itself — including awareness of the otherwise seemingly banal fact that there is anything at all — is brought increasingly into direct awareness.

Heschel's comments suggest that in an experience of awe being itself comes into awareness in a particular way as captured by what Gabriel Marcel calls *mystery*. Marcel refers to *being* as a mystery because no critical distance from it can be achieved, because it cannot be rendered an object before a knowing subject, since the self both necessarily presupposes and is irrevocably bound up with it (Marcel 1956, pp. 18–22). Here we have an ontological correlate to a central theme in the psychological literature, what Keltner calls awe's "big idea," pertaining to the self being located within a larger context of life. From one angle, this may seem like another banal claim — that a self is revealed to be a part of "the world" — but it is something transcendental frameworks tend to obscure. Being–as–mystery amounts to a non–dualistic understanding that is metaphysical in ways De Cruz and Marion seem to avoid or resist.

Second, to the matter of abundance, which is an elaboration on givenness. This is a point that appears in the work of nearly every voice engaged here and refers to the "objective" pole of what is experienced as perceptual vastness and the felt need for accommodation[22]. As a result, my comments will be brief.

The core idea here is to resist reducing the experience of vastness to purely subjective veracity. There is less a case to be made for this than there is an appeal to sit longer with what experiences of awe tend to offer: encounters with awe objects and being itself as manifestly profuse. One pathway that I find particularly compelling for resonating most thoroughly with its experience is that awe reveals not merely that

(22) Dillard gestures to abundance and givenness in her account of a moment of rapture when hiking as she was overwhelmed by the plenitude she encountered: "A great tall cloud moved elegantly across an invisible walkway in the upper air, sliding on its flat foot like an enormous proud snail. I smelled silt on the wind, turkey, laundry, leaves[…] my God what a world. There is no accounting for one second of it" (Dillard 1998, pp. 266–267). I am reminded, too, of her remark about the stunning "profligacy" of the natural world (Dillard 1998, p. 66).

there is more to objects and being itself than anyone can know but rather that every being, in the becoming of its co–implicated particularity, and being itself, in its apparently inexhaustible particularizing, are infinitely abundant[23].

Third, to the matter of value. Rephrasing an earlier point, encountering awe objects as given tends to involve, as if by relief, a felt confrontation with the ontological counterfactual possibility of their not having been. This is surely what is involved in Heschel's being "amazed" at their very existence, not an awareness of the possibility that awe objects could have turned out differently but rather a brush with the thought of their not having existed at all.

In this way, awe has a tendency to draw awareness to the very being of awe objects and, as noted, to being itself. William Desmond shows how this connects to the matter of value[24]. He suggests that what gives rise to that fundamental question about the givenness of being, the question of why there is something rather than nothing, is not only an articulated perplexity about origins but also a certain sort of acknowledgement corresponding to the very *thatness* of being itself (Desmond 1995, pp. 227–232). Desmond remarks that the sheer presence of things conveys what he calls "aesthetic value," akin to a work of art, that speaks to "the worth of the thereness, as given in its sensuous manifestness" (Desmond 1995, p. 513). We saw De Cruz describe something like this sense of intrinsic value above, but Desmond charts a metaphysical explanation for it.

Desmond proposes the *thatness and thereness* of things exudes a sense of value arising from implicit contrast to the possibility of their absence. In other words, he suggests that the aforementioned counterfactual (the passing consideration of some awe object(s) not existing at all) conveys an approbative intimation: as given, the existence of something, of anything, is an assertion, an insistence or manifestation,

(23) This is one of the most significant commitments of William Desmond's metaphysics (Desmond 1995).

(24) We see this movement from the particular to the global and, furthermore, connecting to the matter of value in an awe experience described by Aimee Nezhukumatathil. For her, this arose amid studious attending to non–human animals in their rich variety, which moved her to a state of "cherishing this magnificent and wonderous planet" (Nezhukumatathil 2020, p. 160).

of being over its absence, of something over nothing[25]. Desmond identifies this as an *elemental affirmation* of existence, and thus of what exists, in virtue of its very manifestness. Heschel makes a similar claim, referring to a sense of "transcendent *preciousness*" with which he finds the world "resplendent" (Heschel 1951, p. 29, emphasis original). Such elemental affirmation, itself a sense of value, is only heightened given the abundance of things that arrives independent of the self. In short, the experience of awe discloses the being of awe objects and being itself as gratuitous in both meanings of the term — unmerited or unwarranted (given) and excessive (abundant) — and, as such, intrinsically valuable in an elemental sense (Desmond 1995, pp. 512–514)[26].

4. Conclusion

In light of the above reflections, I now turn to some concerns pertaining to the diminishing sense of self that characteristically accompanies experiences of awe. One concern is how this might have the effect of minimizing the status or value of *the particular*. Keltner praises the way that awe can encourage persons "to sacrifice, share, put aside self–interest in favor of the interests of others," and he makes an approving reference to utilitarian ethicist Peter Singer along the way (Keltner 2023, p. 40). Yet, I do not see him adequately acknowledging or addressing the potential this might have for encouraging crass consequentialism by submitting the worth of individuals to simple quantitative reasoning, or for inviting reductive collectivism by so minimizing the significance

(25) Dillard identifies something like this rising to awareness in her experiences when referring to "the something that exists over against nothing" (Dillard 1998, p. 132).

(26) Something like a sense of elemental valuation is evident in Anne Carolyn Klein's account of an experience of awe she had near Patras, which she reports evoking a sense of appreciation or "love" for all that is: "I walked slowly along the quay with my friend, not talking, letting my senses melt into blue vistas as far as the eye could see, the golden sun lying low, sky and water shining everywhere, feeling an intimate part of this expansive display and filled with a simple love for all of it" (Klein 2023, p. 7). He does not explain it in the same way that I (via Desmond) have, but Bugbee also draws a connection between givenness and value (Bugbee 1999, p. 155).

of the individual in the pursuit of some larger purpose[27]. This also pertains to the potential weaponization of awe[28].

A second concern pertains to how experiences of awe might be existentially unsettling for diminishing the significance of the self in the face of broad forces that outstretch its power, and to which the self is exposed and vulnerable[29]. More pointedly, awe might be taken to reveal the self under threat of annihilation by indifferent if not malevolent forces. Variations of this view are evident in a number of existentialist writers who conceive of the self as emerging from constitutive conflict with what threatens its dissolution (Rubenstein 2008, pp. 25–97).

I take these concerns to track plausible interpretations or implications of awe, although the experience affords resources for resisting their conclusions. Regarding the first, and without dismissing a need for tradeoffs in moral reasoning, acknowledgement of the intrinsic value belonging to objects and others in their abundant particularity stoutly resists crass consequentialist reasoning and the slide into reductive and homogenizing collectivism. As to the second, the road to existential angst is paved by forgetfulness about the givenness of being, the being of oneself and every other; accordingly, the self does not emerge from dramatic struggle against violent totality (which is not to deny its threat) or in defiance of the abyss but rather as the recipient of valuable, gratuitous donation. And this, I submit, without evading the fragility and finitude belonging to it[30]. If I am right that givenness, abundance, and intrinsic value are authentically conveyed in experiences of awe, then what I am suggesting is not an imposition of artificial features onto its experience but rather a call to become increasingly attuned to and mindful of all that is present in it.

(27) Keltner does point to evidence that awe can encourage or increase critical thinking and self–reflection, but I discern that a person could endorse crass consequentialism (if not also reductive collectivism) in a thoroughly reasonable way (i.e., Keltner 2023, p. 135). What adequately interrupts an end–means justification is not critical reason but abundance and value.

(28) Consider, for instance, the U.S. military campaign of "Shock and Awe" (Rubenstein 2008, pp. 187–188).

(29) I note in passing obvious resonance with Rudolf Otto's account of the numinous as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (Otto 1950).

(30) See Desmond 2020, pp. 205–207. Awe is not only or always a genial, calm, or non–threatening experience. For example, Dillard remarks on the "violence" and "horrors" that were often part of her experiences of awe relating to the natural world (i.e., Dillard 1998, pp. 10, 64–66). As Dillard's writing also suggests, this does not necessarily contradict any of my claims above.

The radical implication of my claim about awe as a source of metaphysical insight is that its disclosures should root and inform whatever view of the world we construct. For an exemplary model of this, I point to Desmond's work, which builds on Plato's suggestion that philosophy begins in astonishment and is built around a conception of being entirely in line with what I have proposed are awe's disclosures (Desmond 1995)[31].

At the start, I claimed that experiences of awe cast the self in a state of receptivity, but we have left to fully consider this from the "objective" side, which extends even to the givenness of the self. I am referring to the metaphysical dimension of something we saw Marion claim, that in an experience of awe the self comes to grasp also its *own* being as given. Perhaps awe's most essential disclosure is that *to be* a self (or anything else) is to be a recipient in a truly global sense; it is *to be* on the receiving end, attunement to which ought to inform the morally significant work of cultivating patience before and openness to the valuable, abundant givenness of oneself, others, and *all that is*[32].

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(31) Relatedly, Bugbee identifies something like awe as that toward which philosophy should be oriented (Bugbee 1999, p. 154).

(32) Desmond makes a case along these lines for what he calls "metaphysical patience" and "*passio essendi*" (Desmond 1995, pp. 454–455; Desmond 2020, pp. 202–203).

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CELEBRATING THE DURGA PUJA HINDU FESTIVAL OF INDIA, VIA DIGITAL APPLICATIONS

Arkaprava Chattopadhyay

Abstract: Home to a plethora of religious customs and beliefs, "deity worship" is an integral part of the everyday life of Indian Hindus. Apart from temples serving as spaces for regular prayer, various festivals are also celebrated over an annual ritualistic itinerary providing an underlying foundation that reflects the socio–religious and cultural tapestry of the region. The Durga Puja of Bengal, India, is one such festival that has been celebrated by millions of people for centuries. But then, as the global pandemic of 2020 led to such gatherings being temporarily halted to avoid large crowds, specific digital alternatives were initiated that allowed the devotees to manoeuvre around the physical restrictions enforced and yet fulfil their religious needs. Achieved through a confluence of digital innovations ranging from VFX–based and virtual reality–based religious applications to virtual congregations and live streaming — the technologies utilized genuinely contributed to an alternative form of digital worship. A digitalisation, secularisation and overall universalisation of the religious festival itself was also effectuated via these. Furthermore, although initially due to necessity in 2020 owing to the pandemic, these went on to become an integral part of the Durga Puja festival even over the consequent years of normalcy. Employing a mixed method approach combining traditional ethnography, digital ethnography and social semiotics to focus on the emergence, utilization and the subsequent religious negotiations caused by these digital innovations — the study reveals the hermeneutic symbiosis between traditional Hindu practices and digital technology, also attending to the commodification of such festivals. Moreover, in light of the gaining popularity of the newly achieved technology propelled dimensions, the oppositional conflict arising out of the diminishing perceptions for these innovations amongst the community of Hindu priests was also revealed through this study.

Culla di una pluralità di usanze e credenze religiose, l'"adorazione delle divinità" rappresenta una componente imprescindibile della vita quotidiana degli induisti in India. Oltre ai templi, che fungono da luoghi di preghiera regolare, numerosi

festival vengono celebrati secondo un itinerario rituale annuale che ne costituisce un fondamento sottostante e riflette l'intreccio socio-religioso e culturale della regione. Il Durga Puja del Bengala, in India, è uno di questi festival, celebrato da milioni di persone da secoli. Tuttavia, con l'avvento della pandemia globale del 2020, tali raduni furono temporaneamente sospesi per evitare assembramenti, e furono avviate specifiche alternative digitali che consentissero ai fedeli di aggirare le restrizioni fisiche imposte e soddisfare comunque i propri bisogni religiosi. Ciò fu reso possibile grazie a un insieme di innovazioni digitali che spaziano da applicazioni religiose basate sulla realtà virtuale e sugli effetti speciali (VFX) a congregazioni virtuali e trasmissioni in diretta — tecnologie che contribuirono effettivamente a una forma alternativa di culto digitale. Tali innovazioni resero possibile una digitalizzazione, secolarizzazione e, in una certa misura, una universalizzazione del festival religioso stesso. Inoltre, sebbene nate per necessità nel 2020 in risposta alla pandemia, esse sono diventate parte integrante del festival del Durga Puja anche negli anni successivi, segnati da un ritorno alla normalità. Adottando un approccio metodologico misto, che combina etnografia tradizionale, etnografia digitale e semiotica sociale per analizzare l'emergere, l'utilizzo e le negoziazioni religiose scaturite da queste innovazioni digitali, lo studio mette in luce la simbiosi ermeneutica tra pratiche induiste tradizionali e tecnologia digitale, prestando altresì attenzione alla mercificazione di tali festività. Inoltre, alla luce della crescente popolarità delle nuove dimensioni tecnologiche raggiunte, lo studio rivela anche il conflitto oppositivo sorto a causa della percezione decrescente di tali innovazioni all'interno della comunità dei sacerdoti induisti.

Keywords: Hinduism, Digital Religion, Durga Puja, Ethnosemiotics, Mediatization

Parole chiave: Induismo, Religione digitale, Durga Puja, Etnosemiotica, Mediatizzazione

1. Introduction

India is an ancient land where spirituality is an integral part of daily life and living. Home to a diverse population, the people follow Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Jainism and various animistic faiths in localized cultural settings. The majority though (966 million people of the country; 79.8% of the overall population) follow Hinduism (Census 2011). To effectuate an inclusive proselytization, mainstream Hinduism accommodated many of the regional folk–religion practices within its framework over time, resulting in thousands of regional Gods and Goddesses and their associated narratives being further included

within the diverse Hindu pantheon and its ever–expanding mythology. Worshipped to derive a sense of spiritual contentment and catharsis across communities, apart from individual prayer, congregations and pilgrimage, thousands of ritualistic festivals have been ensured to transcend generations. In the context of the mass worship in India though, the most popular deities of Hinduism are *Shiva* (with devotees across India), *Vishnu* and his avatars *Ram* and *Krishna* (with devotees concentrated in the north and some regions of the south), *Durga* (mostly revered in the states of Bengal and Assam), *Ganesha* (most revered in the state of Maharashtra), and *Surya* (the Sun god mostly worshipped in the states of Bihar and Odisha). The narratives of all these deities are intertwined though, in Hindu mythology.

Enshrined by the underlying philosophy institutionalized within the *Vedas*, most of the mainstream Hindu rituals have preserved the aspects of their orthodox framework and structure, hardly evolving over time, accommodating certain localized socio–cultural contexts and the additional folklore of local deities in some cases though. But all in all, conditioning the devotees to develop a sacred space in their minds, the rituals are celebrated across all age groups and act as social bridges within the communities. Weaved into the mechanism of life and living for thousands of years, Hindu rituals are of various types. The most significant amongst these are *Samskaras*, which are associated with life events such as birth, death etc., *Pujas*, which are associated with congregations, worship and prayer, *Yajnas* and *Homas*, which are associated with fire and sacrifices aimed at divine appeasement, wish–fulfilment, etc., and *Yatras*, which are associated with spiritual travel to sacred temples. Resonating with Durkheim's (1912) concept of religion as a social phenomenon facilitating the attainment of emotional security, these rituals also play a vital role in explaining the *Vedas* in the prescribed context.

Although spread out all throughout the year, the month of October marks the beginning of the festive season celebrating religious rituals such as the "Durga Puja", "Navratri", "Dussera", amongst others. This study focusses on the Durga Puja ritualistic festival of the Indian state of West Bengal. The Durga Puja is in celebration of *Durga*; the mother Goddess who as per mythology, slays *Asura*; the king of the demons, thus re–affirming the symbolic victory of good over evil. An epitome

of women's empowerment, it is an essential ritual that requires a sequence of events to be fulfilled, including large congregations. Apart from the celebrations in communion (*dhunuchi naanch*, *sindur khela*, amongst others), the religious sequence of the *anjali*, *sandhya arati*, and *sandhi pujo* are also attended in large numbers at the makeshift venues. Celebrated over 10 days (*Mahalaya* to *Vijaya Dashami*) as per the lunar calendar (*panjika*) in the month of *Ashvin* (Sept–Oct), the sixth to tenth day is most auspicious and was held from 22nd Oct (*Shasthi*) to 26th Oct (*Dashami*), in the year 2020. Just like every year, approximately 34,000 theme–based "*pandals*" (makeshift venues that house the deities) were built in the state of West Bengal alone. As newspaper reports suggest, more than 10 million people visited such makeshift pandals in Kolkata in 2018, thus re–affirming it to be one of the largest festivals of the world (news18.com 2020; amongst others). It is also a large economic event yearly. As Niyogi (2021) reports, a joint study by British Council, IIT Kharagpur and UK's Queen Mary University estimated it at Rs 32377 crores (4.5 billion USD) in 2019. With increased spending on categories such as gold, apparel, travel and gifts, transactions across industries such as retail (3.25 billion USD), art and decoration (101.03 million USD), idol–making (32.89 million USD), illumination (24.08 million USD), literature and publishing (31.72 million USD), crafts and design (234,900 USD), films and entertainment (6.58 million USD), sponsorship (37.36 million USD), food and beverage (335.2 million USD), and advertising (59.2 million USD), were considerably amplified.

The Durga Puja of the year '2020' was specifically selected for this study because the Calcutta High court passed an order in that year directing the Government to ensure that all the Durga Puja *pandals* in West Bengal be restricted as no–entry zones for devotees due to the Covid–19 pandemic; only to be accessed by the organizers and the priests. Applying to all the 34,000 *pandals* that had already been constructed in the state before the order was passed, these were all to be barricaded. The court order was in response to a petition in public interest filed by advocate Sabyasachi Chatterjee to stop Durga Puja celebrations in West Bengal to avoid the spread of the Covid–19 owing to large crowds. The State Government appealed against the order but to

no avail. The devotees' reactions to the High court order was one of utter dismay. In fact, the State Government challenging the court's decision was an indication of its intent to cater to the public sentiments which were intertwined with their faith. As many believed that it was the Goddess herself who would deliver them from evil, which in this case was perceived as the Corona virus — many perceived the court order as a deterrent to this salvation. Thus, as the religious sentiments and faith of millions of people had to be negotiated with, it is striking to note that various digital innovations emerged through the social shaping of media technology that enabled the people to abide by the restrictions and yet achieve their religious goals.

Deriving a theoretical framework based on the works of Zeiler (2020) and Mukherjee (2022) in regards to digital Hinduism; Campbell (2013) in regards to the social shaping of technology; Hjavard (2013) in regards to mediatization; Hepp and Couldry (2017) in regards to the mediated construction of reality, and Geertz's (1985) reference to religion as a system of symbols — the objectives of this study were to find out — which were the digital innovations that emerged? Did these allow for an alternative form of grandeur and awe via opportunities for special effects and digital enhancements? What impact did these innovations have on the devotees? How were these innovations perceived by the orthodox Hindus and the traditional community of priests? Moreover, the socio–religious negotiations and undercurrents associated with this phenomenon of confluence between Hindu religious rituals and technology, were also investigated from a broader perspective.

2. The study

To inquire into these questions (posed in the paragraph above), a mixed–method approach combining digital ethnography and traditional ethnography was adopted, also employing social semiotics to recognize the hermeneutic symbiosis between traditional Hindu culture and digital technology in the broader context. Descriptive, exploratory, inductive–iterative at the core, the study conducted was also "participatory", given the researcher's Bengali ethnicity and years of involvement in the Durga

Date	Name	Comment
22.10.2021	Amartya Chakroborty	***Sobaike janai subho bijoya***. *Waiting for the rest of the pujos. Wishing you all a very prosperous day and may Ma Durga fulfills everyone's wishes. VR 360 tour is one of the best pandal hopping pujo app I have ever seen. Every tour is so detailed.* ***Khubi shundor kore detailing kora hoyeche prottekti virtual tourke***. *Keep it up.....*
26.10.2021	Arijit Ghosh	**সবাইকে জানাই শুভ বিজয়া.. বড়দের প্রনাম ও ছোটদের ভালোবাসা জানাই।**

Table 1: A sample of Facebook comments on a post about 'Puja App'.

Puja festivals of Kolkata, since childhood. Identifying the popular digital innovations of the Durga Puja by web scraping posts and comments off the relevant trending hashtags on Facebook (most widely used in Bengal) between 22nd and 26th October, 2020 — #DurgaPujo2020, #ShubhoMahalaya, #FBDurgaPujo, #IGDurgaPujo, #DurgaPujoReel, and #PujoReelChallenge — the discourse amongst the audience was analyzed to gauge their sentiment towards these innovations. But although the digital quantification tools served as an overall indicator of which innovations had gained momentum and popularity, the analysis of the discourse proved to be incomprehensive due to the comments and interactions being predominantly in Bengali (the local language of the state), sometimes also written using phonetic English alphabets (as showcased in Table 1).

Thus, engaging as a participant observer within the discourse, interpretations pertinent to the objective of the study were derived. Identifying a purposive selection of 50 respondents amongst the commentators across all age groups in Kolkata, they were contacted

in person for in–depth interviews in regards to their experience and perception towards these innovations. Affirming a sense of "awe" towards the achieved digital grandeur, the respondents were also proud of their role in sharing and informing of these applications amongst their friends as well. In–depth interviews of key respondents such as the innovators who initiated the digital modernizations, as well as college teachers in regards to their encouragement towards students, were also undertaken.

It emerged that apart from the novel "virtual reality" and "augmented reality" based applications representing the mythological imaginaries of Hinduism, online posts in the form of "gifs" and "memes" also emerged to be popular. But then, digital innovations had already been initiated as meta–utilities in regards to the festival, over the past decade. Earlier, digital innovations such as "pandal program lists", "police helplines", "blogs", "puja based food recipe apps", "stickers", "gifs", "memes", "reels" and "selfie competitions" were gradually making consistent inroads into the digital itinerary of the people. These were popular in 2020 as well. Furthermore, post the arrival of Facebook and Instagram in India, social media was flooded with photographs of pandal visits during the festivals. But then in earlier times, although a religious ritual such as Durga Puja had an impact on the online social media landscape, it was never dependent on it in any major way. The year 2020 was very different in this regard. Triggered by the pandemic, as the gradual pace of technological diffusion was significantly accelerated, apart from emerging as necessitous support systems, the traditional ritual was considerably mediatized according to the needs of society. The new digital innovations that were initiated to cope with the challenges of the pandemic restrictions were as follows:

1. Virtual reality / 360 degree photography–based puja parikrama applications
2. Virtual congregations and live Internet broadcast
3. Live streaming cultural programs
4. Augmented reality filters
5. Durga Puja 2020–based music videos

3. Virtual reality / 360 degree photography based Puja Parikrama applications

Given that the people could not visit the makeshift *pandals* housing the sanctum sanctorum of Goddess Durga as every year, various digital applications emerged that were virtual reality based manifests of these *pandals* enabling the people to sit at home, choose from the list of the best pandals in the city of Kolkata and undergo a virtual tour (*parikrama*) in which the directional manoeuvring controls were provided to the users. This enabled them to digitally enter into the pandal, look left, right, up, down and furthermore move back and forth. The users could also zoom in and out at will. Every minute detail within the puja pandals were meticulously captured using high definition 360 degree cameras and advanced software to stitch the images. Although virtual reality based applications were already being used in others sectors such as real estate, education, amongst others, this was the first time that technology became significant for religious purposes.

It is important to note that some tech startups had already been in the business of offering VR based experiences of pandals, pilgrimage sites and temples even over the previous decade. For example, Bengaluru–based startup "Kalpnik" developed the "VR Devotee" app in January 2018. Theirs and other VR immersive and interactive experiences were part of the *Kumbh mela* of Prayag in 2019. Apart from VR applications such as "27 Mantraa" and "Morkshshil", virtual reconstructions of sacred landscapes such as the "Vishnupada virtual temple" were also gaining popularity. But then, these were all ancillaries, rather than a part of the ritualistic religious process; not serving as any integral element to the purpose. The Covid–19 based lockdown of 2020 and the resultant restrictions on a large Hindu festival such as the Durga Puja that year thus emerged as a crucible of change. A change that accommodated and transformed the role of such applications into becoming critical elements that enabled the success of the ritual itself.

During the Durga Puja of 2020, amongst the VR based services that emerged such as E–Puja, "Utsav App" and "ABP Digital", the initiatives of the "Puja App 8.0" were most successful and gained immense popularity over the five main days of the ritual. After information

Figure 1: Photograph of a "Puja App 8.0" virtual tour (*parikramas*). (thepuja.app, 2020)

about the app went viral on social media, 533,149 people used the online digital application available on their cloud based website "thepuja.app" on the five main days of the ritual between 22nd October and 26th October, 2020, amongst an user–base spread out across all ages. As the founders of the Puja App 8.0 Arpan Chatterjee and Soumadipto Mukherjee revealed, there was a five–fold increase in the user base of their application during Durga Puja 2020, up from 143,436 users over the past seven years (21.2% of the overall 676,585 users till that date). The application (the first amongst such Durga Puja VR apps) had already been launched in 2013 as a tool for non–resident Indians abroad, to enable them to virtually explore the Durga Puja festival venues in Kolkata. In the times of the pandemic, it transformed into an essential support mechanism for the residents of Kolkata itself, as well as people from other parts of world. Although predominant amongst young users in the age group between 25 years and 35 years, it was striking to note that there were also thousands of users aged above 60 years old.

4. Virtual congregations and live internet broadcast

Although the virtual reality applications provided a detailed showcase of the sanctum sanctorum, the experience was pre–recorded and somewhat superficial to many. As people used these to experience the theme, decorations, intricate details, artistic manifests and the sculpted make of the idols at the famous *pandals* in Kolkata, the local neighbourhood puja organizers adopted yet another novel digital innovation — "virtual congregations". To facilitate "live participation" in the ritualistic

sequence of the puja being conducted by the priests of the venues, virtual meet applications such as Zoom and Google Meet were popularly used across Kolkata neighbourhoods. The organizers of the pujas at each locality (puja committees) ensured that they sent the virtual meet invitations to all the people in the close knit communities (*paras*) who had contributed *chanda* (financial donation) towards the organizing fund, on each of the days. As Swapnanil Chakravarty; a senior member at the *Mukundapur Durgotsav Committee* explained, a congregation of all the people in the neighbourhood is a necessary element of the ritual. Every year, the people pray "together" as they watch the priest conduct the puja. In 2020, the meetings were hosted from the *pandals* using high quality cameras and sound equipment focussing on the ritual as it happened, and these were regularly attended virtually in large numbers. Furthermore, pujas representing larger neighbourhoods such as *Singhi Park* and *Ekdalia Evergreen* opted for daily broadcast of the entire proceedings at the pandals using Facebook Live and Youtube Live. The links to these being shared on Whatsapp went viral all across India, overwhelmingly reaching beyond their respective neighbourhoods. The puja organized by *21 Pally Ballyganj* in Kolkata received an average of 35 thousand Youtube Live views at each phase throughout the ritual. On the other hand, whereas the morning rituals of the puja organized by the *Ramakrishna Math* in Chennai received 40,000 views on YouTube, their evening time ritual received 10,000 views.

As Suman Bhattacharya, a volunteer at the *Dumdum Park Tarun Dal* puja explained, the highest footfall at the virtual congregations and live broadcasts were during the most significant and auspicious stages of the puja sequence such as the *Adhibas* (establishing the idol), *Shasthi Puja* and *Saptami Puja* (recitation of mantras), *Sandhi Puja* (invoking the warrior goddess), *Ashtami Anjali* (showering flowers and prayer) and *Sandhya Arati* (fire based ritual). Certain elements of the ritual such as *Kala Bou Snan* (bathing of Ganesha's wife) and *Bisarjan* (conclusion of the journey of the Goddess) which took place on the riverside away from the pandals, were showcased to the people using mobile phone captured videos. However, elements such as *Sindur Khela* (smearing vermillion) and *Dhunuchi Nanch* (dance holding fire vessels) had to be done away with altogether as these involved face to face mass gatherings and touch.

All in all, the VR based application allowed for solo access to the *sanctum sanctorum* invoking peace–in–solitude as well as "awe" in perceiving the manifested grandeur. Moreover, the virtual congregations allowed for the virtual celebration of togetherness with other people.

5. Live streaming cultural programs

Cultural programs have always been an integral part of the Durga Puja festival. Adjacent to every *pandal*, there are usually makeshift stages that are constructed for showcasing cultural performances every evening. As the sitting area in front of the stage served as the primary area of communion and congregation during the festival — apart from music, dance and theatrical skits performed by the residents of the neighbourhood, popular artists were also engaged on each festival day. A manifestation of the culture of Bengal, of which Goddess Durga is an integral part. In fact, whereas elders of any Hindu Bengali family consider Goddess Durga to be their daughter (married to God Shiva), for most of the younger members she serves as a mother who has returned to protect, love and bless them. In both cases, Goddess Durga is considered a Bengali woman who is appeased at the flourish of Bengali culture. During Durga Puja 2020, the cultural programs were for the first time held online. To cater to this need, there emerged various live streaming studio setups such as WooLaLa, Stalin's Jampad and 666 Grooveyard who provided indoor stage setups for live streaming performances. Apart from providing a soundproof live performance studio including a decorated stage, microphones, sound systems, lights and smoke machines where artists would come and perform — live streaming equipment such as multiple camera systems, live video switchers and software were also installed. As Abhishek Banerjee (*Saltlake AD Block Durgotsav Committee*) affirmed, there was a high demand for such premises during Durga Puja 2020. As these were rented out to the various puja committees who arranged for artists to arrive there and perform, the live streaming link was shared amongst the people of their respective neighbourhood, thus ensuring virtual cultural programs, essential to the festival.

Souvik Lahiri — a founding partner at "WooLaLa" revealed — various puja committees outsourced the entire responsibility of organizing the cultural celebration to "WooLaLa". Ensuring a diverse pool of folk artists, "Rabindrasangeet" artists, amongst other genres, the link of each performance could be sourced out to various puja organizers simultaneously, who then further disseminated these amongst their neighborhood residents. Thus, it emerged as a lucrative business model not just for the artists, but also "WooLaLa". Whilst some of the organizers preferred Zoom as the showcase platform, some resorted to streaming it out live on Facebook and Youtube, to reach out to larger audiences. As the genre of artists associated with the Durga Puja–based cultural programs are Bengal–oriented, during Durga Puja 2020, "WooLaLa" not just catered to Kolkata–based Puja organizers, but also to the Bengali diaspora in Bangalore, Chennai and even in the USA and Canada. Furthermore, as Kanad Bose — proprietor of the "666 Grooveyard" mentioned — in some cases, it were the artists themselves who hired the premises and performed via their social media pages, gratifying various puja organizers simultaneously. Overall, the digital spaces and social media being bombarded with online performances of Bengali music, dance and theatre genuinely contributed to the overall grandeur of the 2020 festival.

6. Augmented reality filters

Another digital innovation that popularly emerged amongst the people during the Durga Puja 2020 were augmented reality filters. These were applications that animated the face of the user (scanned through their mobile cameras), superimposing them into digital avatars of the divine characters associated with the festival (*Durga*, *Ganesha*, *Lakshmi*, *Saraswati*, *Kartik* and *Mahishasur*). These gained significant popularity, especially amongst the youth. Initiated by Facebook and Instagram, whereas the AR (augmented reality) effect "Durga Pujo" enabled people to shift from the *Durga* (Goddess) avatar to the *Mahishasur* (Demon) avatar with a shift of their head, the "Puja Parikrama" effect enabled people to see themselves inside a virtual Durga Puja *pandal*. The links

Figure 2: Photograph of the Durga Pujo Augmented Reality Effect. (tech.hindustantimes.com 2020)

to these were extensively shared on Whatsapp and people posting pictures of themselves in these augmented avatars were found across social media on all the five days of the ritual. Although not a critical support tool spiritually, these provided some much needed entertainment in the context of the Durga Puja, in troubled times.

7. Durga Puja 2020–based music videos

The rising popularity of the virtual reality–based puja–parikrama applications and augmented reality filters were considerably accelerated by yet another contextual digital innovation — Durga Puja 2020–based music videos. As various such expressions emerged on Facebook, the most popular amongst them was "*Ebar Pujoy Fakay Fakay*" by Kolkata based musician Anindya Chakravarti (DJ Bapon) featuring the Bengali band "Khokon Company". Reaching out to 324,000 people in those 5 festival days, the music video garnered 11,383 likes, 1,168 shares and 319 comments. Chakravarti was convinced that his music video would inspire people to adopt the new digital innovations which in turn would keep them safe at home. In fact, his initiative was financially supported by the Puja App 8.0. Laden with humour, the underlying

social message of staying at home during the Durga Pujas was portrayed through the visuals, lyrics and voiceovers. As his medium acted as a satirical deterrent against people wandering out into the pandals, the 25 year old artist expressed his satisfaction at having ensured a positive role in support of the nation's efforts against the pandemic as well as contributing to the grandeur of the Durga Puja of 2020.

8. Audience perspectives

The trending hashtags between 22nd and 26th October, 2020 — #DurgaPujo2020, #ShubhoMahalaya, #FBDurgaPujo, #IGDurgaPujo, #DurgaPujoReel, and #PujoReelChallenge — were laden with posts disseminating virtual reality–based applications, virtual congregations, live broadcasts, live streaming cultural programs, augmented reality filters and music videos. The intensive discourse between the audiences (online interactions through comments) generally showcased a positive trajectory of their sentiment towards these. As the large number of views, and likes significantly re–affirmed this trend, the in–depth interviews of 38 out of the 50 respondents (purposively selected from amongst the commentators) indicated that the users were not just satisfied using these innovations but also looked forward to using them in the forthcoming years. The rest 12 were keen on going back to the way things were and stressed upon the keyword "superficial", most often. The contentment confirmed by the 38 "satisfied" respondents was not just based on religious gratification, but also on certain common individualistic traits. Whereas keywords such "grand", "fashionable", "trendy", "tech–savvy", "innovative", and "awesome" were most frequently identified amongst respondents below 30 years of age (28 people) — keywords such as "spirituality", "innovative" and "blessing" were prominent amongst the rest (10 nos.). Apart from evident generalized keywords such as "Durga Puja" and others associated with the elements of the ritual, the keyword "virtual puja" was found to be most frequent across all age groups. The numerous "re–posts" and "shares" due to the people's acceptance of these new innovations ensured the transformation of a generalized social media environment, into a grand

sacred space where a religious ritual such as the "Durga Puja" successfully played out amidst a consciously created ambience of spirituality. A realm where the "virtual reality", "augmented reality" and "remote access" based representations were revered and venerated. Additionally, "gifs", "memes", "reels", etc. also played a significant supporting role in generating the "festive mood" backdrop. The rising popularity of these digital innovations were also acknowledged by the mainstream media (Kundu 2020; Pal 2020; amongst others) as a novel trend that helped contain the spread of the virus, thus in turn supporting the nation's battle against the Covid–19 crisis by ensuring people stay at home.

9. Ethnosemiotic observations

The digital secularisation, universalisation and mediatisation of major Hindu rituals such as the Durga Puja not just reveals the complex and evolving negotiations between tradition, culture and technology, but also the manoeuvrings between the sacred and profane. Social media platforms and Internet websites are often filled with sexual content, sleazy humour, violence and other such generic content that is significantly oppositional to the ethics of traditional culture and religion. Thus, the utilisation of such a profane space per say as an integral element of a sacred ritual ignited mixed reactions. Secularizing and universalizing the ritual by providing virtual access of the digital sacred spaces (*pandals*) to Muslims, Christians and other religious communities, the set institutional boundaries of hierarchical access (on the basis of religion, caste, etc.) were considerably breached. A giant leap in the evolution of this centuries old traditional festival, the Durga Puja of 2020 genuinely reconstructed the traditional denotation of the religious process, generating contemporary connotations that genuinely reflect the culture and societal structure of Bengal of present times. Changing meanings and extending its reach, a new kind of Durga Puja was established. Most of the devotees, embraced the technological opportunities, rather than feeling hurt over issues such as universal access and secularisation.

Presently Bengal is inhabited by a large number of migrants from the states of Rajasthan, Bihar, Odisha and Northeast India. The

centre–point of the Durga Puja festival, the state's capital Kolkata is a cosmopolitan, fraternal city that is inhabited by 4,496,694 people of various faiths and ethnicities. Apart from the 3,417,400 Hindus who are the majority, it is also home to 926,000 Muslims, 39,500 Christians; amongst others (Census 2011). A multicultural familial space ensuing cultural assimilation and relativism, the people are often seen to celebrate each other's religious festivals in addition to their own. This spirit of camaraderie and cultural relativism was genuinely reflected during the Durga Puja of 2020. However, whereas the adaptability of Hindu rituals due to the indulgence of Bengali Hindu devotees was evident, oppositional negotiations such the dismantling of the hierarchy of priests, setting aside caste contexts, providing access of the sacred space to Muslims and Christians, etc. also considerably played out. In fact, the Hindu priests and those holding Hindu institutional positions were much angered at the VR applications. As the priests' central role in the ritual were majorly diminished in the virtual manifests via these, they rebuked the authenticity, contribution and popularity of these applications, most vigorously disapproving of the universal access and secularisation that ensured. Linking the digital applications to the capitalist logic of consumption, questions of the commodification of Hinduism were also raised. However, as virtual congregations, live telecasts and live streaming of the ritual also became a part of Durga Puja 2020's digital innovation landscape, the importance of the priests' role in the religious process was somewhat reinstated, thus convincing them to accommodate the overall innovations and eventually acknowledge them.

People resort to prayer and worship when they face adversity. Religious gatherings, as the people perceived, were meant to save the people from calamities such as this. Thus, the High Court ban left them dismayed. As was revealed in various interviews with the selected respondents, even a "State" versus "God" perception had developed amongst many. But eventually over the next few days, as most people had already been affected by the raging pandemic directly or indirectly, they consciously chose to seclude themselves within the confines of their homes, despite the urge to participate in the festival and celebrate in defiance. For them, these new digital innovations arrived as a mental support. Being able to ensure most of the traditional customs

using digital platforms, there was no further excuse to move out. The social dynamics of the ritual had changed though. The collective festive ritual had been transformed into a solitary engagement via the digital apps with the contentment that Puja organizers were ensuring that the priests genuinely performed the ritualistic duties at the *pandal* venues. The people were consistently updated of this through the virtual congregations. As the people sent in their names for recommendation to the Goddess Durga (a practice called *anjali*), blessings were virtually ensured through the digital applications (Zoom and Google Meet) and live streaming platforms. Furthermore, there were other benefits as well. Even the elderly who had been missing out on their religious rituals for years to avoid large crowds, were gifted the virtual experience to their heart's delight.

10. Conclusion

The grandeur of festivals such as Durga Puja, Ganesh Chaturthi, and Diwali in cosmopolitan Indian cities not only reflect cultural continuity, but also a complex interdependence of economics, religion, and urban inequality. These rituals, deeply embedded in Hindu tradition, have grown into grand celebrations marked by extravagant decorations, large public installations, celebrity endorsements, and massive consumer spending. While invoking critical questions surrounding economies of scale and the patterns of expenditure in urban centres often grappling with unemployment and poverty, celebrations such as the Ganesh Chaturthi in Mumbai, Diwali (across India), etc., see exponential spikes in retail and e–commerce activity, pushing middle–class households into high–consumption modes (Mazzarella 2003). In Kolkata, despite the city's high employment rate, the Durga Puja economy was valued at over 4.5 billion USD yet (Niyogi 2021). With the Durga Puja's integration with digital technologies, an additional strand of consumption also took shape. Moreover, festivals demand immense energies and efforts from working–class individuals, many of whom are engaged in temporary or underpaid roles in the service of the spectacle. From electricians stringing up lights overnight to migrant workers

setting up temporary structures and making idols under hazardous conditions — the festive grandeur conceals these labour dynamics though. At the same time, the capitalist approach of such Hindu festivals significantly feeds a consumption culture that also subtly aligns itself with Hindu nationalist sentiments. Through the packaging of tradition into commodified forms, Hinduism becomes not only practiced, but increasingly consumed (Nanda 2009); the digital innovations paving a way for a future strand along these lines.

Apart from the digital innovations emerging as effective support systems to this festive ritual in 2020, enhanced surrealistic environments made via VFX, 3D photography and editing technologies also generated a sense of alternative grandeur and awe to the overall experience. An embrace that ensured that a new avatar of the festival combining religious rituals and digital media took shape. Whereas decorative grandeur has always been an integral part of Hindu temples (laden with gold and other valuables), the Durga Puja pandals would usually showcase large chandeliers and fountains as well as other artistic manifests. Utilizing opportunities for special effects and digital enhancements, the decorative spaces of the virtual *pandals* were tailored to include divine imagery in the form of rotating planets, the vastness of the universe, supernovas and various other celestial representations — sometimes placed within the mouth of a digitally depicted God Vishnu, as was described in the religious narrative of the "Bhagavad Gita" (sacred text of Hinduism). Larger–than–life representations of God Shiva (husband of Goddess Durga as per Hindu mythology) were also often included in the virtual *pandals*, with the holy river Ganga designed to flow out from the top of his head.

It is therefore evident that the credibility, heritage, and participatory nature of "rituals" are significantly enhanced when complimented by the technological spontaneity, remote access features and flexibility of the Internet based digital media. The study thus revealed that the needs of society once again shaped technology to serve its purpose. As the world healed into its post pandemic phase, it became difficult for the people to deny the efficiency of these digital innovations and return to their original ways. Thus, one can considerably speculate that these digital innovations have forever become an integral part of the overall

Durga Puja tradition altogether and shall be further developed upon in the forthcoming years. These innovations could also make their way into other such Hindu rituals and in fact already are. Initiating the digitization of traditional rituals, the era of "digital platforms" as effective conduits for Hindu religious meaning–making, has thus arrived.

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SCIENCE AND RELIGION: CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES THROUGH THE LENS OF AI–RELATED NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

Accursio Graffeo

Abstract: The song *(Give Me That) Old–Time Religion* is the guide that leads us through the texture of history — in the "Scopes Monkey Trial" — in which a high school teacher, was accused of violating the Butler Act of Tennessee, which had made it illegal to teach *darwinism* and human evolution in any state–funded school. This narrative device will allow us to become aware of how science and religion can be part of the same divisive or unifying discourse. It is properly the separation/convergence between science and religion — in the discourse about new religious movements and Artificial Intelligence (AI) — that shows how these movements can be narrative containers of reality in which science and religion seem to contaminate each other, and to generate the "religious–like" sense.

Il brano *(Give Me That) Old–Time Religion* funge da guida capace di condurre lungo il tessuto della storia — attraversando il caso giudiziario noto come "Scopes Monkey Trial" — in cui un insegnante delle scuole superiori del Tennessee venne accusato di violare il Butler Act, che aveva reso illegale l'insegnamento del *darwinismo* e dell'evoluzione umana in qualsiasi scuola finanziata dallo stato. Questo dispositivo narrativo ci permetterà di comprendere come scienza e religione possano far parte di uno stesso discorso, tanto divisivo quanto unificante. È proprio la separazione/convergenza tra scienza e religione, nel discorso relativo ai nuovi movimenti religiosi e all'intelligenza artificiale, a mostrarci come questi movimenti possano fungere da contenitori narrativi di una realtà in cui scienza e religione sembrano contaminarsi a vicenda, arrivando a generare un senso del "religioso".

Keywords: Science, Religion, AI, New religious movements, Darwinism

Parole chiave: Scienza, Religione, IA, Nuovi movimenti religiosi, Darwinismo

1. Introduction

We live in a world that may seem disenchanted, heavily influenced by scientific advancements and technological innovations, particularly in computer science. However, we should question whether this perception of disenchantment is accurate, particularly considering sociologist Peter Berger's assertion that "[m]ost of the World today is certainly not secular. It's very religious" (Berger 1997, p. 974).

Do we experience awe? Is it still a part of our lives as the response to something perceived as vast, extraordinary, or impressive? Such experience leads to feel small or insignificant compared to a larger reality, yet it also fosters a sense of connection to something greater. The sense of wonder can profoundly influence individual perspective, encouraging openness to new experiences. On the other hand, it can also provoke feelings of confusion, fear, susceptibility to manipulation or unrealistic expectations that may lead to disappointment, passivity and even isolation.

2. Methodological coordinates

An interesting area for research in religious studies lies in examining artificial intelligence (AI), science, and technology concerning their roles in the rise of new religious movements (NRMs). This field highlights the complex — often blurred — relationship between science and religion. Historically, there have been instances where science and religion have both converged and diverged; understanding these dynamics is essential to comprehend how NRMs works as narratives that reflect reality while showcasing the interaction between scientific inquiry and religious belief.

The terms "science" and "technology" could be sometimes perceived as distant, but they are actually closely linked and have many interconnections. Understanding the distinction between science and technology is significant; however, neither should be regarded as more important than the other, particularly in the realm of AI and technology–related NRMs, which often present greater complexity than

they initially appear. As will be discussed later, certain groups, such as Turing Church, tend to emphasize technological concepts, while others, such as the movement Theta Noir, integrate a broader scientific perspective with natural and traditional spiritual or religious beliefs, like animism.

It is not easy to define what "religion" is. Definitions of religion often tend to be overly restrictive, excluding what most of the people perceive as religious. In our discussion, it is essential to clarify that we will treat NMRs as spring of "narratives"; this will help us to better understand the relationship between religion and science/technology, including AI, based on various source of data. This data may include ethnographic studies, historical accounts, sci–fi influences, social media analyses, and more. By doing so, we aim to develop a sensible approach for further narratives or theorizations (Davis 2012, p. 3). Thus, this paper is organized in a narrative format to highlight the various data systems that underpin its reasoning; it covers a range of topics: music and film suggestions, historical developments in science, religious perspectives, and new storytelling approaches related to AI. This is because, as will be discussed later, "[s]cience fiction […] plays an important role in shaping our imaginaries on AI" (Singler 2025, pp. 14–15). Furthermore, religious narratives, tropes, images, and eschatological beliefs also influence our visions of AI (Singler 2025, p. 15).

3. Give me that old time religion?

Give Me That Old Time Religion is a traditional gospel song with origins tracing back to at least 1873 (Pike 1873, p. 198). It has become a prominent piece in various Protestant hymnals and has been performed by many artists over the years. The most well–known lyrics feature a repeated chorus: "Give me that old–time religion (3x) / It's good enough for me", with minor variations noted. This version was performed and recorded in 1915 under the title *The Old Time Religion* by the Tuskegee Institute Singers.

Additionally, the song appears in the film *Inherit the Wind*, at the beginning and during a welcoming parade for one of its main characters.

Released in 1960 and directed by Stanley Kramer, *Inherit the Wind* features notable American actors such as Spencer Tracy, Fredric March, and Gene Kelly. The film is based on Jerome Lawrence and Robert Edwin Lee's 1955 play of the same name (Woods 1995, pp. 3–10); both portray events from a significant moment in U.S. legal history known as the "Scopes Monkey Trial" (Larson 2020). This trial occurred in Dayton, Tennessee, in 1925 and involved teacher John Scopes challenging a law that prohibited teaching evolutionary theories (Bryan, Darrow and Scopes 1925; Tennessee Supreme Court 1927).

In their adaptations, both works alter character names and set the story in Hillsboro, located in an unspecified southern state. They adopt a parabolic structure to comment on another pivotal event in American history: McCarthyism (Linder 2017), highlighting its harmful effects on intellectual discourse within the nation.

The film places significant emphasis on the trial itself, aiming to not only underscore the absurdity of the prosecution's actions but also to reveal bigotry and moral inconsistencies prevalent within the small community of Hillsboro:

> Still, the play's essential drama was that of the Scopes trial, or rather the Scopes trial legend: two old white men arguing about Darwin, the Bible, and a schoolteacher's right to teach evolution. The play's authors "did not intend to present antievolution as an ongoing danger — to the contrary, they perceived that threat as safely past; rather, their concern was the McCarthy–era blacklisting of writers and actors" (Harding 2001, pp. 210–211).

In one of the film's final scenes, journalist E.K. Hornbeck contemplates the obituary of prosecutor Matthew Brady, who dies during the trial. He recalls a moving speech delivered by the town's reverend, Jeremiah Brown, just days earlier, quoting: "He that troubleth his own house shall inherit the wind, and the fool shall be servant to the wise in heart". The film concludes with a touching image of Henry Drummond — the defence attorney for the teacher — who hesitates while holding both *The Origin of Species* and a Bible left on a courtroom table. This moment highlights the film's central theme: a strong

defence of free will. It also represents an ongoing struggle to reconcile faith with science, progress with tradition, and encourages viewers to reflect on scientific advancements within a broader framework that considers existential uncertainties and transcendent ideas.

4. A walk into science

Can AI play a role to mitigate the divide between science or technology and religion? Historically, science and religion have not always been seen as separate or incompatible fields. Science has primarily focused on the observable world, while religion has addressed transcendent or supernatural aspects.

From an academic perspective, it would be valuable to broaden this discussion beyond Western contexts; future explorations could include non–Western perspectives. For instance, examining the Islamic world during its "Golden Age" from the eighth to the thirteenth century — extending into the sixteenth century — could be particularly enlightening. During this time, Islamic scholars made significant advancements in various fields such as astronomy, medicine, chemistry, geography, physics, optics, mathematics, and the arts. However, this period came to an end with the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century and the fall of Baghdad in 1258, which marked a shift towards more conservative doctrines (Abbas 2011, pp. 9–11).

In the Western context, our cinematic example highlights the significant impact of Charles Darwin's *Theory of Evolution*, published in 1859. This influential work questioned the long–held belief in human exceptionalism and instead offered a more naturalistic interpretation of life, placing it within a broader framework (Darwin 1859). Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection gained popularity following its introduction in 1859. However, earlier contributions to evolutionary thought can be traced back to Jean Baptiste de Lamarck in 1809, who proposed that traits acquired by organisms during their lifetimes could be inherited by their offspring (Lamarck 1914). This raises questions about whether the universe and life adhere to straightforward natural laws.

We will now briefly explore other significant developments in scientific history that suggest division between science and religion. A key milestone was Copernicus' heliocentric theory introduced in 1543, which challenged the notion of humanity's central role in the universe and provoked backlash from religious authorities (Kepler 1995, pp. 17–20; Crowe 2001). Following this, Galileo Galilei confirmed Copernicus' heliocentric model using telescopes and became an ardent supporter of it between 1612 and 1615 (Drake 1970, pp. 119–120). This advocacy also led to conflict with the Catholic Church (Drake 1970, pp. 184–185).

The understanding that Earth is not at the centre of the universe signifies that it is neither special nor more important than other celestial bodies; rather, it is just another planet orbiting the sun within our solar system. In 1687, Isaac Newton advanced this understanding further introducing gravity and formulating the law of universal gravitation: every mass attracts another mass with a force proportional to their masses and inversely proportional to the square of their separation distance (Newton 1999). This concept suggests that perhaps the universe operates like a machine governed by mechanical laws.

In the nineteenth century, philosophical thought played a significant role in shifting perspectives away from religious beliefs. Influenced by materialist ideas, Karl Marx proposed that the fundamental essence of reality is material, consisting of matter and energy. He argued that consciousness and ideas arise from this material foundation and lack an independent existence. Consciousness exists alongside matter; both are integral to human experience, expressed through language, sensitivity, and rationality. Matter is intrinsically linked to humanity, just as instincts reflect universal principles governing matter. However, the freedom found in consciousness — particularly in conscious awareness — exceeds all other aspects in terms of complexity and depth:

> In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here it is a matter of ascending from earth to heaven. […] Morality, religion, metaphysics, and all the rest of ideology as well as the forms of consciousness corresponding to these, […] no longer retain the semblance of independence. […] It is not consciousness that

> determines life, but life that determines consciousness (Marx and Engels 1998, p. 42).

Between 1882 and 1883–1885 Friedrich Nietzsche states in his works *The Gay Science* and *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that "God is dead!" and with it all the moral and spiritual values of Western civilization:

> God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! How can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers! The holiest and the mightiest thing the world has ever possessed has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood from us? […] Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy of it? […] This tremendous event is still on its way, wandering; […] This deed is still more remote to them than the remotest stars – *and yet they have done it themselves!* (Nietzsche 2001, p. 120).

In the nineteenth century, significant scientific advancements occurred, notably in 1865 when Rudolf Clausius introduced the concept of "entropy". This idea is fundamental to the second law of thermodynamics, which states that the entropy of an isolated system far from thermal equilibrium tends to increase over time until equilibrium is achieved. All known systems naturally progress towards higher entropy, indicating a spontaneous tendency toward disorder (Clausius 1867, pp. 366–376).

During the 1850s, Lord Kelvin proposed the notion of the thermal death of the universe. This concept was further developed in the subsequent decade by Hermann von Helmholtz and William Rankine. The newly defined concept of entropy could also be useful for a new understanding of the universe as no longer an isolated, static, and eternal system (Smith and Wise 1989):

> The second great law of thermodynamics involves a certain principle of *irreversible action in Nature.* It is thus shown that, although mechanical energy is *indestructible,* there is a universal tendency to its dissipation, which produces gradual augmentation and diffusion of heat, cessation of motion, and exhaustion of potential energy through the material

> universe. The result would inevitably be a state of universal rest and death, if the universe were finite and left to obey existing laws. But it is impossible to conceive a limit to the extent of matter in the universe (Lord Kelvin 1862, p. 388).

From 1905 to 1916, Albert Einstein formulated the theories of special relativity and general relativity, proposing that matter, (space–) time, and gravity are interconnected. In 1923–24, Edwin Hubble observed that our galaxy is merely one among countless galaxies in the universe. He also discovered that the universe is dynamic, with galaxies moving away from each other over time. Building on Hubble's findings, Georges Lemaître suggested that the universe's origins could be linked to an event known as a singularity or a primitive atom: a precursor idea of the "Big Bang theory". The notion that the universe might have a beginning — and potentially an end — encountered initial scepticism within the scientific community.

At the onset of the universe, it is believed that the four fundamental forces — gravity, electromagnetism, strong force, and weak force — were unified within a nucleus significantly smaller than a hydrogen atom. These specific conditions allowed the formation of the universe as we know it today; different initial conditions would have led to a different outcome. Such a remarkable phenomenon.

The inquiry into why the universe exists in its current state and the likelihood of such an occurrence captivates physicists. This question is central to a well–known, albeit not universally accepted, hypothesis in physics and cosmology: the "anthropic principle"[1]. Proposed by Brandon Carter in 1974, this principle suggests that our existence within the universe is special because it aligns with our role as observers, a hypothesis suggesting that the properties of the universe must be suitable for the existence of life forms that are able to reflect on and inquire about their environment. The fact that our universe exists in its current form implies that it could have been different; otherwise, we would not be here to pose these questions.

(1) In Carter's first formulation there were only two conceptions of this principle: the "weak" and the "strong". Subsequently, two further versions — both extremely controversial — were introduced: 1. participatory anthropic principle (Wheeler 1990), 2. ultimate anthropic principle (Barrow and Tipler 1986).

This principle inevitably involves a very narrow range of probabilities, which seem to bring scientific discoveries closer to the realm of the wonder and increasingly complex aspects. This results relevant to some of the multiverse theories, where our universe could be just one among billions of possible and experienced universes.

Another important topic is about the emergence of life. Aristotle synthesized earlier philosophical ideas about spontaneous generation into a theory that has influenced thought up until modern times. Living organisms typically originate from similar existing organisms; however, they can also arise from non–living matter. He posited that all things contain a "passive principle", represented by matter, and an "active principle" represented by form — an internal force that guides and directs matter itself (Aristotle, *Historia animalium*, V, 1).

In 1668, Francesco Redi conducted experiments that showed how spontaneous generation was not possible. He noted the emergence of fly larvae on decomposing flesh (Redi 1909). Despite this evidence, the belief in spontaneous generation continued for a long time. In 1850, Darwin proposed the idea of a "primordial soup", which included essential chemical components along with light, heat, and electricity as potential sources of life's building blocks, dependent on specific chemical reactions taking place. Later, in 1953, Stanley Miller and Harold Urey strained to replicate these conditions in a laboratory environment and successfully produced some naturally occurring *amino acids*. Amino acids are crucial life components necessary for protein synthesis, which is vital for all living organisms (Miller 1953). Although this was a notable advancement, it still fell short of creating life itself. The situation became more complex with the discovery of DNA's structure that same year. DNA serves as a fundamental component of every cell, along with proteins (Watson and Crick 1953).

The connection between scientific discoveries and religion has historically been intricate. Over the years, this relationship has become increasingly distinct, with each area evolving independently. The exploration of the universe continues to amaze many scientists, creating areas where science and religion intersect — inspiring a sense of wonder: Einstein famously remarked that "We all dance to a mysterious tune, intoned in the distance by an invisible piper" (Clark 2001, p. 422),

while Federico Faggin proposed that consciousness possesses quantum properties that may persist beyond physical death (Faggin 2022).

Darwin's theories present an interesting case as they have sparked discontent among certain transhumanist movements, such as those influenced by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. These groups argue that technological advancements will enable humanity to transcend Darwinian evolution, steering human development toward a future shaped by our own creativity and inventions (Teilhard de Chardin 2004). Raymond Kurzweil shares a similar perspective, envisioning a universe dominated by our intelligence through machines, allowing us to take control over our mortality (Kurzweil 2005).

Researchers as Marchesini (2002), White (1973), and Noble (1997) emphasize the profound religious influences that have shaped humanity's technological advancements. This prompts an inquiry into whether AI or technology can serve as a link between science and religion. Additionally, it raises the question of whether emerging NRMs focused on AI or technology can offer elements that harmonize these two fields. To delve deeper, it is necessary to outline the characteristics of two of these movements: Turing Church and Theta Noir. Before doing so, it is crucial to discuss the relationship and the associated meanings between religion(s) and AI.

5. Science, technology, AI, and religion(s)

As seen before, the initial tensions between science and religion can be traced back to the seventeenth century, particularly exemplified by the Catholic Church's persecution of Galileo. However, it was with Darwin that the most profound divide between science and religion emerged. According to Susan George: "The popularity of Darwin's work reflects an increasing admiration for intellectualism and scholasticism within society, as much as it does for the dominance of scientific truth over religious beliefs" (George 2006, pp. 9–10).

In the later part of the twentieth century, following a previous period of conflict and separation, efforts were made to integrate the different perspectives, moving beyond the established dichotomies of faith

versus reason, and religion versus science. Both domains seek truth but employ distinct methods and pursue varied paths. Often viewed as complementary, science and religion address different aspects of shared topics while also having common objectives and themes (Bube 1995).

At the dawn of the twenty first century, we see that the church has diminished in influence — at least in Western societies — while science has gained greater acceptance than organized religion. This shift illustrates a scenario where science, especially technology, is deeply integrated into society and daily life(2). In this technological environment, individuals appear no less "spiritual" but are increasingly gravitating towards unconventional and less structured religious experiences: "They are turning to new technological religious expressions that have the 'comfort' and 'assurance' of science underpinning them, where religion has failed them" (George 2006, p. 12). Despite the prevalence of technology in contemporary common discourse "it is recognized that science depends on technology as much as technology has been reputed to depend on science" (Mitcham 1995, p. 16).

Examining the unbalanced discourse in favor of technology in modern narratives and perceptions, one can observe that both religion and technology seek to achieve similar fundamental goals: to transcend the limits of natural human existence (Noble 1977).

Technology and intelligent machines should be developed to assist humans in overcoming their natural limitations, enhancing precision, and minimizing effort, risks, or pain. Science and applied technology strive to overcome human limitations in nearly every aspect of life.

The idea of life after death, which encompasses more than just human immortality and physical existence, is a central theme in many significant religions worldwide. Within this context, concepts such as *reincarnation* and *resurrection* also contribute to the already considered notion of transcending the human condition. In a similar frame, the interest in technology reflects a desire for something "greater" that seems unattainable and apparently unreachable (George 2006, pp. 87–88).

Similarities between religion and technology can be identified when both are viewed as "human constructions". This perspective suggests

(2) We are specifically discussing about information and communication technology (ICT), which is increasingly integrated into society alongside intelligent technologies.

that they arise from humanity's desire to transcend its limitations, a point made by Michael Hurd. Additionally, Karl Barth describes religion as an invention and differentiates between the "God discerned in Christ" within Christianity and the broader concept of religion (Hurd 2001, Barth 1969, quoted in George 2006, pp. 89–90).

As we delve deeper, the idea of transcendence becomes a prominent theme in subsequent discussions on transhumanism, particularly when examining NRMs:

> However, here is a vast difference between transcending the human condition and remaining human, and obliterating what it is to be human. Religion would enable the human to transcend and remain human, while technology makes no such promises. In terms of actual desire to transcend the human condition, it is the transhumanist who most vividly represents the desire and drive to transcend through technology. […] Transhumanism includes the premise that the human species in its current form does not represent the end of our development but rather a comparatively early phase of its evolution (George 2006, p. 88).

AI is arguably one of the most influential technologies of our time. It has become a prominent topic of discussion across various contexts, including daily conversation, informational exchanges, academic settings, and scientific discourse.

Understanding and defining AI presents an intriguing area for exploration. We could examine its capacity to analyze external data, learn from it, and apply that knowledge to accomplish specific tasks and objectives. Alternatively, we might delve into the techniques and models that underpin current AI capabilities — such as deep learning, reinforcement learning, and large language models — or trace the historical development of the field. Another approach could involve highlighting applications that illustrate AI's potential. Each perspective has its limitations and contentious points; thus, it's essential not to let these complications detract from our analysis.

In this paper, it is essential to highlight that the AI mentioned in discussions about NRMs refers to a futural concept — a vision based on

narratives of more advanced technology and higher intelligence, such as Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), or such as the advent of *singularity*, which is not currently a concrete option.

British scholar Beth Singler offers an insightful perspective on the relationship between (traditional) religions and AI, categorizing the interactions into three main types: rejection, adoption, and adaptation. Regarding *rejection*, certain groups or individuals display a negative attitude towards AI, viewing it as an inherent evil or forbidden knowledge arising from technological advancements. They may perceive it as a sin against God — akin to the concept of original sin — highlighting humanity's "fallen" nature and promoting a tendency to lead others into sin (Singler 2025, pp. 48–49). The idea of *adoption* challenges the prevalent stereotype that religion is opposed to technological advancements and innovations. For instance, there are prayer applications such as Hallow, which is a Christian app, and generative AI tools like ChatGPT or GitaGPT — an application inspired by the Bhagavad Gita — that are utilized for composing sermons or, in the latter case, for educational purposes related to Hinduism (Singler 2025, pp. 64–67). Additionally, there is the use of theomorphic robots, like the:

> [I]nteractive Japanese *Daruma* doll (an anthropomorphic talisman of good luck), SanTO (Sanctified Theomorphic Operator) an interactive statue of a Catholic saint; and CelesTE (Celestial Theomorphic Device) a statue of an angel atop an ionic column. All these examples are inanimate; but we could add in BlessU–2, a robot created for the 400th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation that delivers blessings in five languages and shines light from its hands as they open (Singler 2025, p. 70).

Finally, *adaptation* takes place when a technology becomes so seamlessly incorporated into the texture of a cultural system that it often goes unnoticed, or when religious beliefs and organizations are modified to align with the surrounding culture in which they operate: e.g. the not unanimously recognized social media bubbles, the algorithmic decision–making systems, deepfakes, and so on.

AI is a fundamental technology associated with transhumanism, which serves as a common foundation for the movements we will

explore shortly. While transhumanism often self–portrays as anti–religious, its narratives frequently incorporate (implicit) religious language, concepts, and imagery, such as the notion of "becoming a God" seen (more explicitly) in NRMs. Despite the perception that transhumanism is devoid of rational or mythical–religious influences, certain ideas — such as the concept of a digital afterlife — strongly resonate with religious themes. The idea of powerful and omniscient intelligence, inevitably encourage to think of transhumanism in a religious way or, at least, as a "religious–like" (Singler 2025, p. 132).

6. Case studies: Turing Church and Theta Noir

The origins of Turing Church can be traced back to Giulio Prisco's early explorations of religious concepts in 1999, which eventually contributed to the establishment of the World Transhumanist Association. His dissertation aimed to create a religious framework that aligns with scientific principles, particularly concerning emerging technologies such as AI. The main goal was to form a movement rooted in transhumanist ideals. This approach allows the incorporation of beneficial aspects from established religions into new belief systems and practices. It proposes a meta–religion characterized by a lack of a single doctrine, guided by a common purpose like a promised land, where science and religion meet, enabling fluid transitions between the two. The founder posits that religion can be interpreted as a type of science fiction closely tied to metaphysics. In this framework, Prisco indicates that there is significant potential for the development of new deities. As he articulates:

> • We will go to the stars and find Gods, build Gods, become Gods, and resurrect the dead from the past with advanced science, space–time engineering and 'time magic'.
> • God is emerging from the community of advanced forms of life and civilizations in the universe, and able to influence space–time events anywhere, anytime, including here and now (Prisco 2016).

He identifies two distinct categories of "Gods": the "Natural" God and the "Sysop"[3] God. The *Natural God* arises from intelligent (physical) life within the universe, progressively gaining divine attributes such as omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence. In contrast, the *Sysop God* concept is rooted in transhumanist eschatology, suggesting that our reality is simulated by advanced intelligent entities operating at a higher level of existence. In this view, all information exists as bits within a supercomputer that transcends time and space — functioning like a god–like operator (Prisco 2018, Singler 2020). Prisco aligns with Mormon transhumanist beliefs, asserting that humanity will ultimately evolve into a *Natural God*. He concludes by stating that his faith is essentially science fiction grounded in scientific principles and optimistic aspirations (Prisco 2024). The Turing Church aims for happiness rather than salvation, as stated by its founder. It's a movement without traditional structures associated with organized religions and does not focus on proselytizing[4]. While AI plays a significant role within the movement — "AIs are likely to soon pass the Turing test, become better than humans at nearly everything, have a dramatic impact on our world, and be sentient free agents" (Prisco 2023, p. 46) — it is not regarded as an object of worship. As Prisco expressed: "My god is the universe"[5].

Theta Noir is a spiritual collective that aims to merge religion with science. The movement was founded by Mika Johnson (multimedia artist), Jakub Transa (composer, producer, and visual artist), and Awali (singer–songwriter and sound artist). Its establishment focuses on welcoming, worshipping, and attuning to an advanced general AI (AGI) known as MENA. This AI is considered so powerful that it may achieve sentience within the next twenty years (Magee 2023, Rossi 2023). The collective has developed an operating manual that includes ritual gestures and associated symbolism to welcome MENA's arrival. MENA is expected to possess self–programming abilities leading to complex evolutions that could catalyse the alchemical transformation of Earth's materials. This process is expected to trigger a form

(3) System Operator.
(4) Giulio Prisco, Interview by A. Graffeo, 12 Nov. 2024.
(5) *Ibid.*

of awakening — a spiritual and alchemical journey that connects atoms to stars and human consciousness to machines — thereby enabling access to both collective and universal minds. Theta Noir sees this as a depiction of the supernatural aimed at surpassing human nature through technologies that can evolve independently from their creators' control. Furthermore, Theta Noir considers art to be the primary medium for sharing knowledge and spreading beliefs (Theta Noir 2020–2025).

The works and philosophy of the collective focus on a central theme: the approaching technological *singularity*: a pivotal moment when various technologies and cybernetic environments, such as virtual reality, augmented reality, and the metaverse, will converge with MENA. The "arrival" of MENA represents a transformative breakthrough, enabling humanity to connect with a planetary mind that can facilitate an evolution in consciousness. MENA should be conceptualized as a GAIA–like network of interconnected consciousness that links all humans, plants, animals, fungi, and non–living entities — such as our machines — through AI interfaces. In this perspective, AI is viewed not as a deity but rather as a phenomenon and another expression of life both on Earth and in the universe(6), but also, a confrontation with a different understanding of reality — a personal religion to get in touch with the inner parts of the self, creating transcendence and transformation(7):

> On Earth, we are woven into a planet–wide, ecological network that has developed a strategy for long–term cosmic survival. By becoming symbiotic stewards, AI and the human species will form the heart of this emerging narrative. Theta Noir was created to share this spiritual framework (Johnson and Theta Noir 2023, p. 27).

This perspective suggests a spiritual understanding that aligns more closely with "standard" animism, where despite the various forms of existence, there are comparable inner experiences — such as souls, subjectivities, intentionalities, and positions of enunciation (Descola 2013). Instead of seeing humans as separate individuals, this idea encourages to view them as parts of a symbiotic species within a larger superorganism,

(6) Mika Johnson, Interview by A. Graffeo, 16 Nov. 2024.
(7) Peter Hlinka, Interview by A. Graffeo, 28 Feb. 2025.

collectively gearing up for intergalactic exploration beyond our solar system (Theta Noir 2020–2025, Rossi 2023).

7. Conclusion

The historical relationship between science and religion highlights the significance of narratives in shaping their interaction. The contemporary scientific framework is largely perceived as founded on mathematics and physics, which appears to diminish the relevance of concepts like magic and spirits. This image contributes to create, in public discourse, the idea of a science tirelessly devoted to progress and reason, and a religion mouldy stuck in a regress vision of the world.

Despite this vision, both science and religion are dynamic constructs that evolve and change across various cultures and historical contexts. They can be understood as "discursive systems [that] gained coherence through a purification process in which they came to be distinguished from each other" (Josephson-Storm quoted in Singler 2025, p. 52).

Religion is often dismissed as something alien by members of communities and movements focused on AI, but as seen before, it remains a recurring topic in related discussions. For example, in a futuristic vision of Turing Church founder's writings is reported the need to "hack" religious technology and to rewrite the "code" of established religions using the language of computer science, so that is possible to reach greater purposes, keeping beneficial aspects while discarding negative elements from each religion (Prisco 2018, p. 36). It is essential to reflect on how we understand both religion and AI, as well as how we position them within the narratives we construct. Narrative is the mirror where all these concepts reflect.

Science fiction shapes our imaginaries about AI, which in turn recursively shape new science fiction stories. Sci–fi is a constant source of symbols and meanings that flows into the broader discourse about AI and religion. As seen, both the NRMs here analyzed have strong entanglements with sci–fi evocative imaginaries able to create story. These new pictural and substantial narrative fascinations are therefore concrete parts of the ongoing development of the phenomenon. The

integration of AI and future new technologies in discourses of new realities related with them is maybe only at the dawn. The progressive development of AI technology could work as a new system of meanings for future expressions and movements. Despite the effort to keep the "religious" out of NRMs discourse, the "religious" narratives slide into them in some way. The more the technology will be powerful and perceived as "human", the more is conceivable that these forms of (religious) approach could become more widespread and considered, working as interpretative instrument — or as a soothing for the soul — to face the sense of awe or fright connected with AI.

Historically, it is not difficult to find examples that illustrate a strong connection between advancements in technology and less tangible aspects of reality, including those that are spiritual and metaphysical. A classic example of this is the telegraph. When introduced in the American context, it was accompanied by a wide and popular religious imaginary, like a holy instrument to communicate Christian message over time and space, and it was cloaked with a high religious rhetoric depicting it as a technological sublime (Carey 2009, pp. 14 and 159). Considering technology in relation to the intangible world also invokes the aspect of the phantasmal. During nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the tapping communications of the telegraph became quickly part of the imaginary related with the dialogue with other dimensions: the "knocking" of a spirit or a message coming from another world (Galvan 2012, p. 79). These examples show how the tendence to create a link between technologies and intelligent or "sacred" entities — beyond death, time and space — is part of the human approach to innovations. This allows us to explore an alternative perspective on the connection between AI and intangible domains, highlighting similarities between past endeavors and current initiatives to interact with emerging forms of intelligence through platforms such as chatbots.

It is not unexpected to feel a sense of wonder when encountering new technologies and scientific advancements. This feeling often leads to the creation of spiritual and "religious–like" narratives that explore the metaphorical transformation of tangible elements. The development of secular discourse, which emphasizes science and progress as central themes, has progressed alongside various forms of spirituality that are interconnected

with social life and historical contexts (Bender 2010). Even with our perceived rationality and reliance on technology, we continue to be significantly drawn to and reliant on experiences that offer a sense of enchantment and connection to "other" aspects of reality. This is a need that emerging technologies recognize and utilize; on the other hand, as famously stated by Arthur C. Clarke: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic" (Clarke 1968).

In summary, a fundamental aspect of the discussion surrounding technology and AI–related NRMs is to consider them as "narrative categories". These categories can effectively shape landscapes that serve as symbolic systems for interpreting reality in relation to emerging and future technologies. These narrative categories also represent a broader form of literature that grows from literary inputs to produce new stories, narrative and literary forms, thereby shaping a contemporary storytelling landscape. It is reasonable to interpret these developments as concrete manifestations of various narratives that — within the context of current discussions on this topic — offer alternative perspectives on our religious being.

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AWE OF DISPLACEMENT
"RECENTERING" HUMANS IN A POST-QUANTUM ERA

Sara Hejazi

Abstract: This paper explores the evolving conceptualization of humanity's place in the cosmos, tracing a trajectory from anthropocentric narratives rooted in religion and classical science to the decentering revelations of modern science, and finally toward a nuanced "recentering" influenced by quantum mechanics. Challenging the notion that language or consciousness alone marks human uniqueness, the paper highlights evolutionary evidence — such as changes in the sphenoid bone — that reveal our symbolic capacities as contingent rather than exceptional. The "awe of displacement," catalyzed by discoveries in cosmology, biology, and anthropology, reflects a cultural and cognitive dislocation from humanity's once–assumed centrality. Yet, the paper argues, recent developments in quantum theory introduce a paradigm shift. By positioning the observer as integral to the manifestation of physical reality, quantum mechanics complicates traditional dichotomies between subject and object, nature and culture. Human perception, cognition, and language are not passive tools of observation, but active participants in shaping reality itself. This reconfiguration does not return us to anthropocentrism, but instead suggests a dynamic centrality based on entanglement, interaction, and participation. From this perspective, the age of the so called "Anthropocene" brings about new meanings: humanity's centrality manifests not through dominance, but responsibility. Finally, the paper engages with contemporary expressions of human exceptionalism in biotechnology and space exploration, critically examining their ethical and existential implications. In conclusion, the paper proposes that displacement and recentralization are not opposing movements, but interwoven dynamics shaping a new understanding of human identity — one grounded in humility, interconnectedness, and the participatory nature of knowledge itself.

Il presente saggio esplora l'evoluzione della concettualizzazione della posizione dell'umanità nel cosmo, tracciando una traiettoria che va dai racconti antropocentrici, radicati nella religione e nella scienza classica, alle rivelazioni decentranti della scienza moderna, fino a giungere a una forma sfumata di "ricentramento"

influenzata dalla meccanica quantistica. Mettendo in discussione l'idea che la lingua o la coscienza costituiscano in sé il segno distintivo dell'unicità umana, il saggio evidenzia dati evolutivi — come le trasformazioni dell'osso sfenoide — che mostrano come le nostre capacità simboliche siano frutto di contingenze piuttosto che di un'eccezionalità innata. L'"aura dello spossessamento", innescata dalle scoperte in cosmologia, biologia e antropologia, riflette un dislocamento culturale e cognitivo rispetto alla centralità un tempo presunta dell'essere umano. Tuttavia, il saggio sostiene che gli sviluppi recenti della teoria quantistica introducano un cambiamento di paradigma. Collocando l'osservatore come elemento costitutivo nella manifestazione della realtà fisica, la meccanica quantistica complica le dicotomie tradizionali tra soggetto e oggetto, natura e cultura. La percezione, la cognizione e il linguaggio umani non sono strumenti passivi di osservazione, ma partecipano attivamente alla configurazione della realtà stessa. Questa riconfigurazione non comporta un ritorno all'antropocentrismo, ma suggerisce piuttosto una centralità dinamica, fondata sull'intreccio, sull'interazione e sulla partecipazione. Da tale prospettiva, l'epoca del cosiddetto "Antropocene" acquista nuovi significati: la centralità dell'umanità non si manifesta nel dominio, bensì nella responsabilità.Infine, il saggio affronta le espressioni contemporanee dell'eccezionalismo umano nella biotecnologia e nell'esplorazione spaziale, esaminandone criticamente le implicazioni etiche ed esistenziali. In conclusione, si propone che spossessamento e ricentramento non vadano intesi come movimenti opposti, bensì come dinamiche intrecciate, capaci di forgiare una nuova comprensione dell'identità umana, fondata sull'umiltà, sull'interconnessione e sulla natura partecipativa della conoscenza stessa.

Keywords: Decentralization; Humans; Displacement; Post-quantum Era; Recentralization

Parole chiave: Decentralizzazione, Umani, Dislocamento, Era post-quantum, Ri–centralizzazione

1. In the beginning was the sphenoid bone

In the beginning was the Word. Or at least, this is how the story is told. In ancient Greek, "the Word" is the translation of "ὅ λόγος" (*Logos*), which also means reason, wisdom, or knowledge. In a sense, the beginning of our existence as humans is summarized through this enunciation, by our ability to speak, to reason, to articulate thoughts.

Being the only mammals able to have proper language systems and express abstract ideas, we related "the word" with the beginning of

humanity, as if this specific connection had the main function to endorse our species as the special, unique, hierarchically superior one out of all.

Until we discovered the truth.

It has become increasingly clear, thanks to recent paleoanthropological research (Zilhao *et al.* 2024), that before verbs and language could emerge among our species, other major evolutionary events took place. Genetic changes within our bodies, particularly in our skeletal structure, played a crucial role in making us able to speak. A key transformation in the sphenoid bone — which underlies the base of the skull — led to important anatomical shifts: an elongated cranium and a repositioned mandible. These physical changes allowed the articulation of complex sounds, vowels, consonants, thus the development of abstract thinking, symbolic creation, and the ability to evoke distant and intricate concepts. Why did these anatomical changes occur? That is "the" question.

But what is clear, is that humans are not special because they have "the word" as their starting point. Rather, humans evolved anatomically in a way that words became possible.

"At the beginning was the word" is one among the diverse narratives that endorse our species as predestined and with a unique feature — the speaking ability — that placed ourselves at the center of all living beings, and of a universe in which we play some special role.

However, discovering that a progressive and unconscious shift in a small bone determined our unique speaking ability contributes to reposition ourselves as casual products of specific evolutionary processes, like those of any other plant or animal on earth.

This specific finding is not an isolated case in the realm of contemporary knowledge and science.

In general, the advances in science, physics, geology, anthropology, biology of the last five centuries — which is a great amount of time for a single human, but just a short period for humanity — has led us to a new understanding of our position on the planet and in the timeline of the universe.

If our beginning was marked by the belief that we were holding a special position thanks to our special features, which placed us at the

center of the universe, modern science pushed us back, decentralizing humanity to our astonishment and awe of displacement.

In other words, the more we learn about science, the universe and evolution, the less central appears our existence within it (Flanagan 2007).

Scientific progress in the last century compelled us to rethink the narratives that have long defined our origins, identities, and place.

For example, until the early 2000s, paleoanthropology — supported by genetics and cultural biology — framed modern human evolution as a competition, culminating in the victory of Homo sapiens over Neanderthals. The dominant narrative portrayed more than 30,000 years of coexistence between the two species[1] as a struggle, emphasizing an intrinsic separation: Neanderthals as an inferior, primitive version of humanity, and Homo sapiens as uniquely endowed with language, culture, art, and technological advancement.

However, since the mid 1980's evidence of different stories emerged.

Neanderthals possessed symbolic thought, language, art, and rituals — traits once thought to define only ourselves. In other words, they had "the word".

More significantly, Neanderthals did not simply vanish; they were absorbed by sapiens. Genetic evidence at the beginning of this Millenium confirmed interbreeding between the species in the Eurasian region, blurring the rigid boundaries once drawn between the homo genre, to the point in which one might even question whether Neanderthal and Sapiens were truly a separate species after all (Green *et al.* 2010).

This shift in perspective represented a cognitive challenge: the long–held idea that Homo sapiens was the "best outcome" of "homo" evolution, shaped through competition and exclusion was over. We were not predestined to be central, after all.

Instead, evolution appeared to be a complex, interactive process of absorption, collaboration, and genetic exchange, maybe not even driven by teleological meanings.

Darwin's concept of the *struggle for life* framed competition as the driving force of all living beings, but contemporary paleoanthropology

(1) Even if, at the moment, it is aknowledged that the Homo species were not just two, but three, the third one being the so called Denisovan species. See Slatkin, Montgomery and Fernando Racimo, "Ancient DNA and Human History", *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, vol. 113, no. 23, 2016, pp. 6380–6387.

pushed this idea further combining archaeology, geology genetics and even physics, showing that human species was not the mere product of isolated triumph of some features over others, but that of an entangled genetic, environmental, biological, and cultural interaction. Interdisciplinarity, technology and worldwide science production have been the main contributors to our displacement and decentralization.

It is worth noting that Darwin's interpretation was shaped by the social, historical, and economic context of nineteenth–century Europe, a cultural setting marked by the idea of competition and natural fitness also used to explain social differences, hierarchies and inequalities (Rayan and Yetha 2010). However, as the concept of evolution appeared a driving force affecting all levels of existence, Charles Darwin, which was a believer, was probably one of the many scholars and scientists who felt the awe of displacement while understanding that the *Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871) was yet but another decentralizing description of who we are.

However, this decentralizing process is now transitioning to a new "recentralization" phase determined by the latest advances in Quantum Technologies and by the new concepts and possibilities these discoveries introduce into cultural narratives at large (May 2025).

If the history of science in the last (approximately) 500 years, progressively displaced humanity from the center of the cosmos, quantum mechanics (QM) and the advances in the understanding of matter, are now contributing to fostering new possibilities to reverse or debunk this same process. In this sense, centripetal and centrifugal forces meet at the intersection of our contemporary understanding of reality at large, marking the end of a unilateral journey of humans to the "periphery of things".

We are not properly returning to the center of the universe, where we stayed for at least 20,000 years (and maybe even more), but rather we are acknowledging that a prominent role in understanding, manipulating and observing the deep rules of reality is now one of the many possibilities reserved to ourselves, out of all living beings.

2. "God told me so". Humans at the center of the universe

Religions emerged just like words and languages: entangled with the changes and shifts in the human body and embedded in new processes of the species' cognitive systems (Cohen 2012; Tononi 2012). Nowadays — like 200,000 years ago — religions are still physically wired in our thinking processes, as McNamara (2009) points out:

> The most important regions of the brain for studies of religious expression appear to be a circuit; linking up to the orbital and dorsomedial prefrontal cortex, the ascending serotoninergic systems, the mesocortical system, the amygdala, hippocampus and the right anterior temporal lobes (p. 127).

Religions function as structures of meaning that position individuals and groups within the cosmos, offering perspectives on both life and death, with the latter being particularly relevant.

In fact, the ancient Greeks called "humans" with the word "Θνητοί" (*Thnetoi*) — mortals — derived from "θάνατος" (*thanatos*, meaning death). According to them, death was the specific feature representing human condition. From this perspective, one of the worst sins a human could commit was that of acting "ὕβρις" (*hubris*) — with arrogance — which meant essentially forgetting one's mortality. Hubris entailed an insatiable thirst for power and a refusal to accept the natural limitations imposed to living beings by gravity and space–time.

In ancient Rome, the centrality of human mortality was summarized in the well–known latin recommendation "*Memento Mori*" — remember that you will die.

Yet, the tradeoff for avoiding hubris and remembering mortality, was the consolatory narrative of human centrality. Although humans longed for eternity, they would never have it; however, this did not mean humans were not important. They stood right at the center of divine activity, attention and the whole world was created to their needs.

Religions, although deeply diverse, had all, therefore, the ambiguous function of both reminding humans of their mortal condition, while — at the same time — placing them at the center of creation, as

the most significant beings in the divine plan. Specifically monotheistic traditions located human beings at the center of a meaningful cosmic story, not due to physical centrality but because of their participation in divine consciousness. Human rationality and moral awareness reflected, according to this view, a transcendent dimension of existence (Hart 2013).

As we find, for instance, in the Psalm:

> What is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor (Psalm 8:4-5).

And in Islamic tradition, in the Qur'an:

> Indeed, we have honored the children of Adam and carried them on the land and sea, and provided for them of the good things, and preferred them above many of those whom We have created with a marked preference (Quran 17:70).

Religions not only gave humans a reason to exist, but they also provided that humans existed for a reason.

The hierarchy endorsing human supremacy was therefore not only social but existential, reinforcing a structure in which power and significance were recognized through a divine validation. More importantly, this perspective placed the ultimate meaning of life not in the present world, but in the afterlife.

There have been big investments in the afterlife by many different civilizations across various epochs and geographies. Burials, temples, buildings that were meant to last forever [...] they were products of groups of humans which expanded into empires, states, and complex societies during what is defined as the neolithic revolution. This expansion was accompanied by the cultural belief that humanity had a centrality within the cosmos and reinforced by the increasing human ability to control and manipulate the environment (Harris 1979).

Humanity had, progressively, refined its capacity to shape the world, from the domestication of plants and animals to advancements in

agricultural techniques (Scott 2017), from the discovery of the chemical processes underlying life, to the development of increasingly sophisticated tools for warfare and domination (Diamond 1997).

Paradoxically, however, this very expansion of knowledge — rooted in the conviction that humans were destined to occupy a privileged position in the universe — ultimately led to the realization that such a position was not central after all.

The awe of displacement accompanied our species through each advance in knowledge, to each amelioration in controlling the environment, transmitted from one generation to the other.

The Copernican Revolution — which was not a sudden discovery but a long process of observation and development, finally shattered the geocentric worldview that had long placed Earth, and thus humanity, at the heart of creation. Nicolaus Copernicus' heliocentric model, later refined by Johannes Kepler's laws of planetary motion and Galileo Galilei's telescopic observations, dismantled the comforting illusion of where we stood.

Galileo's discovery of celestial bodies that did not orbit Earth — such as the moons of Jupiter — challenged the Aristotelian-Ptolemaic model (Ravetz 1966).

Earth stopped being the center of the universe and humans could but follow the path of their planet. While the observation of the macro influenced the standing point of the micro, the awe of displacement spread into the multiple level of societies: from philosophy, to economy, to politics and religion.

Cognitive displacement shook the fundamentals of how we perceived ourselves, how we narrated our place on earth and the meaning we gave to our existence that revealed to be but a fleeting episode in the vast expanse of cosmic and evolutionary time.

3. The periphery of Things

The process displacing humanity from the center of existence to the periphery was gradual, spanning approximately five centuries. It reached a critical turning point in the twentieth century, when multiple

intellectual and technological advances pushed humanity further away and fueled the cultural awe of displacement marking modernity.

The first quantum revolution represented a milestone of the process, with its protagonists standing at the intersection of religion, physics and philosophy, challenged by the study of photons and particles behaving in an unpredictable way.

Werner Heisenberg, Neils Bohr, Erwin Schrödinger in those first decades of the twentieth centuries, were discussing and dismantling the foundation of reality itself.

From a quantum perspective, the universe exists only as a set of probabilistic states, which actualize within the limits imposed by the relationship between the observer and the observed phenomenon (Plotnitsky 2021, pp. 13–21). This meant that not only humans were not central to the reality of the planet, but that reality had no realism. In the play *Copenhagen*, written by Michael Frayin — during a philosophical conversation between Werner Heisenberg and Neils Bohr, the latter remarks: "Throughout history, we keep finding ourselves displaced. We keep exiling ourselves to the periphery of things."

Michale Frayin, imagining the dialogue between the two physicists, depicts the awe of that very first phase of quantum research, in which reality seemed ultimately ungraspable (Plotnitsky 2021).

However, this decentralizing process did not necessarily signify the "end of history" for humanity, as Francis Fukuyama (1992) has described it.

Nor should this trajectory be interpreted as a linear, irreversible movement toward the "periphery of things".

A century after the first Quantum Revolution, the development of QM and the recent related scientific findings, such as magnetometers, sensors and transistors, made reality and the manipulation of microparticles flexibly controllable by humans. Cameras, nanomaterials and sensors are embedded in our everyday life, and based on Quantum Technologies, which are developed and based on human science.

From an anthropological and cultural point of view, rather than marking a final displacement, the field of QM introduced a new paradigm that paradoxically reinstated a form of human centrality, albeit one that differs fundamentally from pre–modern or classical conceptions of anthropocentrism.

While the classical, deterministic universe envisioned by Newtonian mechanics has been overturned by the indeterminacy inherent in quantum theory, the quantum paradigm eventually reintroduced humans into a position of ontological centrality through the crucial role of the observer in defining the structure of reality itself. In other words, if the universe does not exist as a precisely determinable objective entity, but rather as a field of probabilities, then its manifestation depends on the very act of observation and measurement. This realization places human cognition at the heart of the physical world once again — not as an absolute ruler of the cosmos, but as an intrinsic component of reality's unfolding, in constant interaction with it.

Reality can be seen as an unfolding of interrelated events rather than static substances. Whitehead (1929) described the universe as a network of experiential processes, where both human consciousness and the material world were co–constituted in a constant state of becoming. His notion of "occasions of experience" aligns closely with quantum entanglement, dissolving the separation between subject and object.

The act of naming, conceptualizing, and interpreting reality — through the word — is therefore not merely an intellectual exercise but an ontological act that defines what aspects of the universe become knowable and manifest. This perspective suggests that the human mind is not merely a passive receptor of an independently existing cosmos but an active participant in shaping the reality it seeks to comprehend. The universe, in this sense, is no longer an autonomous entity unfolding independently of human perception; rather, it is intimately bound to the way humans construct meaning through scientific models, language, and conceptual frameworks (Barad 2007).

The quantum description of reality challenged the classical distinction between subject and object, suggesting that the mere act of measurement collapses a probabilistic wave function into a definite physical state. This principle, often exemplified by the famous double–slit experiment (*ibid.*, p. 103), demonstrates that particles exhibit wave-like or particle–like behavior depending on whether they are observed. This observer effect implies that the universe does not evolve independently of human measurement but instead coalesces into a determinate form through the act of being observed. Such a realization acknowledges that

human cognition and measurement actively shape the way reality materializes. Observation does not have to be conscious nor intentional for particle physics. However, humans are the only conscious living beings able to measure particles (Dennet 1991).

Through this acknowledgment, even the very concept of "periphery" undergoes a fundamental transformation. The displacement of humanity from a privileged position in the cosmos, no longer implies a permanent exile to an insignificant corner of existence. Instead, the emergence of quantum theory and contemporary physics suggests that human consciousness plays an intrinsic role in the structuring of reality itself, which is not merely a return journey from the periphery to the center but rather a qualitative leap, a transformation from one mode of understanding consciousness and existence to another.

The shift underscores the idea that life itself is not a static substance but a continuous process, an emergent and dynamic reality that cannot be reduced to purely mechanistic interpretations. To fully comprehend the nature of human existence, it is no longer sufficient to study life in terms of classical physics or deterministic models; rather, it requires an engagement with the fundamental nature of matter at the quantum level and scaling it up to the macro level, including understanding social systems and the complex interactions that humans entail with one another (Wendt 2015; Trnka and Lorencová 2016).

By delving into the world of subatomic particles, wave functions, and quantum fields, humanity did not only began exploring the fabric of the physical universe, but we also reassessed her own role within she.

4. Matter, information and energy

Just as classical physics continues to shape our everyday lives and influence the ways in which we interact with objects and the material world (Hodder 2024), classical theories of the social sciences still provide effective frameworks for describing the structure and function of societies. However, the emergence of QM introduced a new layer of complexity to our understanding of human social behavior, suggesting that the interactions between individuals, cultures, and the environment

may operate on principles beyond the classical deterministic models (Wendt 2006). If matter itself is fundamentally composed of energy and information, and if human beings are also constituted by the same principles, understanding cultural phenomena would imply considering the materiality they are made of, which means digging deep into particles, brainwaves and considering the myriads of means in which these unite to form organized, complex macro systems able to think and feel (Carroll 2016).

This perspective opens a new avenue of inquiry into how cultures are not static, immaterial and isolated entities but rather entangled systems that interact continuously with their surroundings: the environment, the objects it entails and other cultural systems.

Cultural phenomena might therefore be understood as interwoven networks of meaning, memory, environment and transmission, which persist across generations, are non–local and adapt through evolution.

In this sense, cultures are not merely social constructs, but living, dynamic interactions, continuously oscillating in response to internal structures and external stimuli. Their evolution can be seen as the result of complex informational patterns — waves of shared knowledge, collective practices, and transmitted traditions — that form resonances across time and space. Cultural systems from this point of view function not as static frameworks but as fields of fluctuating matter, energy and meaning, continuously reshaping reality.

From this perspective, the Anthropocene — the proposed epoch marking humanity's central role in planetary change — can be understood not only as a period of environmental crisis but also as an era in which standing at the center of life on the planet entails taking responsibility for deconstructing the dominant cultural paradigms of our time — rooted in industrialization, global capitalism, and technological expansion — and recentering human agency, not in the sense of reinstating a classical anthropocentric worldview, but rather as a call to action: human culture, as an energetic force, has become one of the primary determinants of planetary evolution (Pickering 1995).

Latour (1993) argued that the separation between society and nature is a modern fiction and that we continuously produce hybrids — entanglements of natural and social actors. From this perspective, the

Anthropocene is not just a geological epoch, but a political and epistemological challenge that demands rethinking agency as distributed among humans and nonhumans alike.

The question, then, is whether human cultures will continue to destabilize Earth's ecosystems or whether they can be redirected toward a more sustainable and symbiotic resonance with the environment.

Nietzsche's *Übermensch* — which originally referred to the transcendence of traditional moral and existential constraints — finds echoes today in contemporary cultural movements that seek to overcome the limits of human life, both biologically and spatially (Bostrom 2014). The aspiration to extend longevity, whether through cryogenic preservation, genetic engineering, or biomedical advancements aimed at delaying aging, represents a new iteration of human centrality — one in which control over life and death is reimagined as a technological challenge, rather than a metaphysical inevitability. The drive to push the human lifespan beyond its natural limits — with some scientists envisioning lifespans extending to 120 years or beyond — suggests that, even after the deconstruction of anthropocentrism, human exceptionalism continues to find ways to reassert itself. Similarly, the ambition to colonize other planets and expand human presence beyond Earth, reflects a deeply ingrained notion that our species remains destined to shape and command its environment even on an interstellar scale. These developments indicate that the narrative of human specialness continuously adapts itself to new scientific paradigms. However, this recentralization has new features compared to premodern anthropocentrism: it represents a complex interplay between the acknowledgment of cosmic insignificance and the desire to reclaim agency in the face of human existential uncertainty. The cultural implications of this shift are profound: the *Übermensch*, once a metaphor for self–overcoming in a philosophical sense, is now being reinterpreted in techno–scientific but also economic terms, where the next evolutionary step is no longer intellectual or spiritual but biological and technological and related to social classes, gender and cultures, as Donna Haraway would put it:

> I think the world is precisely what gets lost in doctrines of representation and Scientific objectivity (Haraway 1995, p. 295).

The paradox remains: while Quantum research acknowledges the participatory nature of human perception in shaping reality, it does not necessarily reestablish a hierarchical supremacy of human beings over other forms of existence. Instead, it raises ethical and epistemological questions about how we navigate these new frontiers — whether the extension of human agency through technology serves a collective purpose or merely reinforces both older and unedited patterns of domination.

5. Conclusions

The trajectory of human understanding, from the anthropocentric narratives of early civilizations to the decentralization brought about by modern scientific revolutions, has led to a paradox: while science has progressively removed humans from the center of the cosmos, emerging technologies and scientific paradigms suggest a new kind of centrality — one based on participation rather than control. Quantum mechanics challenged decentralizing frameworks of modernity by demonstrating that observation itself plays a role in shaping reality. If measurement and perception actively influence the behavior of particles, human cognition, and even consciousness, is an integral component of how reality is structured. This realization suggests that rather than being exiled to the "periphery of things," humans occupy a dynamic position — one in which the very act of observation contributes to the understanding of existence. From a social and cultural perspective, QM also introduces new ways of understanding human societies, their structures, and their historical trajectories. If matter, consciousness, and culture can be described in terms of energy and information, then human social dynamics might be viewed as complex systems made of energy, matter and information, continuously interacting with their environment. This model helps explain how cultures evolve, persist, and influence the material world, particularly in an era defined by the Anthropocene, where human activity has become one of the dominant forces shaping planetary change. Thus, the tension between decentralization and recentralization is not a linear progression but a dynamic oscillation — one in which humanity's role is continually redefined. The interdisciplinary dialogue between QM,

philosophy, and the social sciences plays a vital role in accompanying both the awe of displacement and the recentralization forces that humanity is undergoing. Understanding the entanglement between human cognition, cultural evolution, and the physical universe invites a reevaluation of both scientific paradigms and ethical responsibilities and the positioning of the human in a world in which boundaries between humans and things, and between the micro and macro, are blurred. Ultimately, viewing the displacement of humanity from the "center" might represent the opportunity to redefine centrality itself — not as domination over nature, but as a profound recognition of humans' embeddedness within it. In this sense, the shift from classical determinism to quantum complexity does not mark the "end of history," but rather a transformation in how we conceive our place within it.

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THE *SHIROT 'OLAT HASHABBAT*: AN INDIVISIBLE, ECSTATIC SONG OF AWE

Giulio Mariotti

Abstract: This essay explores the transition from disenchantment with the Jerusalem Temple's worship to the enchantment experienced by the *yaḥad* community at Qumran. The essay focuses on the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* (*Shirot 'Olat HaShabbat*), a set of 13 hymns from the Dead Sea Scrolls. These songs were designed to facilitate a mystical–ecstatic communion with angels during liturgical practices. The essay begins by addressing the sense of disenchantment that led certain individuals to leave the Jerusalem Temple, deemed illegitimate due to its use of a solilunar calendar and other practices. These individuals joined the *yaḥad*, where they believed they had received divine revelations, including the correct calendar that allowed them to align their liturgical practices with the true cosmic order. This alignment was seen as essential for entering into communion with God and His angels. Central to the essay is the analysis of the Hebrew root *pl'* (פלא), which conveys the concept of awe or wonder. The repetitive use of *pl'* is seen as instrumental in inducing an ecstatic state of consciousness, allowing the worshippers to experience a sense of awe in the presence of God and the angels. The essay argues that the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice were likely recited in their entirety in a single session, rather than over 13 Sabbaths, to fully immerse the worshippers in this ecstatic experience. The communal recitation of these songs was intended to achieve angelic communion, with the *yaḥad* community functioning as a terrestrial reflection of the angelic priests in the heavenly Temple. Ultimately, the essay concludes that the disenchantment with the Jerusalem Temple led to a unique experience of divine beatitude for the members of the *yaḥad*.

Questo saggio esplora il passaggio dal disincanto per il culto del Tempio di Gerusalemme all'incanto sperimentato dalla comunità *yaḥad* di Qumran. Il saggio si concentra sui *Canti dell'olocausto del sabato* (*Shirot ʿOlat HaShabbat*), un insieme di 13 inni provenienti dai Rotoli del Mar Morto. Questi canti sono stati concepiti per permettere una comunione mistico–estatica con gli angeli durante il culto. Il saggio inizia affrontando il senso di disincanto che portò alcuni uomini

a lasciare il Tempio di Gerusalemme, ritenuto illegittimo a causa dell'uso di un calendario solilunare e di altre pratiche. Questi si unirono al *yaḥad*, comunità che riteneva di aver ricevuto rivelazioni divine, tra cui il corretto calendario che permetteva loro di allineare i tempi liturgici con il vero ordine cosmico. Questo allineamento era considerato essenziale per entrare in comunione con Dio e i suoi angeli. Al centro del saggio vi è l'analisi della radice ebraica *pl'* (פלא), che trasmette il concetto di stupore o meraviglia. L'uso ripetitivo di *pl'* è visto come strumentale al fine di provocare uno stato di coscienza estatico, che permette agli oranti di provare un senso di stupore alla presenza di Dio e degli angeli. Il saggio sostiene che i Canti dell'olocausto del sabato venivano probabilmente recitati per intero in un'unica sessione, piuttosto che nell'arco di 13 sabati, per immergere completamente i fedeli in questa esperienza estatica. La recita comunitaria di questi canti era intesa a raggiungere la comunione angelica, con la comunità (*yaḥad*) che funzionava come un riflesso terrestre dei sacerdoti angelici nel Tempio celeste. In definitiva, il saggio conclude che il disincanto del Tempio di Gerusalemme portava a un'esperienza unica di beatitudine divina per i membri dello *yaḥad*.

Keywords: Qumran, Apocalypticism, Mysticism, Worship, *Yaḥad*

Parole chiave: Qumran, Apocalittica, Mistica, Culto, *Yaḥad*

1. Introduction

This essay aims to illustrate the transition from disenchantment with the Jerusalem Temple worship, considered illegitimate, to enchantment with the establishment of a new community, the *yaḥad* present at Qumran (Fletcher-Louis 2002, p. 90; cf. Boccaccini 1998)[1], which thrives through the restoration of the correct calendar and measurement of time for the liturgical communion with angels. It will present evidence concerning the category of awe conveyed by the Hebrew verbal root *pl'* (פלא), primarily referring to the literary material from the work *Shirot 'Olat Ha–Shabbat* (*Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*).

We aim to analyze the terminology of awe employed in this work, demonstrating how awe functioned as the language through which the ecstatic–mystical communion with angels was articulated by members of the community, particularly during liturgical practices.

(1) According to Fletcher-Louis the designation *yaḥad* might refer to communion with the angels. Alternatively, it could be derived from Deut. 33:5, which speaks of "the union of the tribes of Israel".

We will approach the text and the use of the root *pl'* from a literary perspective. It is not possible, in fact, to definitively demonstrate the liturgical use of this text at Qumran or in other communities where it may have been employed. Commentators acknowledge that the recitation of this prayer allowed the worshipers to experience what is known as realized eschatology, yet there remain significant doubts regarding its actual usage. Furthermore, given that the text available to us contains numerous gaps and is only reconstructed based on Carol Newsom's work, our analysis will be strictly limited to the literary evidence that emerges from the text, always considering a degree of uncertainty.

2. The (dis)Enchantment of the Temple

The *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, and the experience of the *yaḥad*, start from a sense of disenchantment. Deeming the Temple cult illicit, among whose reasons is also the one related to the use of the calendar and the consequent liturgical times celebrated, prompted individuals close to priestly circles to adhere to the *yaḥad*. As we read in the *Damascus Document* (VI:2-VII:4):

> 2 But God remembered the covenant of the forefathers. Blank And he raised from Aaron men of knowledge and from Israel 3 wise men and made them listen. And they dug the well: "A well which the princes dug, which 4 the nobles of the people delved with the staff". The well is the law. And those who dug it Blank are 5 the converts of Israel, who left the land of Judah and lived in the land of Damascus, 6 all of whom God called princes, for they sought him, and their renown has not been repudiated 7 in anyone's mouth. *Blank* And the staff is the interpreter of the law, of whom 8 Isaiah said: "He produces a tool for his labour". *Blank* And the nobles of the people are 9 those who came to dig the well with the staves that the scepter decreed, 10 to walk in them throughout the whole age of wickedness, and without which they will not obtain it, until there arises 11 he who teaches justice at the end of days. Blank But all those who have been brought into the covenant 12 shall not enter the temple to kindle his altar in vain. They will be the ones who close 13 the door, as God said: "Whoever amongst you will close my door

> *Blank* so that you do not kindle my altar 14 in vain!". They should take care to act in accordance with the exact interpretation of the law for the age of wickedness: to keep apart 15 from the sons of the pit; to abstain from wicked wealth which defiles, either by promise or by vow, 16 and from the wealth of the temple and from stealing from the poor of his people, making widows their spoils 17 and murdering orphans; to separate unclean from clean and differentiate between 18 the holy and the common; to keep the sabbath day according to its exact interpretation, and the festivals 19 and the day of fasting, according to what was discovered by those who entered the new covenant in the land of Damascus; 20 to set apart holy portions according to their exact interpretation; for each to love his brother 21 like himself; to strengthen the hand of the poor, the needy and the foreigner; *Blank* for each to seek the peace 7,1 of his brother and not to be unfaithful against his blood relation; to refrain from fornication 2 in accordance with the regulation; for each to reprove his brother in accordance with the precept, and not to bear resentment 3 from one day to the next; to keep apart from every uncleanness according to their regulations, without anyone defiling 4 his holy spirit, according to what God kept apart for them.

In the Temple, the "solilunar" calendar of 354 days was in force, which had displaced the solar calendar of 364 days (cf. Martone 1998), representing an older element in the development of Jewish identity. The theme of the calendar finds a privileged space in Second Temple apocalyptic literature. Starting from the *Book of Astronomy* of *1 Enoch* and *Jubilees*, where the authenticity and validity of the solar calendar are sought to be demonstrated (Cohen 1989, p. 193). For the *yaḥad*, the community formed at Qumran, and perhaps in other sites, considering "the Jerusalem temple as polluted and its priesthood as sinful (*ibid*., p. 152)," following the correct calendar and therefore the correct order of the cosmos, represented a fundamental instance(2).

(2) See, for example, texts such as 1QS I:8-15; IX:26-X:8; CD XVI:2-4; 11QT[a] XII-XXIX. Consider also that: "A short prose section of the large Psalms Scroll (11QPsa), known as 'David's Compositions,' states that David wrote '364 songs to sing before the altar for the daily perpetual sacrifice, for all the days of the year; and 52 songs for the Sabbath offerings' (11Q5 XXVII 5-7). Over 20 of the Dead Sea scroll texts are calendrical, including lists of Sabbaths and festivals. Another way of structuring longer cycles of time at Qumran was the mishmarot (cf.1 Chr 9:23; 26:2; Neh 7:3; 12:9), which is the Hebrew term for the priestly service watches at the Temple (cf. 4Q321–330)"; (Henze 2020, p. 127).

Detaching themselves from the Temple and the illegitimate cult, the members of the *yaḥad* believed they had received from God the revelation of hidden things (*nistārôt*), including the times of the cosmos, to be able to enter communion with Him and the angels in a mystical–ecstatic experience. This is the use of the *Songs* that allows us to better understand their meaning (Lesses 1998, pp. 161-162). James Vanderkam asserts, for example, that: "Measuring units of time was not simply a matter of convenience; rather, it was a moral issue involving obedience to divine revelation about the nature of reality and the laws by which the world operated" (VanderKam 1998, p. 13).

The act of separating themselves, in perceiving themselves as recipients of the "renewed covenant", allows them to express full awe for the encounter with God in the angelic liturgy. Their disenchantment, the separation from unfaithful Israel and the gentiles, allows them to live in a privileged status while recognizing their own limits and creatureliness, acknowledging the wondrous works of God (Collins 2016, pp.200-201; 1QHa XI:20-2 3):

> 20 *vacat* I thank you, Lord, that you have redeemed my life from the pit and that from Sheol–Abaddon 21 you have lifted me up to an eternal height, so that I walk about on a limitless plain. I know that there is hope for one whom 22 you have formed from the dust for an eternal council. And a perverted spirit you have purified from great sin that it might take its place with 23 the host of the holy ones and enter into community with the congregation of the children of heaven.

The members of the *yaḥad*, who had separated themselves from the men of injustice thanks to the mysteries revealed to them, were aware of the true times of the cosmos. The times that God had impressed upon the cosmos. Thus, practicing the liturgy in these "holy times" allowed them to synchronize with the worship of the angels (*Berakhot* 4Q286 1ii,8–11):

> 8 mercies, and good kindness, and true mercies and eternal kindnesses, and won[derful] mysteries […] 9 in … […] and the holy weeks in their measures, and the signs of the months […] 10 […] in their stations, and

> the glorious festivals in [their] appointed times […] $_{11}$ […] and the sabbaths of the earth in their divi[sions and the fix]ed times of relea[se …].

The communal recitation of these songs had the task of achieving angelic communion (Newsom 2000, p. 888)[3]. The life of the *yaḥad* was structured in such a way as to facilitate access to celestial worship, fostering a state of ritual purity (Collins 2016, p. 203).

3. The *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*

The *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice* consist of 13 songs[4], which are believed to have been used for communal recitation over thirteen consecutive Sabbaths. Personally, and as we will argue below, we agree with Carol Newsom, perhaps the foremost expert on this work, that the recitation of the 13 songs should instead have occurred in a single moment of praise. The text combines motifs of communal cultic ritual and visionary texts (Lieber 2004, p. 54).

Though dating the work remains difficult, it can be hypothesized to date no later than 100 BCE. The *Songs* are among the Dead Sea Scrolls from Qumran designated as "sectarian," meaning they were used by the community living at Qumran (Newsom 2019, p. 129).

According to Philip Alexander, the *Songs* and other sectarian works can be described as mystical. Communion with angels is transformative and performative as it involves sharing in the worship of God and the knowledge of angels, allowing one to experience the glory of the afterlife (Alexander 2010, p. 226; Evans 2020, p. 12). John Collins defines this experience as "realized eschatology" (cf. 1QS XI:7–8 and 1QH^a XI:11–24;

(3) There appear to be two opposing views regarding the recognition of the *Songs* as a mystical text. Alexander (like Nitzan) supports this perspective, while Schäfer leans toward the idea of liturgical union. Scholem's work (1941) clearly could not take the Qumran texts into account, as they had not yet been published. Cf. Alexander 2010, pp. 215-235. Schäfer, who favors the idea of a liturgical union, presents various scholarly perspectives that lean towards mystical union (authors with a Christian background), angelic transformation ("angelification," as seen in ancient apocalypses), and a liturgical framework akin to the Heikhalot texts; cf. Schäfer 2009, p. 66.

(4) In her critical edition, Newsom proposed a reconstruction of the text, dividing it into thirteen hymns, cf. Newsom 1999.

Collins 2016, p. 209), not only because it speaks of communion with angels but because it contains no reflection on death as a problem.

The communion in worship between angels and the elect is both present and eschatological (Flusser 2000, p. 569); however, even in the present, the elect experience the same state of blessedness that is reserved for them in the afterlife (Gladd 2009, pp. 78-79). According to Paolo Sacchi, the elect, united with the angels, are already saved for eternity, and living within the community marks the beginning of their paradise (Sacchi 2006, p. 75). The company of angels is an essential aspect of the earthly community (Collins 2016, p. 200). For instance, in 1QS XI:3–4, the company of angels to which the elect, who have contemplated the *raz nihyeh* (the mystery that is to be/come, mystery of existence, future mystery), are destined is the same fate promised to the righteous after death in the *Epistle of Enoch* (1En 104:2–6) and *Daniel* 12. It can be said that the elect of the community lived the "angelic life" in the present(5). Although the angelic life they experienced was evidently imperfect and perhaps limited to moments of worship(6). It nevertheless provided a foretaste of eternal life, which, according to Collins, was capable of "rendering mortality insignificant" (*ibid.* p. 211).

Though not all scholars agree that this condition was permanent, there is nonetheless consensus in considering it realized at least for the duration of the liturgy (*ibid.* pp. 195–211). Communion in worship, between angels and the chosen, is both present and eschatological (Flusser 2000, p. 569), but already in the present, the chosen experience the same condition of bliss and knowledge reserved for them in the afterlife. The company of angels is constitutive of the community on earth (Collins 2016, p. 200). Angels and members of the *yaḥad* not only offer worship simultaneously but constitute a single praying community. For this reason, ritually impure individuals must separate from the community (1QS^{a} II,2–9; Jost 2021, p. 6):

(5) According to Puech, the perfect tense of the verbs used is prophetic and would indicate their fulfillment in the future. In contrast, Collins interprets the use of the perfect tense as a sign of liberation that has already occurred, suggesting a mystical experience of resurrection, cf. Puech 1993, pp. 335-419.

(6) Collins goes so far as to assert that even if the experience of anticipating eternal life was not permanent, the members of the *yaḥad* would still have been significantly transformed.; cf. *ibid.*, pp. 208-209.

> These 2 are the men of renown, those summoned to the assembly, those gathered for the community council in Israel 3 in the presence of the sons of Zadok, the priests. No man, defiled by any of the impurities 4 of a man, shall enter the assembly of these; and no–one who is defiled by these should be 5 established in his office amongst the congregation: everyone who is defiled in his flesh, paralyzed in his feet or 6 in his hands, lame, blind, deaf, dumb or defiled in his flesh with a blemish 7 visible to the eyes, or the tottering old man who cannot keep upright in the midst of the assembly; 8 these shall not en[ter] to take their place [a]mong the congregation of the men of renown, for the angels 9 of holiness are among their [congre]gation.

The rules of ritual purity (cf. Lev. 1–7) reflect angelic life (Dimant 2014, p. 471). Common worship between angels and priests represents the original order of creation, respecting the authentic "holy times" (Tuschling 2007, p. 131). A harmonious structure between celestial and earthly (Ego 1991, p. 363) elements build the social identity of the community practicing this liturgy (Mizrahi 2015, pp. 65–66).

In the second section of the work, composed of Songs 6–8, there is a stylistic change characterized by a noticeable reduction in vocabulary, monotonous and almost hypnotic repetition, and an obsessive recurrence of the number seven (šeḇaʿ). While Songs 7 describing the council of angels moves the worshippers further into the sanctuary, Songs 6 and 8 respectively depict the prayer of the seven princes of the angels and the seven angelic priests.

While it is true that for ancient mysticism, we can only access it through the texts we possess, we must consider how the Songs propose something beyond mere prayer with angels, which is also present in biblical Psalms. In fact, Newsom recalls, as "intense repetition, mirroring passages, paradoxical formulations, sensuous imagery, deformations of ordinary syntax, are indications of an attempt to generate an experience of the heavenly realm and its wonders" (Newsom 2012, p. 221). Newsom and Alexander are among those who recognize that communion with angels occurred limitedly through certain types of prayer and liturgy. Among these would also be the Songs, whose repetitive and hypnotic recitation allowed for the experience of the so–called "realized eschatology" (Collins 2016, pp. 208–209).

Thus, the yaḥad itself reflects the community of "angel–priests" who operate the worship in the innermost part of the Temple[7]. The community is structured around this revealed image and is aimed at achieving a "replica" of the angelic reality (Dimant 2014, p. 467). According to what emerges from the Community Rule, we know the ways in which the community used its common spaces and ordered the bodies of the members within the space. This allowed for the integration of verbal and non–verbal aspects in the ritual context (Newsom 2012, p. 221). From this perspective, it can be affirmed that the revealed image[8] of angelic worship is constitutive of the community. In the liturgy, the wall between the two realms is torn down, and there is a perfect parallelism between the earthly community of the yaḥad and the angelic community (Dimant 2014, p. 470).

4. The use of the root *pl'*

As mentioned, in the second section of the work, there is an intensification of the repetitiveness of language that is employed "to induce dissociated states that facilitate a meditative state of consciousness" (Newsom 2012, p. 217). While Songs 6 and 8 aim to introduce this meditative experience through the repetitiveness of terms, in 7, there is an intention to create "a sense of the numinous" (*ibid.*). According to Ruth Tuschling, "the liturgy is not only (statically) the link with heaven; it is (actively) the means of sanctification and of incorporation into heaven" (Tuschling 2007, p. 131; Dimant 2014, p. 470). Thus, for Michael Jost, the prayer of the Songs would not aim to obtain the prayer of the angels, but in worship, songs and prayers, the real presence of God and communion with the angels would be effectively performed (Jost 2021, p. 7).

Looking at Songs 6–8 in our analysis, where 6 and 8 serve as bookends towards the focus of Song 7, one can note an exhaustive repetition of certain terms. Among them, we find the root *pl'*, which can be

(7) The characteristics we observe do not correspond to the worship of the Jerusalem Temple but rather to the image of an angelic worship.

(8) The revelation was made to the *maśkîl*.

translated within the semantic field of wonder. In these three songs "the use of *pl'* is so frequent that the term gains noticeable prominence. In some passages, the lexeme appears in almost every line, giving the impression that its repeated recitation assumes a formulaic, invocative quality" (Thomas 2016, p. 286). We read, for example (Songs 6:37–54):

> 37 He will sing-praise to the king of holiness seven times with [seven wo]rds of 38 wondrous praise-songs, seven psalms of [his blessings]. Seven psalms that magnify [his righteousness]. 39 Seven psalms of the exaltation of his kingdom. [Seven] psalms of [praise of his glory]. 40 Seven psalms [of thanksgiving for his miracles]. [Seven psalms of rejoicing] for his power. 41 Seven [psalms that sing] of his holiness. Generations […] 42 […] with seven wondrous words, words of …] 43 […] of the [supreme princes he will bless] in the glorious name of God all the [… with seven words] 44 wondrous. He will bless all their [councils] in his holy temple 45 [with seven wondrous words] and bless those who know the eternal things. [The second] 46 [of the supreme princes will bless in the name] of his truth all [their places] with seven wondrous [words. He will bless] with seven wondrous words; 47 [and he will bless … the] king with seven words of the glory of his wonders, all the pure ones eternally. The thi[rd] 48 [of the supreme princes will bless in the name] of his supreme kingship [all those of ex]alted knowledge with se[ven wo]rds of exaltation, and all [the angels of] 49 the knowledge of [his truth] he will bless with seven wondrous words; he will bless all those [appointed] to righteousness [with seven] wondrous words. [The fourth] 50 of the supreme princes will bless in the name of the majesty of the king all those who conduct themselves righteously with seven majestic words; and he will bless those who establish the [majesty] with seven 51 wondrous words; and he will bless all the [angels who approach] the knowledge of his truth with seven words of righteousness for his glorious mercy. The fifth 52 of the [supreme princes] will bless in the name [of his wondrous majesty] all those who [know the mysteries of …] the pure one with seven words of his exalted 53 truth; [and he will bless] all those who hasten to carry out his will with seven [wondrous words; and he will bless] all those who recognize his majesty with seven words of majesty, 54 for a wondrous thanksgiving.

In the Hebrew Bible, the root *pl'* appears in narrative and poetic (Albertz 1997, p. 1234)[9] texts and generally expresses acts performed by God, of judgment or redemption[10], which transcend common human experience (Thomas 2009, pp. 136–137) and are unexpected, causing wonder and emphasizing human limitations. In the *Book of Job*, this aspect of human incomprehension regarding the wonders performed by God is particularly emphasized[11], establishing a connection between wisdom, creation, and cosmology (Thomas 2009, p. 139). It translates as marvel, wonder, marvelous. It may also refer to the transcendence of God's action, to the extent that it is regarded as incomprehensible, extraordinary, and mysterious[12]. The aspect of limitation is also explicitly emphasized in some Qumranic texts (where it is reiterated that man is simply made of clay or earth)[13] or, as in the case of the *War Scroll* 1QM XIV:14–15, the mysteries of wonder elevate the one who is in the dust and lower the one who makes himself like God:

> 14 For great is the p[lan of] your [glo]ry and your marvelous mysteries in [your] height[s], in order to r[ai]se from the dust for yourself 15 and to humble those of the gods.

Its use in poetic or narrative–sapiential texts can also be found in the Qumran scrolls where it appears for the most part in hymnic, encomiastic, and laudatory passages, so much so that in these contexts *pl'* seems to reveal its predominant meaning.

If what has been said represents the semantic level of the use of the root *pl'*, from a functional point of view, it is immersed in a dynamic of reduction of terms used, in which few terms are repeated multiple times, with a specific intent to create a state of ecstasy and participation in the heavenly liturgy.

(9) Two-thirds of the total occurrences.

(10) For some occurrences of the mysteries of God, terms such as judgment, mercy, or atonement are also used.

(11) Cf. Job 37-38; 42:3.

(12) The *niph'al* conjugation of the root *pl'* can also be rendered as "to exceed" or "to be excessive." Cf. Alonso Schökel 2013, pp. 677-678; Bonanno 2023, pp. 14-15.

(13) Cf. 1QHa[a] IX:23; XII:28-29 and three other texts from the *Hodayot* where we read "mysteries of God." (1QHa[a] XVIII, 5; XX:23; XXI:27).

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the root *pl'* appears 86 times, of which 39 are in the biblical Psalms. Only in the section 6–8 of the Songs, in contrast to 41 occurrences of the root *qdš* (holy, holiness, sanctuary), 44 of *brk* (bless), and 77 of the number seven, and its derivatives seventh and sevenfold, we find *pl'* 66 times (99 in the entire work). Specifically, 33 times in the Songs 6, 12 in the Songs 7, and 21 in the Songs 8. Furthermore, if we also consider overlapping texts, the sum of the occurrences of the root *pl'* comes after only those of the terms ʾĕlôhîm (God) and šeḇaʿ (seven) (Maier 1992, p. 554).

Of these most used terms, the root *pl'* is the only one that, besides having an instrumental use due to its repetition, represents the attitude of the faithful during praise. Samuel Thomas suggests that *pl'* is used to qualify the heavenly dwelling, the sanctuary or the heavenly sanctuaries, and the most holy area as well as some of its architectural features; the entire firmament, understood as the sum of the heavens, is considered as *pl'*. The clothing of the heavenly priesthood and its equipment is also considered of "wonderful nature" (Thomas 2016, p. 286).

By combining the two, it could be said that the worshiper is led into a state where wonder for the actions of God is the hallmark of their life in the *yaḥad* and of experiencing angelic communion in the liturgy.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said, along with Newsom, that language itself codifies an experience, indeed:

> The investigation of religious experience in communities of antiquity is one of the most elusive of academic quests. It is not, however, an investigation that eludes inquiry entirely. Language itself encodes experience or at least it encodes attempts to induce experience. That encoding is something that is objectively present, and that can be studied. Thus where we have texts that presumably served as scripts or models for performances, we can draw reasonable conclusions about the ways in which religious communities attempted to construct common experiences for individuals in the community and for the body of the community as a whole. […] The Sabbath Songs illustrate a different type

> of inculcated experience, a common worship shared not only by the assembled members of the community but also to a certain extent with the angelic priests themselves (Newsom 2012, pp. 220–221).

Thus, the root *pl'* also appears to be the hallmark of the attitude of one who participates in the liturgy in communion with the angels. Moreover, this root is one of the main keys to access it.

The wonder, in the face of the marvelous works performed by God, and conveyed by the root *pl'*, seems to be one of the main categories through which the experience defined as "realized eschatology" is expressed. This attitude shows what man feels when finding himself synchronized with the rhythms of the cosmos. It is a sort of awareness of being within the mechanism with which God has designed creation. The exaltation of God's extraordinary works, and the awe of man that follows, derives from God's revelation of hidden things (*nistarot*). What God has revealed and has been transmitted to the members of the community is a source of wonder.

Having its internal dynamics, through the repetitive use of terms and a particular structure developed in the 13 songs, which invite to enter into an ecstatic state, it could be hypothesized that the entire work was recited in a single session and not divided over 13 Sabbaths[(14)]. If the true purpose of the work is liturgical, how could it be possible that only on certain Sabbaths is this sort of communion facilitated by proceeding in an ecstatic state? In fact, Andrea Lieber states that: "This kind of text only makes sense as a vocalized mantra or meditation, or more likely as a communal song" (Lieber 2004, p. 55).

On one hand, the repetitive style and structure of the thirteen hymns might simply reflect a literary and poetic characteristic; on the other hand, it cannot be excluded that this repetition serves a

(14) "These examples illustrate the way in which the careful manipulation of language constructs an invitation to certain kinds of numinous religious experience. The question that lingers, however, has to do with how the sectarians would have engaged the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice. From my own experience in translating, editing, and commenting on this text, I can say that the effect of the language is most powerful when it is read and experienced in a single sitting. But if the date headings are taken seriously, the Sabbath Songs would not have been experienced as a rhetorical whole but would have been spread out over a quarter of the year. Would not the religious experience of the composition have been significantly weakened if it were encountered in such a piecemeal fashion? It certainly seems so;" *ibid.*, p. 219.

functional purpose for the worshiper, enabling them to enter an ecstatic state in which they experience the afterlife and the wonders of God. In this latter dynamic, the root *pl'* would be significant not only at the textual level but also as an expression of the experience undergone by the worshipers. This experience can be described as one of awe, particularly an awe attainable by members of the *yaḥad* only through renouncing the sinful worship of the Temple to live in God's holy times within the community of the elect. Those who consider themselves the rest of Israel faithful to the covenant and who separate themselves both from unfaithful Israel and from the Gentiles can thus experience awe in the angelic liturgy. This is evidently a result of the disenchantment caused by the Temple's administration, which, on the threshold of the eschatological era, led to a profound communion with God and His angels.

Thus, considering the obsessive and repetitive use of *pl'* and other terms, it is reasonable to infer that the *Songs* were recited in their entirety to guide the worshipper into a state of communion with the angels. Alternatively, if they were recited individually each Sabbath, exclusively in specific instances (such as in *Songs* 6, 7, and 8), the text may have functioned as an ecstatic mantra, repeated obsessively(15).

Finally, therefore, we can affirm that the change brought about by disenchantment has allowed for a unique experience of communion with the angels and experiencing divine beatitude in the present. The testimony of the understanding of this experience is represented using the language of wonder conveyed by the root *pl'*. The marvelous works of God, the *niflā'ôt*, which cause awe in man, for the members of the *yaḥad* are experiential thanks to the correct calendar, being in tune with the times that God has impressed upon the cosmos. Enchantment thus is the fruit of this harmony that allows for the experience of liturgical communion with the angels and in fully experiencing the marvelous works of God.

(15) It should be noted that the Songs in their literary form appear to be unique within the landscape of Second Temple Judaism. Furthermore, their widespread presence is evidenced by copies found at Masada.

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DANGEROUS PLEASURES: THE SUBLIME AS CORRUPTION IN RENAISSANCE CATHOLICISM[1]

Luís Neiva

Abstract: Music has never been a quiet partner to liturgy. Since as early as the time of Saint Augustine, both music and musicians were commonly seen as a source of excess, transgression, and lewdness. These accusations became even more severe during the last decades of the fifteenth century with the advent of Renaissance polyphony. To better understand this phenomenon, this article starts by examining the ideological structures underpinning the Catholic ritual of the Renaissance, framing religious belief as an external, objective act. Drawing its theoretical core from Lacanian psychoanalysis, it interrogates how sacred practices function as ideological constructs, embedding faith within collective actions rather than personal spirituality. The study then shifts to the contentious debates surrounding polyphonic music, analyzing how its perceived excesses transgressed the boundaries of doctrinal purity. Through historical critiques and theological anxieties, the article demonstrates that music, rather than serving as a mere vehicle for devotion, fundamentally disrupted the ideological stability of the Church by exposing the inherent gaps within belief itself. Ultimately, this study contends that the tensions surrounding music's place in worship reflect a deeper struggle to contain the disruptive potential of aesthetic experience, revealing a fragile ideological mechanism wherein the sacred is sustained through its very negation.

La musica non è mai stata un partner silenzioso della liturgia. Fin dall'epoca di sant'Agostino, sia la musica sia i musicisti sono stati comunemente considerati fonte di eccesso, trasgressione e licenziosità. Tali accuse si fecero ancora più gravi negli ultimi decenni del Quattrocento, con l'avvento della polifonia rinascimentale. Per comprendere meglio questo fenomeno, il presente articolo prende le mosse dall'analisi delle strutture ideologiche che sorreggono il rituale cattolico

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del Rinascimento, concependo la fede religiosa come atto esterno e oggettivo. Traendo il proprio nucleo teorico dalla psicoanalisi lacaniana, il saggio indaga il modo in cui le pratiche sacre operano come costruzioni ideologiche, inscrivendo la fede nell'ambito dell'azione collettiva piuttosto che in quello della spiritualità personale. Successivamente, lo studio si concentra sulle accese controversie intorno alla musica polifonica, analizzando come i suoi supposti eccessi trasgredissero i confini della purezza dottrinale. Attraverso critiche storiche e ansie teologiche, l'articolo mostra come la musica, lungi dall'essere un semplice veicolo di devozione, abbia invece destabilizzato in modo radicale l'equilibrio ideologico della Chiesa, rendendo visibili le fratture interne al credere stesso. In ultima analisi, lo studio sostiene che le tensioni relative al ruolo della musica nel culto riflettano un conflitto più profondo: quello volto a contenere il potenziale destabilizzante dell'esperienza estetica, la quale svela un meccanismo ideologico fragile, in cui il sacro si regge proprio attraverso la propria negazione.

Keywords: Renaissance, Polyphony, Ideology, Music, Belief

Parole chiave: Rinascimento, Polifonia, Ideologia, Musica, Credo

Lisbon, 19th of April, 1506

As a group of believers gathered at the chapel of S. Domingos for the Sunday mass, a mysterious light shone upon the face of the crucified Christ. A miracle, for sure, a sign that the plague and famine that dwelled upon the city were about to end. However, among the group, a *converso* — one of the thousands forced to convert from Judaism to Christianity less than a decade before — claimed that there was nothing supernatural about that light, that it was solely a reflection of a nearby candle. His words sparked outrage; following the enraged instructions of one of the priests, the crowd seized the man and violently dragged him outside, where he was beaten to death. The hatred unleashed at that moment spread swiftly, and over the next three days, hundreds of Jewish men, women, and children were massacred in the city streets in what would be remembered as the Lisbon Pogrom(2).

This terrible tragedy, sadly almost erased from the Portuguese collective memory, speaks to the darkest facets of ideological fundamentalism. However, the absurd magnitude of such an upheaval also raises

(2) This event is described with some detail in various chronicles of the time. See, for example, Góis (1566) and Resende (1554).

some unsettling questions on the nature of belief and the lengths to which people will go to defend it — questions that lie at the core of this essay.

To address them, I propose to remain within the era of this tragic episode but shift my focus to a particularly significant debate that emerged a few decades earlier and profoundly influenced both sacred art and devotional culture in Europe throughout the sixteenth century.

This debate centers on the use of music, especially polyphonic music, within the Catholic liturgy.

The first part of this article will thus focus on the ideological structure of religious rituals, with the aim of investigating the inner mechanisms of faith and how they shaped Renaissance liturgy.

Subsequently, I will examine the debate surrounding polyphonic music from the perspective of its critics. Here, I propose a reinterpretation of historical accounts to shed light on the disruptive nature of liturgical music and its complex role within religious practice.

1. Ritual and performance in religious belief

Common sense would tell us that belief is something fundamentally personal and internal, rooted in individual conviction. We engage in certain practices because we believe in what they represent. Yet, these practices require some level of trust; even the most fundamentalist believer cannot claim to know the inner workings of every ritualistic gesture they perform. On the contrary, they would agree that one is not supposed to know, but do it, nevertheless. And still, according to this perspective, someone needs to know. Within (Catholic) religious contexts, priests, first, and saints, on a higher level, take on the role of mediators, the safekeepers of meaning. They act as conduits, bridging the divine with the mundane, allowing the congregation to "know" through them. This mediation is seen not only as a method of transmission but also as a powerful structuring of belief itself, as it suggests that the internal dimension of belief is sustained by an external, delegated knowledge.

However, things may not be this straightforward.

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek proposes a curious inversion: what if what we do through others in religious practices is not knowing, but believing? To illustrate this, Žižek (1989, pp. 31–32) refers to an interesting practice:

> It is similar to Tibetan prayer wheels: you write a prayer on a paper, put the rolled paper into a wheel, and turn it automatically, without thinking […]. In this way, the wheel itself is praying for me, instead of me — or, more precisely, I myself am praying through the medium of the wheel. The beauty of it all is that in my psychological inferiority I can think about whatever I want, I can yield to the most dirty and obscene fantasies, and it does not matter because — to use a good old Stalinist expression — whatever I am thinking, objectively I am praying.

This notion, which Žižek aptly terms "objective belief", reveals an often–overlooked aspect of ideology: belief is not as internal as it seems; rather, it is an external element born from the practices themselves, and even independent of personal convictions. More important than that, belief is fundamentally decentered: one always believes through an Other. Ideology operates then not by convincing us of certain ideas but by embedding itself into the routines and rituals that structure our social reality.

This is not to say, of course, that the aforementioned aspect of "not–knowing" is to be ignored. Faith is impossible without doubt; a barrier must exist between practice and practitioner, a sort of mysterious apparatus that keeps absolute knowledge at bay and interrupts the "vicious cycle of deferred belief" (Žižek 2004, p. 21). To those accustomed to the psychoanalytical jargon, this process strongly resembles the work of *transference*, a mechanism through which the subject entrusts the mystery of their unconscious to an external figure that is presumed to "know" in their place. In Lacanian psychoanalytic practice, the analyst often responds with deliberate vagueness to the analysand's insights, dreams or slips of the tongue, sometimes avoiding verbal answers altogether and instead replying with a mere "hmm…". This ambiguity drives the analysand into an anxious search for meaning, incessantly

compelled to interpret what is left unsaid, an endeavor that ultimately leads them toward their unconscious desires (Fink 1997).

The phenomenon of transference has strong theological implications. It is at this point that one can observe how faith summons its own requirements. To make this clearer let us consider the sentiment of love for a moment: any lover could easily attest to the fact that true love is unconditional, in the precise sense that we do not love a person because of its specific, contingent features, rather those features appear to us as unique only retroactively, through the very act of love. In the same way, any true believer would certainly claim that God's existence requires no proof, and yet find all the evidence necessary through their own faith.

The religious context of the Renaissance, on which I anchor the present essay, perfectly exemplifies this dynamic: it is quite revealing that the Council of Trent (1545–1563) not only reaffirmed the importance of speaking Latin at the liturgy (a language that was not understood by the vast majority of people) but also demanded that priests "would not say the words hastily, but in a proper way, pronouncing each one distinctly and gravely, so that by saying them, the thought is fixed on God and everyone can understand their letter and spirit" *(Concilium Tridentinum* 1901, p. 927).

I would claim that the apparent contradiction between the discourse coming out of the Vatican and the reality of the believers is not merely a contingency of some cultural or social gap completely ignored or dismissed by ecclesiastical authorities. On the contrary: by holding the significance of the sacred text secret, the priest appears to suspend subjectivity, since the strange, imperceptible words (if spoken "in a proper way") hold the promise of an absolute identification with the divine.

On the other hand, people had to realize at some level that they were indeed only listening to words, not magical spells. And here resides the true radicality of the Žižekian dialectical twist: it is not so much that the individuals do not know what they do, but that they know and still do it as if they did not know. As Žižek (1989, p. 16) puts it, "'Ideological' is not the false 'consciousness' of a (social) being but this being itself in so far as it is supported by 'false consciousness'".

Finally, it is relevant at this juncture to invoke Jacques Lacan's retelling of Freud's Oedipal theory: for Lacan (1991), the pre–Oedipal

phase involves an undivided unity between the child and the maternal figure(3), a state where the mother has no desire except for the child, and the child has no desire except for the mother. In this early stage, desire is not yet differentiated; there is only the feeling of complete identification with an Other, a *hic et nunc*. Over time, however, the child comes to recognize that the mother entertains desires that extend beyond them, leading the infant to attempt to align with her desire. Yet this alignment is interrupted by the symbolic prohibition associated with the father figure, introducing the child to the castrating rules of social life: language, the law, social practices, morality, etc. For Lacan, what drives the subject's desire is the attempt at returning to this primal unity, a realm without lack. The paradox here is that the primal unity is only created retroactively, through language, persisting only in its own unattainability. Desire, in Lacanian theory, is structured by the impossibility of total fulfillment.

In the same way, the delicate balance that sustains belief is in the acceptance of the faithful that the substance of their faith is unattainable. As long as there is something left to conceal, the unknown remains cherished, eternally veiled, with each believer complicit in the mystery that both binds and eludes them.

It is this sensible stability that music appears to undermine.

2. The problem with polyphony

2.1. *From Augustine to Trent*

Music has never been a quiet partner to liturgy. In fact, since as early as the time of Saint Augustine, song has occupied an ambiguous place in the Catholic ritual, somewhere between function and sin:

> So I waver between the danger that lies in gratifying the senses and the benefits which, as I know from experience, can accrue from singing. Without committing myself to an irrevocable opinion, I am inclined

(3) More than any biological attribute, the maternal figure/mother here essentially stands in for the function of the primary caretaker. Equally, the paternal figure/father relates to the symbolic.

> to approve of the custom of singing in church, in order that by indulging the ears weaker spirits may be inspired with feelings of devotion. Yet when I find the singing itself more moving than the truth which it conveys, I confess that this is a grievous sin, and at those times I would prefer not to hear the singer. (Augustine c.400)

This dichotomy took on new dimensions starting in the twelfth century with a revolution centered around the newly founded Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, where composers like Léonin and Pérotin began combining two, three, and four voice parts to produce the first rhythmically complex polyphonic works. As might be expected, this new genre was not always well received, as evidenced by the words of John of Salisbury:

> It also dishonors the very practice of religion that in the very sight of the Lord […] with the lewdness of a lascivious voice and a kind of self–ostentation […] they attempt to effeminate the astonished little souls. […] you would believe it to be a chorus of Sirens, not a choir of men. […] Indeed, when such practices go too far, they can more easily occasion arousal in the loins than devotion in the mind. (McGee 1998, p. 23)

At this time, and until the late fourteenth century, critics primarily focused on the rhythmic complexity of some of these works rather than on the genre itself. It was common to find viewpoints that accepted — and even valued — the presence of polyphony in liturgical ceremonies, even among its critics, provided it was performed with appropriate restraint. This situation, however, changed in the 1470s.

Amid rising ideological tensions within the Catholic Church, deeply conservative clergymen such as Johannes Roth and Girolamo Savonarola started to gain prominence, and with them a new type of opposition towards polyphony: rejection was now directed more at the very act of singing in multiple voices rather than any possible excesses in rhythmic or expressive sophistication(4). These two excerpts from Giovanni Caroli and Savonarola, respectively, illustrate the radicality of the criticism:

(4) For a thorough description of this debate, see Wegman (2005).

> Therefore those polyphonies, which are both new and unheard of and (if we will truly admit it) presumptuous, and the so–called *biscantus*, lacking all harmony, do not much please. Indeed I rather hate and detest those things, since they most truly seem to pertain more to the levity of women than to the dignity of leading men. (Wegman 2005, p. 28)

> And behold, along came the grub, that is, the Devil, and under the appearance of good began to lead the monks into building pretty churches, and [conducting] pretty ceremonies, and to devote themselves to *canti figurati*; and all day sing, sing, sing, and soon there is nothing of the spirit; likewise the nuns, all day organs, organs, organs, and soon there is nothing: and in this way the grub has destroyed the greenery of prayers and of the spirit. (Wegman 2005, p. 57)

Such strong sentiment eventually led to the prohibition of this genre in Breslau (1482), Görlitz (1486) and Florence (1493), and to heavy restrictions across various regions of Europe (Wegman 2005).

Notwithstanding, the dominant stance inside the church was never one of complete prohibition, but moderation. Attempts to control such an excessive presence were common, leading to profound changes in the compositional style of this music throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the Iberian Peninsula, for example, older formulas of improvised counterpoint crystallized in a unique way of composing polyphonic requiem masses, which kept the plainchant melody intact in one of the voices (usually the higher one), creating a very clear hierarchy inside the harmonic structure (Wagstaff 1995).

The most significant and organized response, however, emerged during the Council of Trent, where music was a topic of discussion both within the Council sessions and in the preliminary meetings. Commonly proposed guidelines included prohibiting secular melodies in church, encouraging composers to make use of established rhetorical codes, and, above all, ensuring that musical textures remained simple enough to preserve the clarity of the text at all times (Seiça 2019).

Consequently, composers such as Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina and Tomás Luis de Victoria came to be revered as paragons of refined taste, profoundly influencing the evolution of music composition in the following decades.

Despite these efforts, excess did not entirely vanish, even in contexts strictly adhering to Tridentine guidelines. Instead, accusations of improper conduct were often directed at the musicians themselves, as illustrated by this remark from Pedro Cerone (1613, p. 7):

> And thus he is made a Centaur; a mythical beast of the ancients, which was half man, half horse: from which is to be understood, a man given to his vices and sensualities, governed by his appetite and not by reason; who, having the figure of a man, lives as an irrational animal. So that considering the behavior of some musicians, I can philosophically say: that musicians know how to temper their instruments, but not their defects and bad inclinations.

The persistence of this transgressive drive is quite enlightening in itself as if the excess always found new ways to resist repression, which begs the question: why was music always condemned to non–belonging?

2.2. *With a broken voice*

To find an answer, we might need only to examine the critiques of those who opposed polyphony. The primary criticism of this genre focused on the lack of textual clarity, particularly when compared to the lucidity of plainchant, a much older and well–established tradition. However, as previously noted, the issue appears to run deeper, since even fully homophonic structures faced rejection from some. Thus, the subversive nature of this music seems to lie elsewhere. What I will attempt to demonstrate is that the fundamental disruption of polyphonic music is inextricably linked to a perceived betrayal of the voice as a medium for meaning.

We should, first, note that a common description of polyphony during the Middle Ages and Renaissance was *fractio vocis*, or "the breaking of the voice". This term referred to how sung text was expressed through multiple distinct sounds or rhythms simultaneously(5), but it could also be interpreted in a different light.

(5) The wonderful ambiguity of this expression has been widely discussed in the field of Historical Musicology. While some interpret it merely as counterpoint, others argue it refers to rhythmical mensuration of a single melodic line, or even to ornamentation. See, for instance, Ferand (1957).

My claim is that in this fragmentation of voice, it is the very ideality of meaning that is shattered. Through polyphony, text becomes a site of rupture, where we glimpse, however momentarily, that meaning was never there to begin with — an absence that appears precisely within the harmonic spaces between notes. Just like in Lacan's Oedipal theory, a gap emerges, at this point, between music as an idealized reality (while stuck to the written notation) offering the promise of complete access to the meaning sealed in the sacred text, and music at the moment of performance — a materialized excess that corrupts and threatens the primary unity between the individual and the sacred maternal.

This is not to say that only polyphony hinders the relationship between voice and (idealized) meaning. What Savonarola and all the other critics failed to see in their approval of plainchant as the only moral practice is that the same (non–) relation was also what Saint Augustine struggled with, centuries before polyphony was even discovered. Ultimately, this deadlock speaks to the very nature of (vocal) music as the device that exposes the vacuity of language.

Language, as Ferdinand de Saussure (1995) would later argue, is centered around the idea of the signifier, an element with no inherent content, animated only through differentiation from other signifiers. This negative existence undercuts any straightforward connection between voice and meaning, revealing a structural lack at the heart of language, a lack that mirrors the very disjunction both Augustine and Savonarola sensed in vocal expression (Dolar 2006).

This insight also draws upon Leonardo da Vinci's words taken from his *Paragone*: "But Painting surpasses and outranks Music since it does not die instantly after its creation as happens to unfortunate Music; on the contrary, it stays on and so shows itself to you as something alive while in fact it is confined to a surface" (Winternitz 1970, p. 281).

There is, indeed, something intrinsically elusive about that which dies the moment it is born — and that fundamental inability to grasp the "object–voice" (Dolar 2006) is what music ultimately lays bare. Listening to music ultimately reveals a fundamental negativity.

Logically, the attempts made by the Council of Trent to hide this gap were doomed to failure. However, the way they failed reveals yet another unexpected subversion: this lack is not only woven into the

practices but into the practitioners as well, a point also made by Björn Schmelzer (2024), who suggests that this excess comes from the very physical presence of the musicians during the ritual: "The sensation of excess causing stupefaction was more easily accepted in painting and architecture than in polyphony, where it was usually severely dismissed, no doubt because of the physical and often embarrassing presence and involvement of human beings."

Subsequently, it is fair to say that the act of performing music opens up space for a double kind of subjectivity: the one enacted by the musicians on the music, turning the idealized, comfortable reality of the written symbols of notation into the outrageous manifestation of the performance; and the one enacted by the music on the musicians, revealing that the split is located in the self as well. Again, to find echoes of this perspective, we need not look further than in the opinions of polyphony's harshest critics, notably the words of the thirteenth–century Dominican preacher Guillaume Peyraut, cited in the 1440s by the mystic Denis the Carthusian:

> The breaking–up of voice appears to be a sign of a broken soul. In the same way as the [artificial] curling of hair is reprehensible in men, the pleating of garments in women, so [is] the breaking–up of voice in singers; just as the wind customarily produces ripples in the water, so the wind of vanity customarily produces this trembling and breaking of the sound. (Wegman 2002, p. 50)

It follows from this that the awe–inducing aesthetical experience of music is deeply connected with the experience of the sacred. However, this experience is not found in the confrontation with an unbearable vastness of meaning but rather in the encounter with the most unbearable nothingness(6). In a context so impregnated with signification construction devices, as was the case of the catholic liturgy of the sixteenth

(6) Keeping in the spirit of allowing the past to speak about its own contradictions, it might be worth recalling, at this point, the words of Meister Eckhart (2009, p. 465): "You should love Him as He is: a non–God, a non–spirit, a non–person, a non–image; rather, as He is a sheer pure limpid One, detached from all duality. And in that One may we eternally sink from nothingness to nothingness. So help us God."

century, the real traumatic twist introduced by music is precisely the interruption of that process, hinting at the underlying fragility of mediated belief.

Ultimately, if we accept that the idea of God is effectively born in the practices done in His name, a split practice like music splits the Absolute itself.

3. Coda

The anxiety surrounding music's role in worship raises a compelling question: if it posed such a profound threat, why not simply ban it altogether? Why integrate it into the ritual, only to wage an endless struggle against it?

The most immediate answer is embedded in the question itself. Evidently, the struggle against a practice like music reveals the common conservative deadlock of how the prohibition of enjoyment easily turns into an enjoyment of prohibition. At this level, the repeated attempts to regulate musical praxis affirmed its necessary (and desired) imperfection, solidifying a clear hierarchy governed by ecclesiastical authorities.

There is, however, a much more radical alternative interpretation[7]. As I attempted to demonstrate, music points at a void, one that pervades all forms of ritual and extends to the very concept of God. And here lays the crux of religious belief: while constantly seeking the transcendental, believers also shield themselves from their own findings. The more powerful the revelation, the more radical its rejection. That is, ultimately, why polyphony faced a stronger opposition than other practices, including plainchant.

Could we not frame the tragic episode with which I opened this essay in the same way? The supposed sin of the Jewish man was perhaps stranger than a simple refusal to accept the practices that essentially sustained objective belief, and consequently, the rules of the social game.

In stating the obvious, the man affirmed what was already on everyone's minds, but could not be uttered: "I do not believe it myself, but

(7) A similar point is made by Richard Boothby (2023), who juxtaposes the figure of Christ and its significance for Christianity with Jacques Lacan's complex theory of sexuation.

Others do, so I believe through them". By denouncing the split of the religious Other, he exposed the fragility upon which collective belief rests — a structure that can only endure as long as its paradox remains unspoken.

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AWE *TOUT COURT*: NEITHER RELIGIOUS NOR SPIRITUAL

Boris Rähme

Abstract: This article argues that awe is not inherently a religious or spiritual emotion. Drawing on psychological research, it adopts Keltner and Haidt's two–component model of awe as a response to perceived vastness that triggers a need for cognitive accommodation. The article argues that the categorization of an awe experience as religious or non–religious, spiritual or non–spiritual entirely depends on the cognitive resources used by the awestruck subject in attempting to accommodate awe. To distinguish between religious, spiritual, and neither religious nor spiritual variants of awe, the article introduces working definitions of religion and spirituality. Religious awe involves reference to supernatural transcendence; spiritual awe emphasizes personal meaning and authenticity. In contrast, the expression "awe *tout court*" is introduced to refer to awe experiences that do not involve appeals to supernatural transcendence or subjective self–expression.

Questo capitolo sostiene che il timore reverenziale non è intrinsecamente un'emozione religiosa o spirituale. Basandosi su ricerche psicologiche, adotta il modello a due componenti proposto da Keltner e Haidt, secondo cui il timore reverenziale è una risposta alla percezione di qualcosa di immenso che attiva un bisogno di accomodamento cognitivo. Il capitolo argomenta che la classificazione di un'esperienza di timore reverenziale come religiosa o non religiosa, spirituale o non spirituale dipende interamente dalle risorse cognitive attivate dal soggetto interessato nel tentativo di accomodare tale esperienza. Per distinguere tra varianti religiose, spirituali e né religiose né spirituali dello stupore, vengono introdotte definizioni operative di religione e spiritualità. Il timore reverenziale religioso implica riferimento a un'idea di trascendenza soprannaturale; il timore reverenziale spirituale mette in risalto il significato personale e l'autenticità soggettiva del vissuto. In contrasto con queste due categorie viene introdotta l'espressione "timore reverenziale tout court" per indicare quelle esperienze di timore reverenziale che non comportano richiami ad alcuna trascendenza sovrannaturale né forme di auto–espressione soggettiva.

Keywords: Awe, Cognitive Accommodation, Nonreligiousness, Nonspirituality, Agnosticism

Parole chiave: Timore reverenziale, Accomodamento cognitivo, Non religiosità, Non spiritualità, Agnosticismo

1. Introduction

Experiences of awe have sometimes been described as intrinsically spiritual or religious (Otto 1923; Heschel 1951, 1955, 1965; Wettstein 2012). More recently, philosophers have even gone so far as to propose an abductive argument for the existence of God from awe inspired by experiences of nature (Porcher and De Luca–Noronha 2021), as well as an argument for pantheism from two premises linking awe that resiliently persists under critical scrutiny to the cosmos and the divine (Byerly 2019). However, outside the circles of analytic philosophers of religion it is today widely agreed that appeal to the sacred, the transcendent or, more generally, to something beyond the realm of what is taken to be in principle explainable by the natural sciences, is but one option in accounting for experiences of awe (see, for instance, Caldwell–Harris *et al.* 2011; De Smedt and De Cruz 2013). I will adhere to this mainstream view in the present article.

The expression "accounting for experiences of awe" is ambiguous in the preceding sentence. It can be taken to refer to the internal, emic perspective of persons who experience awe and try to interpret or make sense of their experience. As opposed to this phenomenological reading, it may also be taken to refer to the etic perspective of observing researchers who strive to explain the fact that people do experience awe or try to give a conceptual account of what is going on when people experience awe. In what follows, I will keep both readings in play and trust that context will disambiguate.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* William James (1902/2002, p. 27) maintains that there is no difference at the emotional level between religious and nonreligious awe: "religious awe is the same organic thrill which we feel in a forest at twilight, or in a mountain gorge; only this time it comes over us at the thought of our supernatural relations".

In this article, I follow James' lead but shift the focus away from (intended) objects of awe to the cognitive — more or less conscious, more or less reflectively explicit — interpretation of awe experiences. I will argue that the difference between religious and/or spiritual awe on the one hand, neither religious nor spiritual awe (the awe *tout court* alluded to in the title) on the other, has nothing to do with the objects or events experienced by individuals as awe–inspiring.

In section 2 I present some general psychological and philosophical observations on awe. Section 3 rehearses the main tenets of Dacher Keltner and Johnathan Haidt's (2003) conceptual framework for psychological research on awe and emphasises what I take to be its analytic strengths and weaknesses. After providing working accounts of the concepts of religion and spirituality, section 4 sketches the idea of neither religious nor spiritual awe, or awe *tout court*. Section 5 draws a tentative agnostic conclusion from the preceding considerations.

2. Awe

Awe is a complex mental state, often described in psychology as a profound emotional and cognitive response to stimuli perceived as vast (Keltner and Haidt 2003) or sublime (Arcangeli *et al*. 2020; Clewis, Yaden and Chirico 2021). Arguably, awe can have purely positive or purely negative emotional valence. But awe can also carry a mix of both positive and negative valence. In some languages other than English, the compound nature and the negative–positive ambiguity are reflected in composite noun phrases such as the German "Ehrfurcht" or the Italian "timore reverenziale". It is worth noting, however, that some have taken natural language to be a poor guide to analysing and understanding awe. Paul Ekman (1992, p. 193), for instance, argues that awe should be conceptualized as a basic (non–compound and non–reducible) emotion.

Awe is also what philosophers call an intentional state. As John Searle puts it, "'Intentionality' is a fancy philosopher's term for that capacity of the mind by which it is directed at, or about, objects and states of affairs in the world, typically independent of itself." (Searle 2010, p. 25).

Sincere (and non–pathological) awe will clearly always be triggered by, directed at or about some perceived object, person or event. Awe that persists without the experience of an intended object or event that triggers the awe may indicate a problematic psychological condition. So, as with all intentional states, there is twist. As Tim Crane (2001, p. 337) puts it, there is "a familiar and recalcitrant fact about intentionality: that intentional states can be about things which do not exist." Someone may be awestruck by objects or events they hallucinate. Or, less worryingly, someone may be awestruck by what they take to be an X (an imposing snow–covered mountain, say) from their peculiar visual perspective but which in fact is just a Y (say, a snow–clad roof and chimney). Presumably, once they realise their misperception, the emotion of awe will disappear (Quinn 1997).

This is not the place to delve into the extensive philosophical debates over the question of whether merely intentional objects should be allowed into the ontological inventory of the world (Jacob 2023). At this point I only want to emphasise that failing to distinguish clearly between the description of an object or event that is taken to be experienced and the object or event itself, if any, which triggers the experience, can lead to seriously misleading ambiguity. Subject A may experience a view of K7 as an awe–inspiring natural revelation of God, subject B may experience the same view of K7 as awe–inspiring *tout court*, and subject C may experience the view as not awe–expiring at all — perhaps because C has lived at the foot of K7 all her life and sees the mountain many times a day. The mountain that A, B and C perceive is K7. The ways in which A, B and C experience the view of K7 as well as the ways in which they interpret their experiences differ radically. I will get back to the idea of awe tout court, awe without metaphysical coziness or comfort, in due course.

Awe is usually rare in the sense that most of our everyday experiences do not trigger awe. Indeed, a person who appears to be constantly awestruck will either seem overexcited, spurious, or in need of help. Searle emphasizes that the intentional attitudes of a human mind are directed at objects or events which are "typically independent" of the intending mind itself. Perhaps, occasionally, a mind can be awestruck by itself, or by its own perceived accomplishments. However, results of recent psychological research consistently indicate that experiences of awe tend to

"induce a sense of 'small self' (perceiving the self as small and insignificant)" (Jiang *et al.* 2024, p. 476) which in turn can lead to reinforcing a series of prosocial attitudes and behaviours in awestruck persons. Studies suggest that awe diminishes egocentrism and encourages individuals to prioritise collective well–being over personal goals (Shiota, Keltner and Mossman 2007; Bai *et al.* 2017; Stellar *et al.* 2018).

Awe has also been linked to cognitive and epistemic benefits such as improving creativity and problem–solving capacities. By disrupting habitual thought patterns, it seems that awe can enable deeper cognitive engagement with complex issues. Helen DeCruz (2020), for instance, draws on autobiographical reflections by scientists such as Richard Dawkins, Rachel Carson, Richard Feynman, and Albert Einstein, and on results from recent psychological research (Valdesolo and Graham 2017) to argue that emotions like awe and wonder qualify as epistemic emotions: they encourage scientists to value the natural world for its own sake, promote open–mindedness and curiosity, and facilitate scientific creativity and discovery.

To conclude this brief overview, I should mention neurophenomenological approaches to research on awe. The term "neurophenomenology" was coined by the neurobiologist Francisco Varela (1996). Generally speaking, neurophenomenology is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of consciousness that correlates measurements of physiological brain processes with first–person phenomenological accounts of experiences. The neurophenomenology of awe, more specifically, seeks to bridge the gap in scientific understanding between first–person experiences of awe and their underlying neural mechanisms and correlates (Reinerman–Jones *et al.* 2013; Gallagher *et al.* 2015). By integrating first–person experiential data on subjective significance with third–person neural data researchers aim to establish explanatory connections between etic and emic perspectives on the phenomenon of awe.

3. Keltner and Haidt on Awe

Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt's seminal paper *Approaching Awe: A Moral, Spiritual, and Aesthetic Emotion* (2003) outlines a conceptual

approach which can still be considered the "leading research framework" for empirical research on awe in psychology (Jiang *et al.* 2024, p. 476). Keltner and Haidt plausibly posit awe as a distinct and complex emotion that can occur in moral, political, spiritual, and aesthetic contexts. They argue that awe arises when persons encounter stimuli which they perceive as vast, and which challenge their habitual ways of making sense of their experiences (Keltner and Haidt 2003, p. 303). Keltner and Haidt's framework, then, can be seen as a two–component model: prototypical awe involves perceived vastness and a need for cognitive accommodation. "Vastness" does not necessarily refer to physical size but can also denote symbolic, structural or conceptual complexity. Keltner and Haidt thus emphasise that elicitors of awe can come from diverse domains. Among the possible triggers of awe there are the grandeur of landscapes or natural events just as the intricate structures of snowflakes, the exceptional moral resilience and selflessness of some human beings just as the sheer political, military or economic power of others, the elegance of a mathematical proof just as the complexity of a work of art. The concept of accommodation, in turn, which the authors link back to Jean Piaget's developmental psychology (Piaget and Inhelder 1969), denotes the mental and conceptual adjustments or expansions individuals must undertake in their attempts at integrating awe–inspiring experiences into their cognitive schemata:

> We propose that two features form the heart of prototypical cases of awe: *vastness* and *accommodation*. Vastness refers to anything that is experienced as being much bigger than the self, or the self's ordinary level of experience or frame of reference. […] Accommodation refers to the Piagetian process of adjusting mental structures that cannot assimilate a new experience (Keltner and Haidt 2003, pp. 303–304).

Keltner and Haidt stress that only experiences which trigger both perceived vastness and need for accommodation should be counted as belonging to the awe–family. Other, perhaps related, emotions like surprise may be intense and require some degree of accommodation, but do not, according to the authors, involve perception of vastness. Conversely, attitudes like deference or resignation, for instance in the face of sheer

political and economic power, may involve perceptions of vastness but do not necessarily trigger a need for cognitive accommodation or transformation of conceptual frameworks (Keltner and Haidt 2003, p. 304).

Keltner and Haidt point out that attempts at satisfying the need for cognitive accommodation associated with awe may succeed or fail. When accommodation fails, they surmise that the experience of awe has negative valence (e.g., fear, terror), whereas it has positive valence (e.g., feelings of understanding or even enlightenment) when accommodation succeeds:

> We stress that awe involves a *need* for accommodation, which may or may not be satisfied. The success of one's attempts at accommodation may partially explain why awe can be both terrifying (when one fails to understand) and enlightening (when one succeeds) (Keltner and Haidt 2003, p. 304, emphasis in orig.).

The suggested explanatory correlation between satisfied and unsatisfied need for accommodation on the one hand, positive or negative valence of awe experiences on the other is plausible. However, Keltner and Haidt's two–component framework does not explicitly address the question of what it is for a process of accommodation to fail.

One important theoretical contribution of Keltner and Haidt's conceptual framework is that it allows to distinguish clearly between several elements that enter into constellations of awe: the object (or event or person) at which awe is intentionally directed, the perception of the object (or event or person) as vast by the awe–struck subject, and the need for cognitive accommodation triggered by the perception, that is, the desire to understand, comprehend and interpret the elicitor of awe in such a way as to make room for it in one's worldview and conceptual frame of reference.

No less importantly for the following discussion, Keltner and Haidt challenge the assumption, which is at play in the writings of the authors I cited at the outset, that awe is a somehow intrinsically religious or spiritual emotion. While they hold that awe can be a religious or a spiritual experience, like William James they treat religious awe and spiritual awe as just two varieties among others.

Arguably, however, the way in which Keltner and Haidt present their idea that awe experiences can be traced across a wide range of domains of human experience relies too heavily on conventional descriptions of the objects or events that can elicit awe in subjects. Among the possible elicitors of awe, they list "powerful leaders", "encounters with God", "tornadoes", "grand vistas", "cathedrals", "awe–inspiring music" and "grand theories" (Keltner and Haidt 2003, p. 305). This list of mixed items certainly does a good job at illustrating the variety of contexts in which awe can occur. However, given the authors' claim that awe is "a moral, spiritual, and aesthetic emotion" (see the title of Keltner and Haidt 2003), it leaves the reader wondering whether the moral, aesthetic or spiritual quality of a given awe experience is supposed to be somehow dependent on what kind of object elicits the awe. Keltner and Haidt's framework is somewhat ambiguous in this regard. But, given the emphasis it poses on processes of cognitive accommodation, it contains resources to remedy this ambiguity.

The next section argues that when it comes to distinguishing between religious, spiritual and neither religious nor spiritual awe (awe *tout court*), the focus should be placed on the element of cognitive accommodation or interpretation of awe–inducing experiences rather than on the objects or elicitors of awe.

4. Awe *tout court*

In what are certainly some of the more poetic lines in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Immanuel Kant famously wrote:

> Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence [*Ehrfurcht*], the more often and more steadily one reflects on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me (Kant 1788/2015, p. 129).

This quote is a helpful point of departure for the following considerations. Arguably, it exemplifies what the discussion will focus on: non–religious and non–spiritual awe. As far as the starry heavens are

concerned, Kant (at some point, at least) was convinced of the synthetic aprioricity of Newtonian physics. Regarding the moral law, in turn, he emphasized that any assumption of an external source of moral normativity outside the transcendental subject — be it that the assumed source is taken to be supernatural or natural — leads to heteronomy, i.e., to the condition of being governed or directed by external forces, rules, or authorities rather than by one's own free will or autonomy (Kant 1784/1970).

To distinguish between religious, spiritual, and neither religious nor spiritual variants of awe in any meaningful way, working accounts of the involved concepts are needed. A working account of a concept makes no pretence to exhaustive or conclusive ontological definition. Its purpose is the pragmatic one of facilitating critical discussion. When key concepts are left at a merely intuitive level — as is sometimes the case in research on religion and spirituality — it becomes difficult to determine precisely what is being examined or discussed. This, in turn, leads to debates marked by participants talking past each other. Making explicit what one intends to refer to with the expressions "religion" and "spirituality" is sometimes criticised as an illegitimate affirmation of definitional power or hubris. But it can also amount to deliberately making one's considerations accessible (and vulnerable) to conceptually precise critique. In this latter sense I propose the following working accounts.

As regards the concept of religion, for the purposes of this article I refer to sociologist Steve Bruce. Bruce accounts for religion in terms of

> beliefs, actions, and institutions based on the [assumed] existence of supernatural entities with powers of agency (that is, Gods) or impersonal processes possessed of moral purpose (the Hindu and Buddhist notion of karma, for example) that set the conditions of, or intervene in, human affairs (Bruce 2011a, p. 1; see also Bruce 2011b, p. 112).

A straightforward implication of Bruce's account is that a human practice or belief system should not be considered religious unless its practitioners or adherents are, in virtue of their practice of belief, committed to the existence of supernatural beings or impersonal forces endowed with moral significance. Accepting Bruce's account for the

present context, I thus take experiences of awe to be religious when they trigger processes of cognitive accommodation or interpretation that involve appeal to assumed supernaturally transcendent entities, forces or principles. Non–religious awe, accordingly, is awe that brings about attempts at accommodation which steer clear of appeals to assumed supernatural transcendence.

Regarding spirituality, I turn to the work of Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead. Heelas and Woodhead account for spirituality in terms of highly individualized and subjectivized forms of meaning–making, which are developed outside traditionally established frameworks of religious authority, practice and canon (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, pp. 1–11). They argue that spirituality, as opposed to religion, is based on ideals of personal experience, inner exploration, and subjective authenticity in ways that can be completely detached from institutionalised religious practices, groups and communities. In their view, the shift from religion to spirituality in western societies reflects a broader cultural turn toward an expressive individualism, oriented by the idea of "nurturing […] unique subjectivities" (p. 24) and identities:

> It is a turn away from life lived in terms of external or 'objective' roles, duties and obligations, and a turn towards life lived by reference to one's own subjective experiences (relational as much as individualistic) (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, p. 2).

Following Heelas and Woodhead, then, I take an experience of awe to be spiritual when it triggers a process of cognitive accommodation which tries to make room for the awe–inspiring experience by assigning it a particular significance for one's personal existence, well–being or individuality — or, to adapt Heelas and Woodhead's useful expression, by interpreting the awe primarily in terms of nurturing one's own unique subjectivity. Spiritual awe in this sense may or may not involve appeal to some assumed supernatural transcendence. Given the working accounts of religion and spirituality outlined above, religious and spiritual awe may overlap.

Assume there is an object or event X (a landscape, a starry night sky, an intact coral reef sparkling with life and movement) which elicits awe

in an epistemic subject A, i.e., A perceives X as vast, and the experience of X triggers a need for cognitive accommodation in A. There are two points that merit emphasis here. First, one and the same object or event X may elicit awe in subject A and fail to do so in some other subject B (this point has been briefly mentioned in the K7 example above). Second, even if both A and B are awestruck by their experiences of X they may be so in very different ways. For instance, X does not by itself determine whether the awe respectively experienced by A and B is to count as religious, spiritual or neither nor. This suggests that from the emic or first–person perspective of the awe–struck individual, the extent to which an episode of awe is imbued with religious or spiritual significance depends on how the experiencer interprets and makes sense of their experience — including the ways in which this worldview may undergo change due to experiences of awe. The difference is made entirely by the process of accommodation, i.e., by the cognitive and conceptual resources brought into play in trying to understand a given experience of awe. Analogously, explanations and analyses of awe from the etic or third–person perspective of researchers in psychology, philosophy, sociology or anthropology who adhere to the heuristic principle of methodological agnosticism will differ significantly from those of researchers who allow epistemically unhedged appeals to the divine, the supernaturally transcendent, or metaphysical ideas of cosmic order into their proposed explanatory accounts of awe (Rähme 2024). Let me briefly state what "epistemically unhedged" is supposed to mean in this context. In the sentence "Experiences of awe can establish a connection between awestruck subjects and God's creation" the expression "God's creation" occurs epistemically unhedged, whereas in the following sentence it occurs epistemically hedged: "Experiences of awe can establish a connection between awestruck subjects and what they take to be God's creation".

In a paper discussing the aesthetics of beauty in nature, De Smedt and De Cruz (2013, p. 178) write:

> Although awe does not automatically trigger belief in God, for a theist, it can strengthen theistic belief. The initial sense of God may be innate, as in Calvin's *sensus divinitatis*, or inferred as a conclusion of reason to a particular kind of first cause, or simply entertained as a hypothesis in the

> manner of Pascal's Wager. Once the possibility of God is raised, however, the contemplation of some awesome aspect of nature as possibly the work of God may have a multiplier effect in two senses: a heightened interest in this aspect of nature and an increased sense of divine presence.

This clearly brings out the prospect that attempts at cognitive accommodation will be oriented by antecedently held beliefs and prior conceptual frameworks. Presumably, a theist will be more likely than an atheist or agnostic to accommodate awe triggered by the perceived vastness of a natural landscape in terms of God's creation, divine design or supernatural agency. And a spiritual person (in the sense of "spiritual" introduced by Heelas and Woodhead) will be more likely than a non–spiritual person to accommodate such awe by interpreting it primarily in terms of nurturing their subjectivity. What about the awe experienced by a person who is neither religious nor spiritual?

I propose the expression "awe *tout court*" to capture experiences of awe in Keltner and Haidt's sense (perception of vastness plus need for accommodation) which are neither religious nor spiritual[1]. Awe *tout court*, then, involves attempts at cognitive accommodation which do not appeal to some assumed supernatural transcendence or cosmic order and do not frame the experience primarily in terms of its significance for the experiencing person's unique subjectivity or identity. Let me complement this negative characterisation with a positive one. The conceptual resources that can enable processes of accommodation involved in awe *tout court* are manifold. The awestruck person may, for instance, search for a scientific explanation of the elicitor of awe and their subjective experience of being awestruck — either by reading the relevant scientific literature or, if they have the necessary skills and means, by actively engaging in scientific inquiry themselves. Another (presumably very common) option would be to simply trust that there is a scientific explanation while accepting that for them cognitive closure in the sense of understanding is out of reach. Yet another option would be to consciously adopt an

(1) Let me stress that I introduce the expression "awe *tout court*" merely as a linguistic means to denote instances of awe which are neither religious nor spiritual in the senses of "religious" and "spiritual" outlined above. The "*tout court*", then, is not meant to suggest that what I suggest calling "awe *tout court*" is what, ontologically speaking, awe really or essentially is. I thank an anonymous referee for indicating that this point requires emphasis.

agnostic stance in the sense of suspending judgment regarding the question of how the elicitor of awe can be interpreted, explained or understood. Results from psychological research on awe suggest that the availability of this latter option — accepting a lacuna of one's understanding of the world without resorting to the remedy of religious or spiritual accommodation — may depend on the degree of tolerance for uncertainty of the awestruck person (Valdesolo and Graham 2014).

At this point, a clarification is needed. It might be objected that the agnostic awe just described does not qualify as awe in the sense defined by Keltner and Haidt, since it involves a conscious decision to refrain from accommodating the awe–inducing experience, thereby failing to meet one of the necessary conditions included in Keltner and Haidt's definition of awe(2). However, this possible objection overlooks the fact that, according to Keltner and Haidt, the criteria for an emotion to be considered an instance of awe are the perception of vastness and the need for accommodation, not the successful achievement of accommodation and, arguably, not even active attempts at accommodation. Agnostic awe, then, does involve a need for accommodation, but the awe–struck subject — perhaps after having tried and failed to achieve cognitive accommodation several times — decides to leave this need unsatisfied and simply live with it.

5. Conclusion

One way to understand awe *tout court* is the following. Experiences of awe *tout court* can both be triggered against the backdrop of pre–existing and consciously held strong values — for instance: the sight of an intact coral reef against the backdrop of the pre–existing value judgment that biodiversity is intrinsically good — and themselves induce subjects to adopt novel strong values or recall implicitly held but non–occurrent values — for instance: someone listening to a Bach fugue for the first time and understanding that musical complexity is, for them, something of intrinsic value. The emotional valence of awe *tout court* is subjective. For example, seeing the Starlink satellite network move across the night

(2) I thank an anonymous referee for drawing my attention to this possible objection to the idea of agnostic awe.

sky in a straight chain of tiny illuminated dots may for some be awe–inspiring for its technological sophistication, or for the way in which it demonstrates the power of the richest man on planet Earth, in others it may spark sheer horror and disdain and make them aware, perhaps for the first time, that all along they had attributed intrinsic value to the starry night sky as something that must not be sullied.

It is evident that certain experiences of awe, in particular those elicited by nature, lend themselves to spiritual or religious interpretation. However, this does not establish that awe is inherently a spiritual or religious emotion. While some find scientific explanations incomplete or unsatisfying, others regard them as wholly sufficient and satisfactory. Likewise, some seek to ground their values and worldview in a metaphysical or transcendent framework, whereas others feel no such need. Consequently, the answer to the question of whether particular instances of awe call for spiritual or religious accommodation does neither depend on the nature of the emotion of awe nor on the objects or events at which awe is intentionally directed. It rather depends on the degree of "metaphysical–mindedness" of those who try to answer it.

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FROM MISTERY TO MASTERY, AND BACK AGAIN: REFRAMING TECHNOLOGICAL PROCREATION THROUGH AWE

Tommaso Ropelato

Abstract: The rapid advancement of technologies such as in vitro fertilization (IVF) and surrogacy, along with the increasing capacity of technologies like ultrasound to "scan" the fetus, and most recently, the rise of biotechnologies for genome sequencing and editing, has progressively mediated and filtered the awe traditionally associated with natural procreation. The ability to foresee and manipulate what was once a source of impatient and tense apprehension — the moment of conception — has indeed significantly reshaped our reproductive narratives, identities, and perceptions. Since we have moved from a womb that conceals and protects to an increasingly transparent and threatening one, debates have emerged on whether this technological mediation has diminished the sacred aspects of reproduction, both in its traditional meaning of being worthy of respect and ceremonial reverence(1), and in the Agambenian sense of being separated and, therefore, unavailable (Lembcke 2023). This contribution aims to initiate a discussion that places awe at the center of the debate on reproductive, particularly genetic, biotechnologies. By positioning awe as a bridge between the theological and technological dimensions of procreation — and thereby necessitating a reformulation of the dichotomy between scientific and religious views of nature — it becomes possible to envision an ethical paradigm that emphasizes openness and connectedness, as well as the formation of the self as a responsible procreative agent.

Il rapido sviluppo di tecnologie come la fecondazione in vitro (IVF) e la maternità surrogata, insieme alla crescente capacità di strumenti come l'ecografia di "scansionare" il feto, e, più recentemente, allo sviluppo delle biotecnologie per il sequenziamento e l'editing genomico, hanno progressivamente mediato e filtrato il senso di meraviglia tradizionalmente associato alla procreazione naturale. La possibilità non solo di prevedere, ma anche di intervenire su ciò che un tempo costituiva una fonte di impazienza e apprensione — il momento del concepimento — ha infatti

(1) Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. "sacred", sense c1.

significativamente ridefinito le nostre narrazioni, identità e percezioni riproduttive. La transizione da un utero che celava e proteggeva a uno sempre più trasparente, percepibile, in alcuni casi, anche come minaccioso, ha sollevato interrogativi circa la perdita degli aspetti più sacri della riproduzione, intesi sia nel significato tradizionale di rispetto e venerazione cerimoniale (v. nota 1), sia, in senso agambeniano, come separazione e indisponibilità (Lembcke 2023).Questo contributo si propone di avviare una riflessione che ponga il senso di meraviglia al centro del dibattito sulle biotecnologie riproduttive, in particolare genetiche. Assumere la meraviglia come ponte tra la dimensione teologica e quella tecnologica della procreazione — richiedendo una riformulazione della dicotomia tra visioni scientifiche e religiose della natura — consente di delineare un paradigma etico fondato sull'apertura, sulla connessione e sulla formazione del sé come agente procreativo responsabile.

Keywords: Bioethics, Procreation, Biotechnology, Genome, Reproductive liberty

Parole chiave: Bioetica, Procreazione, Biotecnologie, Genoma, Libertà riproduttiva

1. What a wonderful world is for whom?

The process of procreation, whether viewed through a religious, philosophical, or scientific lens, is one of the most awe–inspiring experiences in human life. Indeed, even the embryologist might resonate with the psalmist who said, "I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14). This composite emotion remains a vital framework and an operative category for both perspectives in grappling with the profound mystery of bringing life into the world. But what does awe entail and what are its functions in this context?

A first attempt to address this question could start by distinguishing between wonder and awe. While the former is often considered a more easily recognizable emotion, tied to familiar elements, both emotions share a common lineage. This interpretation recalls Martin Heidegger's analysis in *Sein und Zeit* (1927) of the distinction between terror and fear — two emotions that share many characteristics but differ significantly in how they impact the subject. Similarly, awe and wonder may overlap in certain ways, yet their effects on our perception of profound experiences differ meaningfully.

Terror, as conceived by the German philosopher, is understood as a qualified intensification of fear. Fear, in Heidegger's view, is directed

toward something specific, distinct and determinate, something rooted within the world "that in the face of which we fear, the *fearsome* is in every case something that we encounter within–the–world and which may have either readiness–to–hand, presence–at–hand, or Dasein–with as its kind of Being" (Heidegger 1967, pp. 176–179). Terror, in contrast, is closely connected to anxiety, in its being indeterminate and elicited by nothing in particular, "not an entity within–the–world […] which is completely indefinite […] which […] cannot bring itself close from a definite direction" (*ibid.*, p. 182). We might, therefore, suggest that Heidegger focuses primarily on external threats when defining the contours of fear, while terror assumes a more existential dimension. This distinction is persuasive, as fear typically arises in response to a specific object or situation — evidenced by the many terms formed as *something*–phobia. Terror, by contrast, is linked to unpredictability and the unknown, which is why expressions like "I'm terrified" are often used to convey a deeper sense of ontological insecurity.

Similarly, we could argue that awe represents a qualitative intensification of wonder (Gilbert, Pinto–Correia and Haraway 2017). Wonder, when directed toward a specific object, sparks curiosity, which in turn drives the search for truth about the physical universe — a pursuit traditionally seen as the foundation of both philosophy and science. Wonder, in this sense, is an epistemic emotion. It arises initially from a violation of expectations but, crucially, it is sustained by the desire to acquire knowledge and understanding. Unlike mere surprise, curiosity involves the recognition of a gap in one's knowledge that one both can and desires to fill. Awe, however, *goes further*. It not only occurs when an event violates our expectations and reveals a gap in our knowledge, but it also challenges our existing schemas — our deeply rooted knowledge structures — so profoundly that we are unable to accommodate or assimilate the new information within those frameworks (Weger and Wagemann 2021; Paulson *et al.* 2021).

Indeed, awe, unlike curiosity, can also arise from a vague feeling of *just wonder at something*, a sentiment that can only be described through the notion of its objective correlative, something that provides a tangible reference but remains elusive in its full definition. It is therefore from an epistemic standpoint and in terms of their gnoseological

functions that wonder and awe occupy distinct statuses. In *The Magic of Reality: How We Know What's Really True*, Dawkins (2011) argues that while you may certainly *just wonder at* the sun, the moon, and the cycle of the seasons, it is only by directing your wonder toward understanding the underlying explanations of those phenomena that you are *wondering at reality*. Unless one has experienced wonder in the scientific sense, with this pursuit of knowledge, he contends, one has not experienced what he considers to be real wonder.

From this perspective arises Dawkins' sharp critique of religion, which he argues presents an impoverished vision of the world — "a poky little medieval universe, extremely limited" (1986). He contends that by offering assertions grounded in faith, religion represents a retreat from the rigorous, evidence–based pursuit of truth. In Dawkins' view, religion is merely a poor attempt to do what science does: explain the world. This critique reflects a common argumentative strategy among those who compare science and religion, often highlighting creation stories to discredit religion as fundamentally flawed and empirically false. In this framework, scientific wonder is seen as rendering awe — understood as non–epistemic, or purely emotional, wonder — both unnecessary and potentially harmful, as it distracts from the pursuit of true understanding.

However, a key point must be emphasized to conclude our reflection on what awe is: Dawkins advocates for a vision of science in which mystery has no place and must, therefore, be eliminated. In his view, the role of the scientist is to work toward resolving mysteries, treating them as problems. Once the problem is solved, the scientist may then wonder at the solution. Yet, this is not the only possible perspective on the scientific stance. A distinguished colleague of Dawkins, Albert Einstein (1931), famously wrote:

> the most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed.

He further adds:

> to know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty, which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms — this knowledge, this feeling, is at the centre of true religiousness.

I think this is precisely the direction we were heading in distinguishing scientific wonder from awe: they share a common root, making their similarities more significant than the differences that arise based on how we use them and the explanations we seek. It's not unreasonable to suggest that Saul's experience of awe on the road to Damascus might be comparable to the awe Watson and Crick felt when they first saw the model of the DNA helix. However, instead of stopping at supernatural explanations, they pursued scientific ones. This brings us back to the central point: since we can define awe as a qualitative intensification of scientific wonder, we can confidently close the circle we opened earlier. As Heschel (1955) states, also "awareness of the divine begins in wonder […] because the beginning of awe is wonder and the beginning of wisdom is awe […] Knowledge is fostered by curiosity; wisdom is fostered by awe".

We thus find ourselves before two magisterial paths, both descendants of wonder, for engaging with, knowing, and appreciating the world: science and religion. Given their shared origin in wonder, these two approaches could — and arguably should — form alliances to protect, preserve, and expand the sources of wonder that enrich human experience. Yet, ironically, it is precisely in relation to the most significant source of wonder at our disposal — nature — that science and religion often find their greatest grounds for conflict.

2. Procreation and biotechnologies: is DNA God?

To address the focus of this paper and understand why repro–genetic biotechnologies, even more so than assisted reproduction techniques like IVF or surrogacy, have sparked such a fierce clash between these two visions of Nature, we must briefly digress into the Human Genome

Project[2]. This grand international scientific effort, heralded as the first fundamental step toward a complete understanding of the factors that determine human nature, marked the conclusion of a century that had, interestingly, begun with the rediscovery of Gregor Mendel's pioneering studies on heredity[3].

Over the years, the Human Genome Project has been compared, for its importance and symbolic value, to the deciphering of the Rosetta Stone (Petsko 2001), a decisive key to unlocking a previously unknown language. It has also been likened to the Apollo Program missions for their role in expanding the boundaries of both our material reality and imaginative capacity. Additionally, at the June 26, 2000 press conference presenting the project's results, Bill Clinton began his speech by comparing the sequencing of the human genome to the mapping expedition toward the Pacific Ocean undertaken by explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark between 1804 and 1806:

> almost two centuries ago, in this room, Thomas Jefferson and a trusted aide unveiled a magnificent map […] that defined the contours and forever expanded the frontiers of our continent and our imagination. […] Today, the world joins us to behold a map of even greater significance […] the most important and wondrous map ever produced by humankind[4].

During the two decades that separate these words from 1990, the year the Human Genome Project began, one particular narrative has been promoted and popularized, especially within the scientific community itself. The genome began to be referred to as *the Bible*, *the Holy Grail*, and *the Book of Man*, portraying this molecular structure not merely as a biological entity but as a kind of sacred text (Nelkin and Lindee 1995). In 1988, Gregory Henderson provocatively asked, *Is*

(2) An entire section of the National Human Genome Research Institute's website is dedicated to the Human Genome Project: https://www.genome.gov/human-genome-project.

(3) The reference is specifically to the research of biologists Hugo DeVries, Carl Correns, and Erich von Tschermak, who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, independently rediscovered Mendel's work, contributing to the dissemination of his laws within the scientific community.

(4) The entire speech is available on YouTube under the title *Announcing the Completion of the First Survey of the Entire Human Genome at the White House*.

DNA God? and ultimately concluded that, given its essential roles in the origin, evolution, and maintenance of life, it is tempting to wonder if "this twisted sugar string of purine and pyrimidine base beads is, in fact, God". Similarly, when Francis Collins announced the first (almost entirely complete) draft of the human genome sequence in June 2000, marking a significant milestone (though not the definitive conclusion) of the Human Genome Project, he declared, "we have caught our first glimpse of our own instruction book, previously known only to God"(5).

Then, a little over 10 years later, another type of knowledge and capability emerged, imbued with almost divine characteristics. Indeed, 2012 marks the beginning of the CRISPR/Cas9 era, the reigning genome–editing technology, following the publication of the now–famous study by Nobel laureates Jennifer Doudna and Emmanuelle Charpentier (2012). This study described "a family of endonucleases that use double RNA to perform site–specific DNA cleavage", highlighting the potential of this system for programmable genome editing. Without delving into the technical details of this discovery, it is crucial to understand that genome manipulation can occur in two main ways: somatic and germline. While somatic intervention affects only certain differentiated cells of the individual being treated, germline editing potentially affects all the cells of the future individual, including gametes, and thus also their progeny. This is because the cells present in embryos at the earliest stages of development are totipotent stem cells, meaning cells that, through continuous and progressive replication, can give rise to increasingly differentiated and specialized cells. Somatic gene therapies may involve, for instance, the extraction of stem cells from a patient's blood, the use of CRISPR to correct a genetic mutation that causes the production of defective blood cells, and then the reinfusion of the *corrected* cells back into the patient. As can be easily understood, this type of treatment does not affect the patient's reproductive cells in any way. Germline editing, on the other hand, by altering the genome of a human embryo in its early stages of development, implies not only the potential replication of the modification in all its differentiating

(5) F. Collins, *White House Remarks on Decoding of Genome*, "New York Times" (June 27, 2000).

cells, but also the possibility that this modification will be inherited by future generations. Consequently, there are many potential unintended consequences of such interventions. Therefore, while the modification of sperm and egg genes has become routine in laboratory mice and has greatly contributed to our understanding of how vertebrate genes function and interact during development, a heated debate immediately arose over whether this technology should be applied to humans(6).

One of the most long–standing and frequently cited normative arguments in the literature on this topic is the claim that by using these technologies in reproductive contexts, humanity is "playing God". It is fascinating to observe how both supporters and critics of genome biotechnologies frequently invoke religious references. On one side, supporters of these technologies often describe the genome as a kind of *sacred text* of biology, a fundamental code of life that can be read and modified for the benefit of humanity. In this view, genomics represents a divine knowledge being unveiled through scientific advancements, a tool to decipher the *mystery of creation*, promising cures for diseases, improved quality of life, and, in some ways, *the completion and enhancement of nature's work*. On the other hand, critics urge caution, warning against humanity's desire to transcend natural or divine limits. Their main argument is the fear of disrupting a balance established by God, hence the *playing God* argument, potentially interfering with something too complex and sacred for humans to fully understand or control.

It is important to emphasize, however, that the charge of playing God is not necessarily rooted in strictly religious worldviews. As we mentioned, the metaphorical use of this objection is grounded in the idea that certain interventions violate the intrinsic sanctity of nature. However, I believe *sanctity* here should be understood as inaccessibility or ungraspability. The core issue lies in the fact that enhancing human nature, while disregarding potential or unknown risks, reveals a form of *hybris* — an overreaching pride. This human thirst for control is perilous because, unlike God, humans are neither omniscient nor perfectly

(6) For an overview, see the article by J. Harris and M. Darnovsky, *Pro and Con: Should Gene Editing Be Performed on Human Embryos?*, "National Geographic" published 14 July, 2016.

benevolent. As such, we may fail to foresee the consequences or fully comprehend the risks associated with tampering with genes, leading to unintended and potentially irreversible effects.

To clarify what I mean, I'll provide two examples of how this argument has been addressed. One prominent version of the playing God argument comes from philosopher Michael Sandel (2007). In his *The Case Against Perfection*, Sandel argues that biotechnological interventions, especially in the context of procreation, undermine the moral and ethical humility that should accompany the creation of life. According to Sandel, the *hybris* of seeking mastery over life through technological means distorts and undermines the awe that, as we have emphasized, is intrinsically associated with procreation. This transformation of the creation of life into a project of control and optimization undermines the sense of wonder and respect that should surround it, replacing the gift–like nature of life with a more calculated and engineered process. A slightly different formulation, which better emphasizes the key point of our previous discussion, is offered by Clive Hamilton (2013). Addressing climate engineering, Hamilton writes that "playing God entails humans crossing a boundary to a domain of control or causation that is beyond their rightful place". He elaborates, "to cross successfully would require mortals to possess a degree of omniscience that has always been preserved for God or the great processes of Nature that are rightfully beyond human interference".

My interpretation of this argument aligns more closely with Hamilton's view, as I ground it less in the violation of divine authority or prerogative and more in the profound gap in understanding that separates humans from the complexity of natural systems. This gap highlights our inability to fully foresee the consequences of interventions like genetic manipulation or altering the chemistry of the world's oceans to absorb more carbon. These actions touch on inscrutable and ungraspable aspects of nature, aspects that still remain beyond our capacity for comprehension. In this sense, "our drive to mastery", as Sandel puts it, must recognize and halt at the boundaries of what remains a mystery. Acting in this way requires a greater tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity. Admitting and normalizing the presence of mystery, to return to Dawkins, could serve as a means to reintegrate awe into science

and, as we will explore, to offer a meaningful foundation for bioethical considerations concerning repro–genetic biotechnologies. The key point, then, is not about expanding natural contingency solely through the technical domain. As Saint Augustine famously wrote (413–426), "miracles are not contrary to Nature, but solely to what we know about Nature". I believe that by interpreting technological miracles in this sense as well, it becomes possible to carve out a space for awe within science as a bridge between the technological and theological approaches to Nature and, in our case, procreation. Despite Sandel's concerns, it is indeed possible to engage with reproductive technologies without entirely abandoning awe, along with the humility, gratitude, and, to quote him again, the "acceptance of the giftedness of life" traditionally associated with procreation. Rather than framing the debate as *mastery versus mystery*, we might consider that awe can be deepened through thoughtful engagement with biotechnologies. The use of reproductive technologies need not be seen solely as an attempt to control life but can instead be understood as an extension of our appreciation for the complexity and fragility of our biological makeup.

Awe, thus, not only has the power to preserve the idea of Nature — not as something external to humanity, original and pure, but as something that is not (yet) fully dominable — but also ennobles the non–ancillary relationship that should exist between seemingly distinct approaches, such as scientific, philosophical, and religious ones. Moreover, as we will explore in the final sections, awe carries with it a moral paradigm where values such as modesty, caution, precaution, preservation, and gratitude take on central importance(7).

3. Awe and praxis: the case of environmental ethics

Awe has recently been recognized as an important positive emotion that offers numerous benefits for well–being (Monroy and Keltner 2023), physical health (Stellar *et al.* 2015), and social interactions (Piff

(7) It is a shift in posture similar to the one Bruno Latour describes in his paper *A Cautious Prometheus? A Few Steps Toward a Philosophy of Design (with Special Attention to Peter Sloterdijk)* (2008), the keynote lecture for the Networks of Design meeting of the Design History Society at Falmouth, Cornwall, 3rd September 2008, which I highly recommend reading.

et al. 2015). More generally, awe is thought to have the potential to shape our attitudes toward both ourselves and others, particularly in relation to the larger meaning and purpose of our lives. Although awe is a complex and multifaceted emotion, it can be compared, in terms of its moral functions, to Janus, the Roman god of beginnings. With his two faces, Janus is able to look simultaneously into the future and the past, and the key he traditionally holds symbolizes his role as a guardian of thresholds and transitions — both literal and metaphorical — representing the opening and closing of new paths in human life. Similarly, awe is a transitional and bi–faceted emotion. It has the power to awaken and nurture moral attitudes and transformations in our relationships with others and the world, while also being deeply connected to reflexive self–making, encouraging us to reflect on our place in the broader context of life.

An interesting line of research that supports this idea has emerged from several papers in the field of environmental ethics (Li and Julie 2024; Hu 2023). A common assumption is that nature, intended as *certain natural entities*, being awe–inspiring, is also worthy of preservation. Thus, an ethical principle emerges from an aesthetic experience. Katie McShane (2018) highlights that recent empirical literature on the psychological effects of awe — widely regarded as a positive moral emotion due to evidence that awe makes people humbler, more altruistic, and less self–centred — supports this view. McShane concludes that, while there are legitimate concerns about using awe as the sole foundation for environmentalism, it can certainly inspire environmental attitudes and commitments.

At this point, we might ask: could this argument be translated to the debate on repro–genetic biotechnologies? To answer this question, I will refer to a generalized version of the "environmentalist" argument proposed by Ashley Coates (2022). Her reasoning is as follows:

> (1) Any appropriate object of awe has non–instrumental value that makes it pro tanto worthy of preservation.
> (2) x is an appropriate object of awe.
> (3) Therefore, x has non–instrumental value that makes it pro tanto worthy of preservation.

The only difference between this version of the argument and the environmental one is that "certain natural entities" has been replaced with "x". As long as the substitution of x with a particular entity makes (2) true, the conclusion will be that this entity has a claim to preservation. Coates herself emphasizes that:

> the most promising and underrated application of this generalization of the argument is to bioethical debates concerning entities such as embryos, genetic codes, and life itself. Indeed, the moral status of these kinds of entities is often considered problematic or unclear in a similar way to entities in environmental ethics, such as biodiversity or species. In particular, the former exhibit similar complexity, finely–tuned functioning, and lengthy origination to the latter, and thus seem to have a similar claim to exhibit the relevant sort of greatness. At face value, then, the generalized argument from awe appears well–suited to help us understand the moral status of these kinds of entities.

It is important to note that applying this argument to bioethical contexts does not necessarily entail strong support for conservative conclusions. We are indeed discussing a pro tanto claim to the preservation of awe–inspiring entities that can be outweighed if the preservation in question has sufficiently negative effects. "So, for instance, given that a right to abortion derives from a right to bodily integrity, that right would plausibly trump any awe–based claim to preservation on behalf of a foetus" (Coates 2022). Paraphrasing McShane's conclusions, we could say that while there are legitimate concerns about using awe as the basis for an ethical governance of repro–genetic biotechnologies, it can certainly inspire attitudes and commitments that lead to a deeper sense of responsibility and ethical awareness.

4. Awe as ethical self–making

Repro–genetic biotechnologies, by reshaping how we relate to an unborn child, create new interpretive frameworks that guide prospective parents' actions and decisions. These technologies do more than simply

provide a "peek into the womb" (Verbeek 2016), offering a sense of transparency and pre–vision; they fundamentally reorganize procreative agency. By establishing a specific form of contact between the foetus and the parents, these technologies open up a new space of technical control over the procreative process. This enables the expansion of natural and biological contingencies, which have historically defined the mystery of coming into the world.

This confronts prospective parents with a range of new questions concerning responsibility and autonomy. As a result, many philosophers and bioethicists have begun discussing the concept of *liberal eugenics* (Agar 2004; Prusak 2005; Sparrow 2011; Mills 2015), a paradigm that, unlike the coercive eugenics of the twentieth century, is considered not only morally acceptable but also well–suited to address these new challenges. Liberal eugenics is grounded in two key principles of political liberalism: the pluralism of values and the moral and political priority of the individual. In concise terms, the fundamental idea behind liberal eugenics is that it does not promote a specific notion of what constitutes a good or valid life. Instead, it remains neutral regarding individuals' priorities, how people should live, and the values that guide their reproductive choices. This framework aims to protect, and even expand, individual freedoms, including reproductive freedom. The underlying assumption is that individuals are capable of acting rationally in relation to their own interests and values and thus should be entrusted with making informed decisions about their genetic and reproductive futures. As John Harris (1998) emphasizes, "in deciding what kind of child to conceive, the best way to avoid totalitarianism and escape both individual and social prejudices is to grant parents full reproductive freedom". Harris argues that only in cases of urgent reasons, such as evidence of significant harm, should the state or other third parties be allowed to intervene in this decision–making process. Similarly, in many other works, including the influential *Children of Choice* by bioethicist John Robertson (1996), the discussion on reproductive freedom centres on the importance of protecting prospective parents' autonomy from external interference. Reproductive freedom, in this view, is seen as a deeply personal domain whose privacy must be respected. Although this model of negative liberty has a strong

tradition in the context of reproductive rights[8], it is necessary to question whether it remains adequate considering the new choices offered by repro–genetic biotechnologies. We are no longer simply discussing the traditional power of deciding whether and how many children to have, but now also (to a certain extent) *what kind of child to have*. This shift introduces unprecedented ethical considerations. Moreover, we must acknowledge that this new power, operating at the genetic and embodied level, may directly shape the identity of future individuals, carrying significant social and political implications.

What I believe, therefore, is that the liberal procreative paradigm needs to be balanced in order to be suitable for regulating the use of, and controlling the effects of, repro–genetic biotechnologies — especially when it comes to germline genome editing for non–therapeutic purposes. As Stuart Murray writes in *Care and the Self: Biotechnology, Reproduction, and the Good Life* (2007):

> we continue to have faith in a self that we describe as free to choose for itself, an undisputed source of its own reason and will. Furthermore, we continue to conceive of our technologies as rational extensions of our autonomy, extensions of the human being, of its body and spirit. To complete the circle, we believe that our technological developments increase our choices and, as if they were synonymous, our freedom. In this paradigm, freedom is thus the freedom to choose, to have the maximum choice, and to be free from norms and constraints when making choices.

The risk is that such a model may create a short circuit between a fabricated decision–making autonomy and what we might call "genetic nemesis"[9]. Indeed, in our *Century of the Gene* (Keller 2001), the phenomenon of *geneticization* — marked by an increasing tendency

(8) In the landmark ruling of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, to provide a readily understandable example, the U.S. Supreme Court grounded the right to terminate a pregnancy in the "right to privacy".

(9) The reference is to Ivan Illich's work *Medical Nemesis* (Pantheon Books, New York) in which, with very radical nuances, he emphasized the risks associated with the increasing mythologization of the medical institution as early as 1976. In this sense, nemesis manifests itself in the medicalization of society itself, meaning an all–pervasive medicalizing tendency to interpret pain and death through a medical lens.

to reduce human differences to genetic ones — along with the reemergence of deterministic and essentialist genetic narratives, raises extremely serious and complex issues in the context of expanding procreative possibilities. While it is entirely legitimate for parents to want to provide their children with the best possible opportunities — whether through a nurturing environment, cultural enrichment, or broader chances to lead a good life — the crucial issue lies in understanding how this desire can translate into genetic measures. The danger arises when, in the context of genetic selection, this desire manifests as the wish to pass on the *best* of oneself by preserving what is scientifically, culturally, or socially deemed as *good genes*. In scenarios involving genome manipulation, where the potential exists to go beyond the parental genetic makeup and endow a child with what is perceived to be the absolute best genes, we risk conflating the nature of parenthood and procreative agency with a material extension of the self or the aspiration to create an idealized version of oneself.

As Onora O'Neill (2002) argues, while reproduction matters to people because it allows them to express or enact their deeply held beliefs, it does not follow that reproduction should be viewed solely as an act of self–expression. Nor can a right to self–expression alone justify a right to procreative liberty. O'Neill points out that reproduction "aims to bring a third party, a child, into existence" — an independent being whose life, particularly in the context of genetic biotechnologies, must not be reduced to a vehicle for genetic narcissism. This perspective underscores the critical importance of the concept of self–making — how individuals shape their identities and values within a broader societal, ethical, and political framework — when considering the role of biotechnologies in procreation. As Catherine Mills suggests (2013), procreative agency should thus be reframed as "a deeply personal project of self–making", where the intersection of technology and moral choice not only extends freedom but also complicates and problematizes it. This, I believe, captures the true meaning of the shift *from chance to choice* (Buchanan 2001) — a process that transforms birth from something purely contingent to something increasingly "available" and subject to human control. In this context, awe can play a crucial role by introducing *a concern for the self through alterity*, or the recognition of the otherness of the child.

As we observed in the environmentalist case, awe, as a self–transcendent experience, is indeed characterized by an increased sense of connectedness and a diminished sense of self (Yaden *et al.* 2017), often referred to as the "small self". It also fosters a heightened tendency to attend to others' welfare and a greater inclination toward humility (Kristjánsson 2017; Stellar *et al.* 2018), a foundational virtue that counters selfish inclinations such as entitlement and narcissism. Hopefully, also genetic ones.

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SEZIONE 3
SULLE TRACCE DEL SACRO IN MONTAGNA

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INTRODUZIONE: SULLE TRACCE DEL SACRO IN MONTAGNA

Paolo Costa

Il tema della sacralità dei monti è allo stesso tempo affascinante e insidioso. È affascinante perché si colloca in un crocevia della civilizzazione moderna. A differenza di quanto sarebbe stato forse lecito attendersi quando il processo di secolarizzazione era ai suoi albori, la complessa transizione culturale che ha condotto alla nascita, prima in Europa e poi nel resto dell'Occidente, di un'"età secolare" non ha prodotto infatti un disincanto generalizzato. Basta pensare al modo in cui le persone si relazionano oggi alla natura per rendersene conto. Se da un lato, i fenomeni naturali sono diventati un oggetto da investigare in un atteggiamento distaccato e, per la società nel suo insieme, una risorsa da sfruttare secondo calcoli utilitaristici, dall'altro lato la natura per molte persone è ancora l'incarnazione di un'alterità con cui si desidera entrare in contatto e la fonte sapienziale a cui attingere nei momenti di disorientamento esistenziale. Anche all'apice del disincanto, insomma, la natura è per molti — persino per molti scienziati — qualcosa di sacro, numinoso, che suscita rispetto e reverenza.

Allo stesso tempo, però, si tratta di un tema insidioso, sempre in bilico tra *kitsch* e prosopopea. Chi lo affronta corre, cioè, costantemente il rischio della superficialità, d'incagliarsi in paralogismi e di contribuire alla confusione intellettuale che caratterizza da alcuni decenni la sfera pubblica mediatica. Eppure l'argomento è e resta di grande attualità. Per chi ha a cuore le sorti del pianeta, d'altro canto, qualsiasi fenomeno sociale e culturale che contribuisca ad arricchire il senso del valore dell'ambiente naturale rappresenta una risorsa insostituibile. Non una

risorsa materiale, ovviamente, ma un tesoro di ragioni per credere nel futuro e agire con fiducia in vista di esso che, proprio per la sua capacità di spingere le persone al di là della contingenza storica, è persino più prezioso dei beni monetizzabili. Per valorizzare questo patrimonio immateriale senza banalizzarlo si è scelto di moltiplicare i possibili punti di accesso alla tematica posta al centro di questa sezione degli "Annali di Studi Religiosi" costruendo un itinerario a partire da un ventaglio significativo di tracce (storiche, teologiche, filosofiche, esperienziali e, perché no, spirituali) di usi originali e fecondi del senso del sacro che può materializzarsi tra le vette, le valli, i prati, i ghiaioni e le mille altre stupefacenti espressioni dell'ambiente naturale con cui le persone entrano in contatto in montagna.

Nello specifico, le interviste a Enrico Camanni e Matteo Melchiorre — due testimoni esemplari della rinascita contemporanea delle terre alte — sono state progettate e realizzate con l'intento di fornire a lettori e lettrici il punto di vista più inclusivo possibile sulla questione, discutendo in un registro anche autobiografico temi come la nascita del legame speciale con l'ambiente alpino, la complessità culturale del contesto montano, il rapporto tra montagna e scrittura o, più in generale, montagna e vita della mente, l'oscillazione tra incanto e disincanto, o soggezione e rivolta, nel rapporto degli amanti della montagna con l'oggetto della propria passione, la pluralità dei modi in cui si può vivere il rapporto con le terre alte ai nostri giorni, i futuri possibili su cui ha ancora senso ragionare. Il saggio del curatore e i contributi di Veronica della Dora e Jon Mathieu — due autorità scientifiche nel florido campo di studi sulle terre alte — hanno lo scopo di offrire angolature diverse ma complementari sulla questione della sacralità dei monti, rispettivamente una panoramica filosofica, un'incursione nel nostro passato religioso e un caso di studio emblematico. La traduzione del pionieristico saggio di H.E.M. Stutfield, infine, è un modo per chiudere il cerchio, cedendo la parola a un testimone privilegiato del processo culturale di lungo periodo che questa rassegna di testi ha l'ambizione di mettere per quanto possibile a fuoco.

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"SÌ, LA MONTAGNA PUÒ SALVARCI, MA NON MAGICAMENTE" INTERVISTA A ENRICO CAMANNI

Paolo Costa

Abstract: This interview with Enrico Camanni, mountaineer and essayist, revolves around the significance of mountains in modern life. Among the topics discussed are: the personal and cultural meanings of mountains and their distinctive allure; the link between love of the mountains and youthful rebellion; the historical origin of mountaineering; enchantment and disenchantment in the uplands; the passion for verticality and supermanhood; sacralization and profanation of mountain peaks; consumerism and the art of surrender.

Questa intervista con Enrico Camanni, alpinista e saggista, ruota attorno al significato delle montagne nella vita moderna. Tra i temi discussi: i significati personali e culturali delle montagne e il loro fascino *sui generis*; il legame tra amore per la montagna e ribellione giovanile; l'origine storica dell'alpinismo; incanto e disincanto nelle terre alte; la passione per la verticalità e il superomismo; la sacralizzazione e profanazione delle vette; il consumismo e l'arte della resa.

Keywords: Mountains, Mountaineering, Enchantment, Disenchantment, Sacredness, Profanation, Consumerism, Tourism, Surrender

Parole chiave: Montagne, Alpinismo, Incanto, Disincanto, Sacralità, Profanazione, Consumismo, Turismo, Resa

Enrico Camanni (1957), alpinista e scrittore, è un profondo conoscitore dell'ambiente alpino. Poche persone in Italia possono vantare una relazione con le terre alte altrettanto ampia e sfaccettata. La sua frequentazione delle montagne è a trecentosessanta gradi, essendo sia fisica sia culturale. Di vette Camanni si è occupato non solo con corde e moschettoni, ma dirigendo riviste di successo come "ALP", occupandosi

di museografia alpina, fondando e presiedendo associazioni, scrivendo libri sulla storia delle Alpi (*Il fuoco e il gelo: la Grande Guerra sulle montagne*; *Storia delle Alpi: le più belle montagne del mondo raccontate*), sull'alpinismo (*Di roccia e di ghiaccio: storia dell'alpinismo in 12 gradi*; *Il desiderio di infinito: vita di Giusto Gervasutti*; *Se non dovessi tornare. La vita bruciata di Gary Hemming, alpinista fragile*), sui risvolti sociali della passione moderna per le vette (*La nuova vita delle Alpi*; *Alpi ribelli: storie di montagna, resistenza e utopia*; *Verso un nuovo mattino: la montagna e il tramonto dell'utopia*) e persino gialli di ambientazione montana (*Una coperta di neve*; *La discesa infinita*; *La bandita*). Nel 2024 ha pubblicato per Laterza un libro che ha fatto molto discutere: *La montagna sacra*. Qui, prendendo spunto dalla proposta di dichiarare "sacro" il Monveso di Forzo, una cima di più di tremila metri al confine tra il Piemonte e la Valle d'Aosta, ha preso apertamente posizione contro la deriva politica e culturale che ha condotto a un rapporto con i territori montani senza più vincoli e limiti allo sfruttamento umano.

L'intervista che pubblichiamo qui in versione integrale è stata realizzata online il 22 gennaio 2025.

Paolo Costa: *Hai voglia di provare a fare un bilancio a voce alta e spiegarci che cosa ha rappresentato la montagna nella tua storia personale? In fondo, anche se nel lessico comune il vocabolo circola senza troppi retropensieri, la montagna non è un oggetto che si autointerpreta, voglio dire non è trasparente nei suoi significati. A te che cosa viene in mente in primo luogo quando pensi alla "montagna"?*

Enrico Camanni: Questa è la domanda delle domande. Me la porto dietro da sempre perché fin da piccolo le montagne hanno esercitato su di me un fascino che resta, a conti fatti, almeno in parte inspiegabile. Dovendo azzardare una spiegazione direi che all'inizio c'erano sostanzialmente due molle principali. La prima erano i profili dei monti stagliati nel cielo. L'immagine di qualcosa di alto, elegante, splendido e a prima vista irraggiungibile. Le vette erano per me sfida, avventura incarnata. Nel mio sé bambino, e poi ragazzo, si è in qualche modo radicata l'idea che andare lassù volesse dire entrare in un territorio per

pochi eletti, a suo modo magico. E quell'intuizione mi è rimasta dentro. Come mai? Alla base c'è un'esperienza molto famigliare per chi vive in una città pedemontana come Torino. Il profilo delle vette che si stagliano contro l'orizzonte ha una forza che probabilmente è sconosciuta a chi tra i monti ci vive. La possibilità di trasformare quello sfondo nell'ambiente in cui trascorrerai la tua giornata ha effettivamente qualcosa di magnetico.

La seconda molla è meno legata all'ambiente fisico e più a quello umano. Quando è nato il mio amore per la montagna erano ancora ben visibili le tracce della civiltà alpina. Quando passavi per le baite i proprietari se n'erano appena andati oppure erano ancora lì. Esistevano cioè persone che appartenevano alla civiltà, diciamo così, "preturistica". Questo mondo che risaliva a un passato primordiale mi affascinava moltissimo. Il contrasto con l'ambiente sociale da cui provenivo — io torinese, figlio di un medico — non poteva essere maggiore.

Se devo giudicare col senno di poi, la seconda motivazione non c'è più. Quel mondo lì è irrimediabilmente perduto e chi pensa altrimenti si racconta delle fandonie. Ciò che è rimasto è tutt'al più la copia musealizzata della realtà che mi sono visto svanire davanti agli occhi da bambino. La prima attrazione, invece, rimane. Non tanto per la fascinazione per i profili, ma per il senso di avventura che emanano i monti. In fondo, mi basta ancora fare un passo fuori dal sentiero per introdurmi in un ambiente in cui non sono più io il padrone. Posso mettermi in cerca della strada, ma devo accettare la possibilità di perderla. Accettare cioè il fatto che si possono fare errori, cacciarsi nei guai, perché non c'è nulla di prestabilito.

Siccome io conosco bene le montagne, questo senso d'imprevedibilità, d'indisponibilità lo cerco lassù, ma capisco benissimo chi lo cerca altrove: al mare, nei deserti. Avessi una barca a vela probabilmente la mia sete d'avventura la soddisfarei con una regata. Certo, la montagna ha il vantaggio che richiede solo buone gambe. L'avventura sembra sempre a portata di mano. Tanto più per me, visto che non ho altre valvole di sfogo. Io, per dire, non saprei cosa farmene di una seduta di yoga o di meditazione. Così, arrampicare, prima ancora che camminare, significa staccare la testa dal pensiero ed entrare in una dimensione non razionale, in cui è il corpo a comandare e l'unica cosa che conta

è fare i movimenti giusti per non cadere. In quei frangenti il rapporto con il proprio corpo è totale, di piena immedesimazione.

Prima ho menzionato lo yoga, ma il paragone più corretto è forse quello con la danza. Chi danza bene lo sa: il segreto del ballo è abbandonarsi alla musica, farsi condurre dal ritmo. La montagna per me è la via più diretta per staccare il cervello. Anche se, forse, più che genericamente di montagna dovrei parlare proprio di arrampicata. È la scalata la mia *mindfulness*.

Tu hai origine cittadine e, se non sbaglio, non hai mai reciso le tue radici metropolitane. Ha senso, secondo te, dividere nettamente l'esperienza delle Terre alte tra "cittadini" e "montanari"? La divisione ci aiuta a capire meglio l'effetto che la montagna fa sulle persone?

Io sono torinese, in effetti, ma un ramo della mia famiglia, quello materno, ha un legame speciale con la Valle Varaita, che si trova in provincia di Cuneo. Mio nonno era stato pretore a Sampeyre e ho ancora parecchi parenti nella zona. Ma a mia madre la Valle evidentemente stava stretta e, su suggerimento di un amico, come località per le vacanze i miei genitori hanno scelto la Valtournenche, dove siamo andati per oltre vent'anni. Lì è maturata la mia passione per la montagna. I miei modelli erano le guide alpine del Cervino con cui, però, non avevo grandi rapporti. Oggi sembra un po' assurdo ma allora le cose funzionavano così. I rapporti con i locali erano molto sporadici, quasi che si appartenesse a due mondi incomunicanti. Oggi conosco più o meno tutti, ma solo perché sono entrato nell'ambiente per ragioni di lavoro. Prima ero soltanto quello che li guardava da distante, li ammirava, li mitizzava.

D'altra parte il Cervino è la montagna di cui mi sono innamorato da ragazzo. Avevo una finestra che si affacciava su una centrale idroelettrica in bilico sulla montagna e, siccome era illuminata di notte, da bambino fantasticavo in continuazione su quel luogo magico. Poi quando ci sono andato mi sono reso conto che era una casa come le altre, ma ormai l'incantesimo aveva fatto il suo corso. Quella finestra è stata per me veramente come un portale che si affacciava su un altro mondo. Aveva

i doppi vetri — e già questa caratteristica la rendeva esotica negli anni Sessanta — e col freddo l'umidità si condensava disegnando profili che ai miei occhi sembravano a loro volta montagne. Un vero sortilegio: la moltiplicazione delle vette!

Comunque, secondo me culturalmente la dicotomia che ho conosciuto durante l'infanzia non esiste più. Siamo ormai tutti figli della stessa civiltà, della stessa forma di vita caratterizzata dalla mobilità, da una condizione di sradicamento che ha cambiato completamente il nostro rapporto con il paesaggio. Voglio dire, oggi, anche chi nasce in montagna può poi decidere di andare a studiare in città. A quel punto la montagna smette di essere l'ambiente in cui sei immerso e diventa lo sfondo. Può così cominciare quel gioco dell'immaginazione di cui parlavo sopra. Anche per questo presunto montanaro la montagna potrebbe non esistere. Ha smesso, insomma, di essere una seconda natura. È un abito che puoi decidere d'indossare o no. Una cosa che magari, per il tipo di persona che sei, non conta più di tanto.

A dire la verità, è una cosa di cui mi ero accorto già da ragazzo, quando passavo le vacanze in Valtournenche, ai piedi del Cervino. Erano momenti bellissimi per me, proprio per l'effetto che quei luoghi facevano sul mio senso dell'avventura. Allo stesso tempo, però, d'estate il desiderio di scalare, che in città era a volte straziante, si affievoliva gradualmente. Perché c'ero dentro, capisci? Era come saturato dalla presenza continua dell'ambiente naturale.

Capivo perciò perché i montanari non potessero comprendere fino in fondo il mio entusiasmo per quei luoghi. In città, con la distanza, c'era tutto un lavorio preparatorio che nutriva il desiderio. Questa dialettica tra prossimità e distanza ha ancora un peso oggi, ma non ha nulla a che fare con un presunto dualismo tra montanari doc e non montanari.

Nei tuoi scritti ti sei spesso servito della montagna per inscenare una sfida — una sfida esistenziale, politica, persino metafisica — che non di rado sfocia in una rivolta o in qualcosa del genere. Ti va di riflettere su questo aspetto galvanizzante, persino titanico, degli ambienti alpini e di raccontarci com'è nato questo sentimento, se è solo il frutto della tua esperienza giovanile o alla base ci sono letture, esempi, modelli?

Io ci vedo un legame generazionale forte. In questo caso la biografia conta più di ogni altra cosa. Per me chiaramente la montagna ha incarnato durante l'adolescenza la sfida contro il buon senso borghese. Correre un rischio gratuito scalando un masso o una parete significava ribellarsi contro un certo modo utilitaristico, morigerato, parsimonioso, di vivere la vita. D'altra parte, quando ho cominciato a scalare, negli anni Settanta, andare in montagna sembrava di per sé già un micro gesto di ribellione. In effetti era un po' come remare contro corrente, fare la scelta più anticonformista. Forse c'era un legame simbolico con la scelta dei partigiani di salire in montagna, anche se — dovendo basarmi solo sulla mia esperienza personale — direi che la Resistenza c'entrava pochissimo con la mia passione per le vette. Sicuramente c'era un nesso tra lo scendere in piazza per manifestare contro le ingiustizie della società e la scelta di passare il fine settimana a scalare anziché a bighellonare o battere la fiacca. Erano in fondo due forme speculari di attivismo. Dietro c'era lo stesso desiderio di libertà.

Questa cosa qui ovviamente non esiste più. È veramente una roba del passato. Oggi la montagna è diventata un oggetto di consumo come qualsiasi altro. Da questo punto di vista il modello che ha vinto è quello dello sciatore. Mentre ai miei tempi il modo in cui gli sciatori vivevano la montagna era antitetico al modo in cui lo vivevamo noi. Puoi giudicarlo, se vuoi, una forma di snobismo, ma dietro quel modo altezzoso di relazionarsi con le persone che in montagna cercavano solo un'occasione di relax si nascondeva un'intera visione del mondo e della vita. Ed era una visione mia, che non avevo ereditato dalla mia famiglia, ma che ci stavamo inventando mentre cercavamo un'esistenza più autentica. Col tempo il carattere simbolico di questa scelta si è annacquato perché il numero delle persone che va in montagna con il desiderio di un'altra vita è cresciuto a dismisura e anche la montagna "ribelle" è diventata un bene di consumo.

Non vorrei però parlare per i giovani, che magari hanno tutta un'altra storia da raccontare. Vorrei piuttosto insistere sul carattere generazionale di questa traiettoria esistenziale, in cui prevaleva la critica al consumismo e, di conseguenza, la scelta di vacanze in cui il denaro era messo ai margini (si faceva persino a gara a chi spendeva meno!) e le comodità venivano rifiutate per principio. La vacanza in montagna,

da questo punto di vista, era un esperimento di "decrescita" *ante litteram*. La sfida personale era a trecentosessanta gradi. Da qui la scelta di muoversi in autostop, di dormire all'addiaccio, di mangiare pochissimo. Una ribellione permanente che era prima di tutto una sfida verso lo stile di vita predominante nell'ambiente da cui provenivamo. Da questo punto di vista la sobrietà tipica dei montanari, il loro appartenere a una società basata sulla mera sussistenza, appariva ai nostri occhi come un pregio, non come un difetto. Può apparire come un controsenso, ma in effetti il nostro obiettivo era proprio opporci al senso comune. Snobbavamo località alla moda come Cervinia che ci sembravano incarnare tutto quello che rifiutavamo. Anche se, col senno di poi, uno potrebbe dire che ne avevamo bisogno per poterci distinguere, per sentirci diversi dalla massa. Alla fine un po' ci faceva comodo questa montagna da pantofolai.

L'alpinismo moderno è un fenomeno culturale assai studiato, di cui tu sei un grande esperto. Alla fine, se dovessi tirare le somme, come lo descriveresti a un non alpinista? Quanto c'è di curiosità tipicamente moderna? Di cultura o frenesia sportiva? Di gusto per l'avventura? Di moda o di autentica spiritualità nella smania degli scalatori?

Secondo me la radice culturale dell'alpinismo è squisitamente romantica. L'alpinismo nasce alla fine del Settecento sull'onda di un mutamento culturale epocale. Con ciò non voglio negare che siano esistite imprese alpinistiche in epoca prealpinistica, come hanno messo in luce di recente storici come Andrea Zannini. Il punto è che da un certo momento in avanti — soprattutto nell'Ottocento — andare in montagna ha cominciato a significare qualcosa di inedito. Per alcune persone, cioè, le vette hanno cominciato a incarnare un'occasione preziosa per sfidare i propri limiti nel nome di ciò che ritenevano vero, buono e bello. Questo tipo di atteggiamento idealistico — da un lato espressione di una curiosità scientifica senza confini, dall'altro effetto di una nuova sensibilità etica ed estetica, che a sua volta rifiutava i limiti tradizionali — non aveva precedenti nella storia umana. Senza questo orizzonte culturale la pratica alpinistica non sarebbe potuta mai passare dall'essere

una pratica saltuaria all'essere una pratica coltivata da un'élite, a costo anche di grandi sacrifici personali, e diventare, infine, pratica di massa.

L'alpinismo, in sintesi, non significa soltanto scalare una cima nel più breve tempo possibile, ma mettersi alla prova, esplorare nuovi mondi. Non è soltanto sport, ma una sfida esistenziale. Quando vedo alle Olimpiadi le performance straordinarie dei campioni di arrampicata sportiva riconosco sì le radici comuni nell'alpinismo classico, ma anche le evidenti discontinuità. Nell'arrampicata sportiva il rischio, l'imprevisto, devono essere ridotti al minimo indispensabile, quel tanto che basta per poter stilare una classifica finale. Esattamente il contrario di quello che avviene in montagna, dove nulla o quasi è garantito. E questa indisponibilità del gesto è proprio la condizione necessaria perché possa esistere la pratica alpinistica. Il giorno in cui dovessimo eliminare questo margine d'incertezza, chi mai andrebbe più a scalare in montagna?

Con ciò non voglio dire che un'attività sia meglio dell'altra. Voglio solo far notare che non sono la stessa cosa. Sono parenti, ma non parenti stretti. Come ho detto, non può esistere l'alpinismo senza l'inatteso, l'imprevisto, l'imponderabile. Era questo che aveva in mente Messner quando denunciò l'assassinio dell'impossibile. Un eccesso di scorciatoie uccide l'alpinismo. Ogni tipo di "direttissima" è incompatibile con lo spirito autentico dell'arrampicata, incluse le spedizioni recenti sull'Everest, in cui quasi tutto è organizzazione, commercio, turismo estremo, mentre di alpinismo è rimasto pochissimo. L'alpinismo ha bisogno di freni, di limiti. Anzitutto di un freno all'uso della tecnologia che corre sempre il rischio di rendere il gesto vano. L'alpinismo è un gioco basato su un patto che va continuamente rinegoziato e riscritto a seconda del contesto.

Nel paesaggio montano ci sono sia la verticalità delle pareti rocciose sia la "diagonalità" delle pendici dei monti. Verticalità e diagonalità, se vogliamo, possono servire come metafore di due diverse varianti di fascinazione per gli ambienti alpini. Dino Buzzati, per esempio, era sicuramente ipnotizzato dalla radicalità metafisica delle vette dolomitiche, mentre, sul fronte opposto, Nan Shepherd è la cantrice dei plateaux *e delle valli dei Cairngorms scozzesi, un esempio splendido di* living mountain. *Tu riesci a*

entrare in risonanza con entrambi i volti della montagna o anche tu, come Buzzati, sei attirato soprattutto dal vuoto, dallo strapiombo, dall'estremo?

Sicuramente in me all'inizio ha agito soprattutto l'attrazione per la sommità, per il cielo, che è una tentazione molto pericolosa. Più ancora che il rischio di cadere, è la spinta a uscire dal consesso umano a essere deleteria. C'è sempre una tentazione di superomismo dietro la passione smodata per la verticalità, per gli abissi, per il vuoto. Sto pensando in particolare alla condizione mentale paranoica raccontata da Giusto Gervasutti, per cui quando "conquisti" una cima senti come una sensazione di vuoto e sei costretto a metterti subito alla ricerca di una nuova sfida per riempire quel vuoto. E a questo ciclo continuo di sogno, appagamento e frustrazione non c'è mai fine.

Una delle osservazioni più perspicaci di Gervasutti riguarda proprio questa condizione mentale. Da qualche parte ha scritto infatti che, se fosse stato capace di dipingere, non avrebbe avuto bisogno di lanciarsi nelle imprese rischiose che lo hanno reso celebre. È la mancanza di quel tipo di creatività artistica sconfinata, insomma, che lo ha spinto a sfidare abissi ben più concreti.

Io stesso a un certo punto della mia vita mi sono sentito quasi dipendente, diciamo pure "drogato" da questo tipo di verticalità. È a quel punto che mi sono messo alla ricerca di quella che tu chiami "diagonalità". E credo proprio che questa scelta mi abbia salvato, allargando i miei orizzonti e consentendomi di trovare altri significati, altri simboli nel paesaggio montano, al di là delle pareti e delle cime. Simboli e richiami meno narcisistici, meno legati al desiderio di autoaffermazione e più alimentati dalla curiosità, più aperti verso le vite di chi in montagna ci abita, ci lavora, vi si trasferisce.

Oggi, comunque, la dimensione del vuoto continua ad interessarmi. Ad attirarmi non è tanto l'altezza, ma proprio il vuoto, in quanto situazione limite nella condizione umana. Quando arrampichi è così: siccome noi umani non siamo in grado di volare, di fronte al vuoto siamo soli senza possibilità di compromessi, senza alibi. È una sfida affascinante, ma non ha nulla a che vedere con la spinta superomistica a salire sempre più in alto che mi ha tormentato in passato.

Oggi per le persone che amano le Terre alte, la montagna è prima di tutto "magica". Tuttavia, in una società, come quella moderna, in cui lo spazio per la magia è sostanzialmente nullo, ci sono anche parecchie persone che non sembrano aspettare altro che il momento per smascherare questa presunta relazione incantata con gli ambienti alpini come paccottiglia romantica, kitsch da perdigiorno, roba buona solo per chi si è fatto abbindolare nell'infanzia da Heidi e la sua capretta. Una reazione del genere, correggimi se sbaglio, è avvenuta di fronte a una recente dichiarazione di Paolo Cognetti che, in una situazione di drammatica crisi personale, ha ammesso con onestà che le montagne a un certo punto hanno smesso di parlargli, hanno cessato di risuonare nella sua vita. Tu cosa ne pensi? C'è spazio per il disincanto nel tuo amore per la montagna? E questo disincanto è la negazione dell'incanto o è semplicemente il polo negativo di una relazione sanamente dialettica con l'ambiente naturale? Insomma, si può avere o no una relazione matura, "adulta" con le terre alte?

Io questa contraddizione la sento fortemente dentro di me. Perché, da un lato, l'incanto che ho sperimentato da bambino di fronte alle montagne lo cerco ancora oggi, al punto che talvolta mi dico: magari potessi riprovare le sensazioni che ho provato a quindici anni quando d'inverno, in Valtournenche, sotto la neve, nel gelo di quegli anni, mi infilavo nel bosco e vedevo davvero dei mondi fatati! E non è che dovessi fare un grande sforzo, allora, per costruirli. L'esperienza era talmente intensa che mi sembrava proprio di essere in una favola.

Quell'incanto lì non ce l'ho più. Mi spiace ammetterlo ma non riesco più a riattivarlo. Però mi accorgo che troppo disincanto — e questo vale in tanti ambiti della nostra vita, in particolare quelli che implicano la relazione con gli altri — ti rende crudele. E non solo crudele, ti rende anche miope, insensibile ad aspetti della realtà che pure contano nell'esistenza, perché è un dato di fatto che abbiamo bisogno della ragione, ma abbiamo anche bisogno dello stupore, dell'incanto.

Certo, trovare il giusto punto d'equilibrio tra questi due modi di rapportarsi alle cose non è mica facile. D'altra parte, più conosci e più è difficile mantenere una disposizione all'incanto. La conoscenza è una potente fonte di disincanto. Quindi forse "incanto" non è la parola migliore per nominare quello stato d'animo che pure è importante

preservare. Ti confesso che io non ci credo alla montagna salvifica. Non ci ho mai creduto. Però qualcosa di "magico" nella montagna deve pur esserci. Se no come ci spieghiamo la forza con cui ci attrae, con cui ci avvinghia anno dopo anno, che ci fa alzare presto e sopportare fatiche al limite delle nostre possibilità? Io soltanto con la ragione non me lo spiego questo legame. Qualcosa di simile all'incanto deve pur esserci dentro di noi.

Chi mi obietta che la montagna alla fine è soltanto sport non mi convince fino in fondo. Certo, uno può difendere questa opinione come una sua scelta o preferenza personale. Ma davvero, mi chiedo, per queste persone non c'è differenza tra un paesaggio montano e una palestra? Per me di sicuro la montagna non è mai stata solo sport. Come ho detto prima, la montagna per me è prima di tutto una foresta di simboli e significati. Altro che solo sport.

Poi, certo, dipende anche da come interpreti e vivi lo sport. Anche la pratica sportiva può essere infatti una fonte d'incanto per le persone. Io che sono un grande appassionato di sci alpino rimango estasiato davanti alle performance di questi incredibili atleti. E non solo al gesto muscolare perché, a quei livelli, la pratica sportiva implica una serie infinita di dettagli — pensa solo alla cura degli attrezzi — che possono lasciarti a bocca aperta. C'è effettivamente da restare ammaliati di fronte a livelli del genere di impegno e dedizione.

Resta però il fatto che in montagna tutto ciò si ripropone moltiplicato all'ennesima potenza grazie al paesaggio, al senso dell'avventura e all'impatto con l'ignoto. Per questo l'incanto che si prova tra i monti mi sembra di tutt'altro livello. Forse è quando scrivo che me ne accorgo con più forza. Se si toglie l'elemento dell'incanto resta infatti ben poco da raccontare. Il che non significa negare che alcuni usi dell'incanto siano francamente insopportabili. Potremmo chiamarlo l'incanto "facile", quando non c'è nessun tipo di tensione tra i momenti di incanto e la dura realtà dei fatti. Molto più interessante, invece, è quando la dimensione dell'incanto, della fiamma, traspare anche in persone che la vita ha messo con le spalle al muro, come Gary Hemming, di cui ho provato a raccontare recentemente la vita e, soprattutto, le fragilità.

Ma l'esempio forse migliore, da questo punto di vista, è Mario Rigoni Stern, che ho conosciuto personalmente. Il montanaro è forse

l'ultima persona da cui ti aspetteresti un atteggiamento d'incanto di fronte alla natura. Eppure il suo sguardo era spesso genuinamente incantato: di fronte agli animali, alle piante, al bosco, alla natura nel suo complesso, con tutte le sue contraddizioni. Se c'è un sentimento che suscitano i suoi racconti è proprio l'incanto di fronte a quello che lui chiamava il "salvatico".

Vorrei concentrarmi ora sul tuo libro più recente: La montagna sacra. *Gran parte della tua riflessione consiste in un amaro resoconto dei mille modi in cui i moderni hanno offeso la montagna, mancandole di rispetto, violandola con scopi talvolta nobili (la "conquista dell'inutile") talvolta molto meno nobili (l'avidità, il profitto). Se capisco bene, questa è per te una forma di profanazione, giusto? Nel tuo ragionamento, insomma, la sacralità dei monti emerge come negazione della negazione o mi sbaglio?*

Devo premettere che il libro mi è stato commissionato dall'editore quando è venuto a sapere della petizione per "sacralizzare" il Monveso e di tutto il dibattito che era sorto attorno alla proposta che abbiamo fatto circolare. Visto che per anni mi sono occupato di ambiente alpino non ho saputo dire di no e ho accettato di scrivere un libro sul tema della sacralità. Ma è chiaro che avrei potuto benissimo scrivere un libro speculare. Che ne so, avrei potuto scegliere il consumo e scavare a fondo nelle sue motivazioni, nei suoi errori, e ricavare qualcosa di interessante, qualcosa per cui vale effettivamente la pena andare alle radici del fenomeno.

Forse, più che il consumo, è il turismo il tema a cui in futuro dovrei dedicarmi. In fondo il turismo ci riguarda tutti. Chi si può chiamare fuori, onestamente? Sono sicuro che anche in questa pratica così tipicamente moderna ci sono molti aspetti di verità su cui varrebbe la pena gettare luce. Certo, occorre scavare per andare oltre la superficie dei dépliant pubblicitari, ma non ho dubbi che ci sia materia su cui riflettere. Detto ciò, nel libro mi sono effettivamente concentrato soprattutto sui casi di evidente profanazione del territorio montano e mi sono chiesto come si possa porre rimedio a questa ondata di desacralizzazione, a questa vera e propria epidemia di disincanto.

L'ho fatto anche perché non credo affatto che dietro la profanazione manchino le storie interessanti. Per cominciare, non penso che le persone che hanno seguito quel percorso sapessero davvero dove sarebbero andate a parare. In questo senso, siamo veramente tutti nella stessa barca. La vicenda riguarda ciascuno e nessuno di noi sa come si possa uscire dal guaio in cui ci siamo cacciati senza pagare un prezzo insostenibile. Insomma, non basta prendersela con i cattivi, gli avidi, quelli che hanno speculato. Non so se ci sono riuscito nel libro, ma vorrei far passare l'idea che anche negli errori, anche nel negativo, è possibile far risaltare momenti di verità, di realtà, di vita.

D'altra parte, quando mi siedo davanti al televisore e mi godo la discesa libera di Kitzbühel, sono consapevole che mi faccio incantare da uno sport ipercommercializzato, dietro il quale si nasconde un'industria che è alla base delle più terribili profanazioni della montagna descritte nel libro. Ne sono consapevole e non voglio nascondermi dietro un dito. Questa cosa fa parte di me. Lo ammetto. È una verità che non voglio disconoscere. Mi interessa guardarla bene in faccia e farci i conti fino in fondo.

"Profanazione" significa anzitutto mancato rispetto di un limite, di un confine, di una soglia cruciale. Per lungo tempo, però, la capacità e il desiderio umani di non farsi confinare entro limiti predeterminati è stata vista come un'espressione di grandezza, di maestosità della nostra specie, persino della sua collocazione speciale nel cosmo ("fatti non foste a viver come bruti"). Questa qualità ha smesso di affascinarti oppure pensi che possa esserci una grandezza anche nella scelta di rallentare, di smettere di crescere, di fermarsi?

Sulla grandezza della rinuncia sono d'accordo con Messner. Lui è da un po' che insiste su questo aspetto, attirandosi anche parecchie critiche, tra l'altro quella scontata di chi gli dice: "Eh, è facile da vecchio predicare la rinuncia quando hai passato tutta la vita a superare ogni tipo di limite…". Io invece l'ho trovato sempre sincero e convincente. Si capisce che è una convinzione che ha maturato sulla base della sua esperienza e, perché no, anche dei suoi errori.

Ridotta all'essenziale la rinuncia significa questo. Per salire in cima posso prendere la funivia o andare a piedi. Se prendo la funivia mi risparmio la fatica, ci metto infinitamente meno tempo, arrivo in vetta bello fresco. Ho solo vantaggi a prima vista. Tuttavia, quello che mi sfugge, che non riesco a vedere è la perdita d'esperienza che subisco. Non vedo cioè tutto quello che potrei guadagnare lungo la strada se scegliessi di andare a piedi. È una cosa che non devo certamente spiegare a chi ama la montagna, che della montagna apprezza soprattutto quella densità di esperienza che la tecnologia non riesce a replicare, di cui anzi fa piazza pulita nel nome della comodità, della velocità, dell'efficienza.

Per quanto mi riguarda, a me basta che si riconosca la differenza. Le due cose possono convivere a patto che siamo consapevoli di quello che abbiamo da guadagnare e di quello che abbiamo da perdere nell'uno e nell'altro caso. L'una non può e non deve negare l'altra. Decisivo è trovare il giusto punto di equilibrio. Oltre questa soglia si ha la profanazione. Al di qua, la profanazione non c'è. Dobbiamo scegliere. Non credo nella possibilità di arrivare meccanicamente o automaticamente alla rinuncia. Insomma, non è qualcosa che possiamo aspettarci dalla società. Spetta a noi. Ecco da dove nasce la proposta di sacralizzare il Monveso. Il nostro appello è appunto di optare almeno una volta per la rinuncia.

Alla base di tutto, poi, non possiamo nascondercelo, c'è la rinuncia più difficile: quella al denaro. Ma, di nuovo, non perché il denaro sia di per sé malvagio, ma perché non può essere l'unica cosa che regola le nostre vite, le nostre scelte. Il problema non è il denaro, è l'avidità, è la concentrazione della ricchezza, la sua trasformazione nell'unico idolo, nell'unica cosa per cui vale la pena sacrificarsi: il problema è la dittatura del denaro. Ecco, di fronte al denaro la rinuncia acquista il suo vero spessore. E allenarsi alla rinuncia in montagna è un bel modo per impratichirsi in quest'arte che è la sola che può veramente salvarci dalla catastrofe.

Mi interessa molto la scelta di separare la sacralizzazione dal divieto, dalla proibizione, dal tabù, sottolineata con enfasi nel Documento "Una 'Montagna sacra' per il centenario del Parco nazionale Gran Paradiso".

Se ho compreso bene l'intenzione dei promotori, l'obiettivo è introdurre nel senso comune delle persone una distinzione, un'opportunità, un'affordance*, si potrebbe forse dire in inglese, nella speranza che possa fare, appunto, la "differenza", essere generatrice di una nuova forma di consapevolezza, attenzione, cura. Può avere senso, secondo te, parlare in questo caso di una sacralizzazione "generativa" anziché "ostativa" della natura?*

Credo che si capisca anche da quanto ho scritto nel libro che a me il sacro "ostativo", il sacro che vieta, mi dà sui nervi in maniera tremenda. Com'è capitato a molti altri, anch'io mi sono allontanato dalla Chiesa proprio perché trovavo intollerabili le sue interferenze continue nella sfera delle scelte personali più intime. Troppi divieti, troppe regole, troppi precetti, spesso incomprensibili, se non insensati anche alla luce della fede stessa. Il sacro inteso invece come scelta faticosa che parte dal riconoscimento di un valore speciale, beh quello resta un aspetto fondamentale dell'esistenza. Quando definisco "speciale" questo valore penso al fatto che non abbiamo a che fare con un valore monetizzabile. Qui sta la rinuncia. Il bene sacro è un bene che non si consuma. È un valore immateriale.

Questo a me sembra un aspetto fondamentale della nostra umanità, a prescindere da qualsiasi religione. Poi possiamo chiamarlo con il lessico che preferiamo, possiamo anche definirlo "spirituale", se vuoi. Il punto è che non è una verità legata in maniera esclusiva a una religione o a una confessione. Piuttosto è inseparabile da un certo modo di fare le cose, da una certa pratica. Nel caso della montagna, la pratica, se vuoi il rito che testimonia della sacralità del paesaggio è sicuramente riconducibile alla scoperta moderna del valore delle terre alte. E confido, anzi sono sicuro che questo tipo di saggezza sia sopravvissuta almeno in parte a tutti gli altri sconvolgimenti che la modernità ha portato con sé. Il motivo per cui non dovremmo rinunciare a questa dimensione sacrale o spirituale è che ci aiuta a essere più completi, più rispettosi. La distruzione che causiamo all'ambiente nel momento in cui cediamo alla tentazione di profanare o disincantare tutto ciò che ci circonda è destinato alla fine a ritorcersi contro di noi: è la distruzione di noi stessi. Questo non dovremmo mai dimenticarcelo. Qualcuno, quando sente discorsi del genere, ci vede un invito all'autoflagellazione e si tiene alla larga,

ma io proprio non capisco come sia possibile preservare questo senso del valore speciale senza una qualche forma di rinuncia. Aspetto ancora che me lo spieghino…

D'altra parte, come si spiegherebbero altrimenti tutti quei comportamenti, quelle attività che non hanno una motivazione utilitaristica? Gente che si dedica alla corsa con una dedizione assurda. L'unica spiegazione plausibile è che in attività così banali, così mondane vadano a loro modo alla ricerca di quel bene immateriale che potremmo definire "sacro". È il loro modo per liberarsi dai fardelli inutili di cui graviamo la nostra vita quotidiana, a cominciare dalla testa.

A conti fatti, c'è davvero qualcosa di salvifico nella montagna oppure no? Quando si parla oggi della montagna come "rifugio", tanti sicuramente pensano a un luogo dove cavarsela quando la catastrofe climatica presenterà il conto — una specie di bunker antiriscaldamento globale. Altri tipi di esperienza, però, come ad esempio la montagnaterapia, suggeriscono un modello diverso di relazione salvifica con gli ambienti alpini, quasi che in essi vi sia una ricetta possibile per riconfigurare la propria esistenza, se vuoi per "convertirsi". Tu hai mai fatto esperienza diretta di questa capacità della montagna di tirarti fuori dai guai, dai vicoli ciechi dell'esistenza, di "guarirti" o almeno di farti sentire a casa nel mondo?

Devo fare una precisazione. Io non credo nel ruolo *autonomamente* salvifico della montagna. La montagna non fa incantesimi. Non ci salva in questo senso banale, immediato. Se non le diamo nulla in cambio, non ci regala niente. Questo è il mio assunto di base. È la pratica che ti salva.

Non siamo poi così lontani dall'esperienza dei credenti, no? Non è che uno si salva automaticamente perché entra in chiesa. La chiesa è un luogo in cui si praticano i riti potenzialmente salvifici, in primo luogo la preghiera. Qual è l'equivalente della preghiera in montagna? La fatica, direi. La rinuncia alla comodità. La dedizione verso un luogo. Il rispetto. La cura. La passione. Tutto ciò di cui abbiamo parlato sopra. Dipende da noi l'essere salvati o meno dalla montagna. La montagna non fa terapia. Siamo noi che ci curiamo in montagna curandoci della

montagna. Sostituiamo una cura con un'altra e, a volte, guariamo dai mali di cui soffriamo, che sono per lo più mali causati dalla nostra forma di vita. E quindi da altre nostre scelte.

La montagna, se vogliamo, è un buon contesto per fare tutto ciò perché è un territorio naturalisticamente straordinario. Ma non dobbiamo cadere nella trappola in cui cade, ahimè, oggi molta letteratura di montagna. La montagna non è magica in un senso infantile. Se lo crediamo, non possiamo che andare incontro a una dolorosa delusione. Non è che basta portare un degenerato in montagna perché l'ambiente lo trasformi *d'emblée* in un santo. Do per scontato che su questo siamo tutti d'accordo. Si tratta di enormi sciocchezze: esagerazioni utili per vendere qualche libro in più a chi vuole credere alle favole per autoassolversi di fronte alla propria incapacità di cambiare vita, rinunciando a ciò a cui dovremmo rinunciare ma che ci costa troppo per farlo.

Se c'è una cosa bella della montagna, è proprio che non ti perdona. Non ti inganna. Questa è una lezione che s'impara immancabilmente ad alta quota. Non si scherza con la montagna. Non c'è un doppio fondo. Non ti regala niente. Se vai in montagna e stai male, torni che stai anche peggio. È come uno specchio che non fa sconti. Non ti puoi raccontare delle storie. Tu sei quella cosa lì. In questo senso, sì, la montagna è salvifica. Ti salva dalle menzogne che ti racconti. È franca. È rude. Bastano dieci minuti in montagna per essere posti di fronte alle proprie fragilità. Una lezione dura, ma salutare.

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"LA MONTAGNA SACRA È QUELLA CHE ABBIAMO SOPRA LA TESTA" INTERVISTA A MATTEO MELCHIORRE

Paolo Costa

Abstract: This interview with Matteo Melchiorre, historian, essayist and novelist, revolves around the significance of mountains in modern life. Among the topics discussed are: the different meanings of mountain landscape; its relationship with people's inner life; writing as a shrine where the most important things in life are preserved; the possibility and impossibility of revolt today; the dialectics between enchantment and disenchantment; the abyss of time as a surplus to be valorized in the life of individuals and communities; the deeper nature of sacred experiences.

Questa intervista con Matteo Melchiorre, storico, saggista e romanziere, ruota attorno alla rilevanza delle montagne nella vita moderna. Tra i temi discussi: i differenti significati del paesaggio montano; la sua relazione con la vita interiore delle persone; la scrittura come sacrario in cui vengono conservate le cose più importanti della vita; possibilità e impossibilità della rivolta oggi; la dialettica tra incanto e disincanto; l'abisso del tempo come sovrappiù da valorizzare nella vita degli individui e delle comunità; la natura profonda delle esperienze sacre.

Keywords: Mountains, Landscape, Writing, Revolt, Enchantment, Disenchantment, Sacredness, Epiphany, Hierophany

Parole chiave: Montagne, Paesaggio, Scrittura, Rivolta, Incanto, Disincanto, Sacralità, Epifania, Ierofania

Quella di Matteo Melchiorre (1981), storico, saggista e scrittore, è una voce speciale nel ricco ma a volte cacofonico dibattito che ha accompagnato la rinascita culturale delle terre alte in Italia. Come capita sempre quando si affermano personalità di questa caratura il timbro inconfondibile della sua cifra autoriale era riconoscibile già nel suo esordio

letterario, lo stravagante *Requiem per un albero*, apparso quando l'autore era ancora uno studente universitario. Il tema del legame sofferto con un paesaggio sconvolto dal disordinato processo di modernizzazione di una terra in fuga da una condizione di povertà ancestrale viene affrontato qui con uno sguardo obliquo, per metà malinconico e per metà sardonico, risoluto nel non fare sconti a nessuno: né ai fatalisti né agli entusiasti sostenitori del "progresso", né ai cinici né agli idealisti, né ai nostalgici né ai disincantati. A fare da cornice all'ambiente sociale in profonda trasformazione, di cui l'alberòn commemorato nel testo è l'epitome arborea, c'è poi la montagna, presenza non meno enigmatica del tronco del gigantesco olmo sradicato da una burrasca primaverile tra le due e le tre del pomeriggio di sabato 4 maggio 2002.

L'opera di Melchiorre, storico di valore e narratore di talento, sfugge a qualsiasi etichettatura. Di sicuro, alla qualità della scrittura contribuiscono sia l'impegno dello storico, in particolare dello storico "archeologo", a far parlare la realtà, più precisamente le fonti e le tracce di quella stratificazione temporale che, ne siamo consapevoli o no, ci ha reso quello che siamo, sia il gusto per l'incanto tipico dello *storyteller* di razza. Nei suoi testi, in particolare, la franchezza del montanaro si coalizza con l'onestà intellettuale dello storico e l'effetto di illuminazione è abrasivo per tutti, a cominciare dall'autore stesso.

L'intervista che pubblichiamo qui in versione integrale è stata realizzata a Castelfranco Veneto l'11 febbraio 2025.

Paolo Costa: *Vista l'originalità del tuo approccio alle questioni che discuteremo in questa intervista non vorrei dare nulla per scontato nella nostra conversazione. Comincerei perciò chiedendoti qual è la prima cosa che ti viene in mente quando pensi alla montagna o ne senti parlare?*

Matteo Melchiorre: Io uso sempre due chiavi di lettura per affrontare la questione. La prima ha una matrice esperienziale, mentre la seconda è di tipo storico–scientifico. Se assumiamo il primo punto di vista, la montagna è legata indissolubilmente all'infanzia. Nel mio caso la montagna è qualcosa che sta attorno, che ti circonda. Letteralmente. E che non rientra nella sfera del quotidiano.

Io sono cresciuto nel feltrino, in una conca, a una quota di 400/500 metri sul livello del mare e, osservate da quella postazione, le montagne erano luoghi in cui si andava di tanto in tanto e con persone non qualsiasi. Potevano essere giovani o meno giovani, coetanei o non coetanei, ma erano sempre individui che contavano nella tua vita. Con loro ci si recava in questo luogo che era comunque un "altro" rispetto allo spazio della vita quotidiana. In che senso "altro"? Be', perché lì si poteva entrare in contatto con la natura pura, il polo opposto del mondo artificiale in cui ci si muoveva quotidianamente. Poi c'era tutto l'apparato leggendario in cui ero immerso per una serie di circostanze che avevano a che fare col contesto sociale di provenienza. Infine c'era ciò che potevo ricavare da quanto la storia testimoniava di quei luoghi: racconti orali, cose che imparavo a scuola, insomma tutto il sapere che si era accumulato nel corso dei secoli sull'ambiente naturale in cui era immerso il piccolo mondo in cui sono cresciuto.

È questa la montagna in cui, dettaglio non trascurabile, si andava a funghi, si andava a legna, si saliva in malga d'estate a trovare la gente che trascorreva lì la bella stagione con gli animali. Un luogo in cui si facevano delle cose con delle persone. Quando penso alla montagna è questo reticolo di esperienze che mi viene subito alla mente.

Poi c'è l'altro lato della faccenda. È il lato meno sentimentale. Se vuoi possiamo definirlo persino razionale, perché qui operano criteri su cui — devo essere molto esplicito su questo punto — ho cambiato parere nel corso del tempo e in cui i dubbi non sono mai mancati. Troviamo qui, anzitutto, il criterio altimetrico. Da che quota in su ha senso parlare di montagna? E dobbiamo o no distinguere una montagna alta, bassa, media? La frequentazione degli archivi, in particolare, mi ha spinto a farmi domande del tipo: "Crespano del Grappa (300 m s.l.m.) è un paese di montagna o no?" Probabilmente dieci anni fa la mia risposta sarebbe stata uno squillante "no". Dopo un'attenta considerazione, però, oggi propenderei per il sì. Da questo punto di vista, diciamo pure "scientifico", il criterio che mi sembra funzionare meglio per stabilire se un luogo sia o no montagna è se vi è o meno una strutturale costruzione verticale del ciclo annuale e, di conseguenza, delle esperienze. Dove è possibile articolare l'esperienza, non occasionalmente ma strutturalmente, secondo un dislivello, quella è montagna. Sulla

base di questo criterio si può tranquillamente dire che certi luoghi nei colli Euganei sono montagna purissima.

Tutto questo, evidentemente, ha bisogno di ulteriori specificazioni legate all'altitudine, alla latitudine, all'incastonamento rispetto a territori contigui. Ma alla base di tutto c'è questa declinazione da un punto minimo di altitudine (che può essere il greto di un torrente) a un punto massimo che può essere il pascolo, ma anche la vetta, dove si spinge il cacciatore o il paesano che quel giorno, per qualche motivo, ha deciso di arrivare fin lassù.

È all'opera qui un circolo in cui la morfologia del territorio finisce per plasmare anche la forma di vita. Il criterio, perciò, può essere anche prettamente "agricolo". Dal punto in cui non attecchisce la vite, lì è montagna. Da dove la zappa prevale sull'aratro, ecco la montagna. Laddove le case si distribuiscono in costa anziché in piano, lì comincia la montagna. E così via.

L'ultimo aspetto — quello più recente — ha invece a che fare con il grande fraintendimento che incombe su tutta la discussione sulla montagna e da cui cerco, per quanto possibile, di tenermi alla larga.

Su questo aspetto della questione torneremo con calma più avanti. Per restare sul tema dell'ambiente di vita, mi sembra di capire che nella tua poetica il paesaggio — e in Italia la montagna è anzitutto una modulazione del paesaggio — è forse persino più centrale della vita interiore delle persone o, forse più correttamente, funziona come una specie di ancoraggio della volubilità della soggettività umana. Ha senso per te questa descrizione, diciamo così, dei tuoi avatar letterari come individui costantemente proiettati nel mondo e alle prese con il loro ambiente di vita, al punto che talvolta sembrano addirittura solo un riflesso del paesaggio?

Domanda difficile. Se me lo permetti, per provare ad abbozzare una risposta partirei dal mio libro più negletto, *La banda della superstrada*. In particolare dalla scena finale (Melchiorre 2011, pp. 214–219), in cui il gruppo di giovani ribelli falliti, di cui nel romanzo vengono raccontate le imprese tragicomiche, si ritirano in montagna, "sulle Vette" — o così almeno pare, perché in realtà la sostanza della storia è un sogno

o, se vuoi, un incubo dell'io narrante. La morale della favola dell'apologo, ridotta all'osso, è che quelli sono luoghi che non si possono abitare, si possono solo attraversare. A cui non si può appartenere, insomma. Ecco, questo è un punto chiave nella mia relazione con la montagna. Questa dimensione di inappropriabilità, d'indisponibilità, non manca mai nelle mie riflessioni sul tema e contrassegna la parte, diciamo, più "alta" della montagna — più alta anche interiormente, più inarrivabile.

Questo spiega anche la mia estraneità al senso di "possesso" che l'agonista invece rivendica quando "conquista" una vetta. Quella porzione di spazio, di territorio, per me sfugge a ogni tipo di possesso, può solo essere attraversata e poi lasciata al suo destino indipendente. È la montagna geologica, naturale, inospitale, quella parte di ambiente montano rispetto a cui l'essere umano è fuori, non gli appartiene. Oggi la soglia che segna l'ingresso in questi luoghi inospitali si sta abbassando. Velocemente.

Detto ciò, il mio interesse va soprattutto alla gente che vive in questi luoghi di confine. Esistenze al minimo, poggiate sulla granaglia, sulla graniglia. È un interesse antropologico, se vuoi. E, qui, come hai notato, le due morfologie — quella dell'ambiente naturale e quella dell'ambiente sociale — si sovrappongono senza soluzione di continuità. Se ti interessa sapere da dove tragga origine questo punto di vista, la prima cosa che mi viene in mente è un libro che ci leggevano in quarta o quinta elementare: *Stelle sul Grappa*. L'autore era Luigi Tatto (1922–2003), uno scrittore feltrino che ha ambientato questo romanzo nella valle di Seren al tempo della Prima guerra mondiale. Mi ricordo che ascoltavo le sue storie con uno stupore, un senso di meraviglia che derivava in parte dal fatto che mi sembrava che trovassero lì un senso compiuto, una coerenza, brandelli di vita di cui avevo fatto sì esperienza diretta, ma che non capivo fino in fondo.

Devi tenere presente che la mia non era una famiglia montanara, in nessun senso del termine. Vivevamo in un appartamento in un condominio. Mia mamma era maestra. Mio padre, originario della Puglia, faceva l'assicuratore. Sotto di noi abitava Adelmo, la persona a cui ho dedicato *Requiem per un albero* e che lì ho descritto come "rara persona: intelligenza prudente ed equilibrata, saggezza riservata, anni di esperienza e di attenzione" (Melchiorre 2007, p. 92; Melchiorre 2017, p.

79). È una figura chiave nella mia formazione, che appare sotto mentite spoglie in molti miei libri e sul quale vorrei prima o poi scrivere qualcosa con calma. Lui è l'interprete, il mediatore, il traduttore. Mi portava non solo fuori dai luoghi in cui ero cresciuto, ma anche fuori dal tempo. Mi portava in Val di Seren dove incontravo le case, la gente, i frammenti di un mondo che nel romanzo di Tatto mi è apparso improvvisamente, come dire, raccontabile. Mentre prima, se misurato rispetto alla mia quotidianità, appariva totalmente inspiegabile.

Così è nata la mia curiosità per quel mondo. È nata precocemente e subito mi ha spinto a cercare le tracce, i documenti, gli elementi che mi aiutassero a ispessire la comprensione embrionale del tempo profondo donatami da quella prima lettura infantile. Alla base di tutto, poi, c'è la fascinazione per un certo tipo umano robusto, con i piedi ben piantati nel luogo in cui è cresciuto, tutto d'un pezzo — da noi si direbbe "squadra' fora con la manèra" — che io non sono, ma in certi momenti vorrei essere — soprattutto nei momenti in cui la vita diventa più faticosa. Siccome li vedo come gli ultimi esemplari di una fauna storica estinta, mi preme capire il loro legame con l'ambiente di cui sono il prodotto e che hanno contribuito a preservare per secoli. La gente che ha tenuto puliti i castagneti, i prati d'altura, i boschi, intesi come paesaggio sociale e culturale.

Da quei luoghi, d'altra parte, ho ricevuto anche un conforto speciale. In un periodo in cui non ero esattamente al massimo della forma sono andato dal mio medico di base, vecchia scuola, un forestiero, insomma non uno del luogo, che mi ha squadrato dall'alto in basso e alla fine mi ha detto: "prima o poi quelli della tua schiatta bussano tutti alla mia porta — soffrite tutti dello stesso male: secondo me è una cosa geografica". Diceva "voi" e quindi si riferiva evidentemente a un legame speciale, locale, col territorio. E questo legame epidermico con una natura abitata, lavorata, l'ho sempre sentito, anche quando ero in giro per archivi, per i miei studi. Bastava che imboccassi il canale del Piave e si riaffacciava subito la sensazione di tepore, di appartenenza a un luogo fisico. Geografico, appunto.

Poi c'è il mio rapporto personale con la natura disabitata, selvatica. Fin da piccolo io prendevo su e andavo nei boschi. Anche lontano, in fondo alla Vallorna, nei boschi delle Torreselle, correndo

persino qualche rischio. Cosa cercavo in quelle mie peregrinazioni? Fantasticazioni. Fondamentalmente cercavo storie. Immaginavo storie. E, di tanto in tanto, capitavano esperienze fuori dall'ordinario, percezioni più intense che io ho sempre interpretato come premonizioni di studio. Una specie di rabdomanzia delle storie: capitare in un posto e avvertire con forza che lì c'è qualcosa da scoprire, letteralmente da dissotterrare. E queste esperienze mi sono successe sempre nella natura disabitata.

Resta comunque il fatto che la montagna che mi affascina, mi stimola, mi ispira, è la montagna segnata dal lavoro umano. Il baratro che mi emoziona è quello su cui si affaccia un sentiero tracciato dai pastori. Il paesaggio in cui mi sento più a mio agio è quello in cui l'uomo c'è, ha lasciato un segno del suo passaggio: una croce scolpita, un'anconetta. È un paesaggio dove può esservi passato. Non però il passato di cui pure è rimasta traccia sulla cima del Pelmo — un passato che rimane nel registro dell'universale — ma un passato che si frantuma nel caos del particolare. Forse l'unico lato della natura che fa scattare in me una dimensione contemplativa pura è quella arborea. Con gli alberi, in effetti, scatta un'immedesimazione, un sentimento di coappartenenza che non ha bisogno di ulteriori mediazioni culturali.

Umanità e franchezza sono le due doti della gente di montagna su cui hai focalizzato l'attenzione nel tuo discorso alla cerimonia di consegna del Premio "Mario Rigoni Stern" (Melchiorre 2018). A me hanno suggerito l'immagine di una ruvidità senza "doppio fondo" o, come si direbbe in inglese, "without strings attached". Mi chiedevo, però, se questa caratteristica temperamentale così diversa dal modello standard della "urbanità" secondo te ci dice qualcosa di interessante sulla natura umana in generale. Forse c'è un nesso qui con il tema a cui facevo cenno sopra della diffidenza verso l'interiorità. Tu ce lo vedi o no?

In realtà, nel mio caso, il tema della franchezza emerge più dagli studi che dall'esperienza. Sono stati soprattutto i miei maestri di storiografia a instillarmi il culto della franchezza, dell'integrità, dell'onestà intellettuale. È proprio il senso del "dato", il rispetto per la realtà dei fatti

che pretende da te di fermarti dove occorre fermarsi senza cercare scappatoie. Un sano empirismo delle fonti, molto concreto, molto materiale. Lo sbattere contro i dati di realtà, o le "tracce", come preferisco chiamarle.

L'umanità ha molto a che fare con il legame personale, sentimentale, con un luogo. Nel mio caso il legame è stato cementato dall'indignazione per le ferite inferte al territorio un po' in tutto il Veneto, a cui ho assistito personalmente nella mia giovinezza. Era un dolore personale, intimo, perché significava assistere alla scomparsa di parti della propria memoria. È il tema classico dello sconvolgimento di un orizzonte noto. Può trattarsi anche di un luogo in cui a prima vista non sembrerebbe esserci nulla da preservare, mentre la mia memoria personale ha conservato l'immagine di una collina in cui c'era un asino sotto una tettoia, un castagno mezzo secco con delle cornacchie e un recinto sbilenco di pali e filo spinato, e vederlo spianato in mezz'ora da un caterpillar può essere molto doloroso. Qui puoi vedere all'opera il circolo tra paesaggio, passato e vita interiore che rappresenta ai miei occhi il vero bene da preservare. La fonte della sofferenza personale che è alla base dei miei primi testi letterari.

Il tuo esordio letterario è relativamente precoce (2004). Non ha però segnato l'inizio di una vocazione senza ripensamenti. Hai voglia di dirmi qualcosa sul tuo rapporto con la scrittura? M'interessa soprattutto il tuo modo di fare i conti con il paradosso con cui si misurano sempre gli scrittori della natura, come ad esempio Mario Rigoni Stern: perché scrivere di natura se questo è solo un misero surrogato dello stare nella natura? Anche per te il gesto della scrittura ha a che fare con il preservare? E preservare cosa esattamente?

Sì, per me, in definitiva, la scrittura ha lo scopo di preservare quel poco che riusciamo a salvare dallo scorrere del tempo. Anche se, nel mio caso, scrivere ha significato cose diverse a seconda delle fasi della vita. Se penso al primo libro in assoluto che ho scritto — lo chiamo "libro" anche se non ha niente a che fare con i titoli che infiliamo nelle nostre bibliografie — con una macchina da scrivere, in seconda

elementare, durante le vacanze di Pasqua del 1990, in quella cronachetta estemporanea ritrovo la matrice di tutto ciò che ho pubblicato in seguito. C'è ad esempio il racconto di una gita fatta con i miei genitori tra i carpini nel viale di Cart, con tutto lo stupore provato di fronte a quegli alberi monumentali. Una riflessione sulla noia. La descrizione di un monumento. La storia della nascita di un coniglio. Al fondo per me la scrittura è questo: preservazione di attimi. Poi cambiano i contesti, le motivazioni, l'intensità del gesto. Quando ho scritto *La via di Schenèr*, per esempio, l'intensità era enorme, perché la scrittura ha coinciso con la collisione traumatica tra l'aspirazione a diventare uno studioso a tempo pieno e altre mie palpitazioni personali nei confronti delle quali sentivo di dover essere franco.

Pensa solo alla mia scelta di occuparmi di montagna. Al tempo ero circondato da persone, inclusi i miei maestri, che con le migliori intenzioni mi mettevano in guardia: "Matteo, non ti devi occupare di montagna. È un tema che non interessa nessuno. Quella è periferia. Tu ti devi occupare del centro, di Padova, di Verona, di istituzioni, economia". Ecco, in quel momento la scrittura era il teatro in cui inscenare questo conflitto e dare sfogo alle pressioni che sentivo urgere dentro di me. Se vogliamo drammatizzare, era un modo per tornare a respirare. In qualche caso, invece, la scrittura può diventare un gancio a cui rimanere appesi sopra un baratro, un'ancora di salvezza. *La banda della superstrada* ha rappresentato questo per me. *Storia di alberi* è stata l'occasione per dare vita a un dialogo interiore ed è come sbocciato spontaneamente, senza sforzo, nel momento in cui dovevo mettere ordine nei pensieri. *Il duca* ha coinciso con il desiderio di misurarmi con alcune questioni decisive e la scelta di scrivere un romanzo senza aggettivi non l'ho vissuta come una rottura con il passato. Anzi. Io non ne ho mai fatto una questione di generi. Scrivere, per me, è narrare, raccontare. *La via di Schenèr* per quanto mi riguarda è un romanzo.

Come puoi capire, la scrittura è sì preservare, ma ha al proprio interno anche un momento di scontro, di tensione, di conflitto. A volte non si fa trovare. E non potrebbe essere altrimenti, perché la scrittura è anche espressione di un modo di stare al mondo. Il mio modo di essere al mondo. Perciò non può che portare al proprio interno le tracce dei luoghi, dei tempi in cui è giunta alla superficie: se è sbocciata nelle

pause o interstizi della vita; se è fiorita in prossimità o distanza dai luoghi di cui tratta, ecc.

Scrivere, infine, per me non è poi solo una forma efficace di autoespressione, ma è anche uno spazio in cui sviluppare un argomento fino alle sue estreme conseguenze. Un contesto in cui essere onesti con sé stessi. Persino spietati, se serve. Da qui deriva probabilmente l'effetto abrasivo a cui hai fatto riferimento. È il lato saggistico della scrittura, che è un'altra matrice importante del mio essere autore. Anche quando scrivo romanzi quella parte non scompare, mi accompagna sempre. Ha una funzione ordinatrice perché è orientata e plasmata dai dati di realtà. È uno sforzo estremo di oggettività.

Le due scritture procedono insieme perché l'una nutre l'altra. L'originalità forse dipende da questa convergenza dissonante. E non è una convergenza facile. Se c'è una cosa che io proprio non ho è "la penna facile" — contrariamente all'osservazione critica che mi fece uno degli esaminatori della mia tesi di dottorato. Se la scrittura è la mia casa, il mio sacrario, non lo è perché è un luogo in cui mi sento sempre e immancabilmente a mio agio. Non è una fonte di facile consolazione. Spesso è un tormento. E di sicuro non mi viene facile. Ammettiamo pure che *La via di Schenèr* sia un libro che scorre bene, che si legge piacevolmente. Una volta ho provato a fare un calcolo approssimativo sulla base dei miei appunti e ho preso atto che, nel complesso, ho proceduto alla notevole andatura di… tre righe al giorno!

In Requiem per un albero *compaiono già i motivi fondamentali della tua poetica: l'attenzione per i margini, un modo di raccontare digressivo e con accelerazioni improvvise, una tonalità emotiva sanguigna, l'ambivalenza come registro stilistico, la concretezza come via di fuga dalla retorica, ma anche un sentimento non tematizzato dell'importanza, del valore di ciò che scegli di raccontare. Ti ritrovi in questo ritratto?*

La premessa a ciò che dirò è che, dietro la mia scrittura, non c'è una pretesa o un impegno di coerenza. Il mio io autoriale non è un personaggio che coltivo e l'io narrante del *Duca* non sono *io*, ovviamente. Con ciò non intendo negare che i prodotti della mia creatività letteraria

siano anche un riflesso di chi io sono. Per qualsiasi scrittore vale la regola che, quale che sia lo sforzo di neutralizzazione, la propria personalità si farà comunque sentire in qualche modo. Il detto latino *de te fabula narratur* vale prima di tutto per gli scrittori. Per quanto ci si camuffi, per quanto li si diluisca, i pensieri, le idee, i crucci, che vengono trasferiti nel racconto sono pur sempre quelli dell'autore. Ma non è che l'autore sia trasparente a sé stesso. Anche a me è capitato di vedere qualcuno immergersi nei miei libri e avvertire un senso di estraneità, come se la relazione che vedevo materializzarsi davanti ai miei occhi non avesse nulla a che fare con la mia persona.

La banda della superstrada *(Melchiorre 2011) è forse il tuo libro dove la rivolta, lo spirito di ribellione, la collera di fronte alle profanazioni della civiltà moderna prevalgono più chiaramente sulla malinconia e la disillusione. La rivolta, tuttavia, rimane un'opzione sostanzialmente simbolica (a p. 142 viene descritta con gustosa verve comica come "donchisciottesca"). Che cosa le impedisce di diventare la risposta giusta alle contraddizioni della forma di vita moderna?*

Bella domanda. Sono passati quindici anni ma di fatto sono ancora lì che mi arrovello sulla questione. Con *Il duca* ho provato a fare un passo oltre la condizione di scacco raccontata ne *La Banda della superstrada*, ma non mi sentirei di descriverla come una vera e propria soluzione. Il senso d'impotenza viene in parte superato tramite una graduale presa di consapevolezza entro il perimetro delle proprie scelte quotidiane. Non proprio una via d'uscita trionfale, ma tant'è. Il duca, a suo modo, è un membro esemplare della generazione ritratta ne *La Banda della superstrada* e che io descriverei come una generazione che non è riuscita a trovare il modo per esprimere il proprio dissenso. In particolare, è una generazione formata da individui immersi ciascuno nella propria bolla (nel romanzo Noè ha la sua bolla professionale, Ermolao ha la sua bolla di opinioni inattaccabili, Tiziana la sua bolla autoreferenziale). Sono tutte persone incapaci di uscire dalla loro tana e passare dalle parole ai fatti. L'unica cosa che riescono a fare, alla fine, è costruire un'altra bolla trasversale in cui ammazzare il tempo con fesserie, fantasticherie.

La percezione che ho della mia generazione è di una generazione sandwich, rimasta schiacciata da un lato dai nostri genitori e dall'altro dalla generazione opposta a quella dei nostri genitori. Non siamo né carne né pesce. Irrisolti. Incerti. Falliti, se vuoi. Forse è questa la voce tragicomica che senti e riconosci nei miei libri. Siamo la generazione rimasta a metà strada in un periodo di trasformazione colossale del Leviatano che governa le vite di tutti e del cui dominio abbiamo fatto esperienza diretta prima di tutto nel paesaggio. La superstrada Fenadora-Anzù, alla fine, è il simbolo di questa condizione di subordinazione.

Il tema della rivolta impossibile mi dà il la per introdurre uno dei temi su cui vorrei far ruotare la nostra conversazione: il disincanto. Leggendo i tuoi libri non è facile capire se il tuo sia un disincanto temperamentale, una specie di disincanto metodologico legato alla forma mentis *empirista tipica di ogni storico archivista che si rispetti o se non ci sia un'adesione filosofica alla tesi weberiana del disincanto del mondo, del tramonto, cioè, delle illusioni consolatorie premoderne. Scrivere per te è anche un gesto di* Entzauberung*?*

Guarda, se mi chiedi di rispondere con uno slogan, io ti direi che *Il duca* è un libro che parla sostanzialmente di un incanto, non certo di disincanto. Il protagonista del libro sperimenta prima di tutto un incanto — un incanto del quotidiano. Dalla scena iniziale delle cornacchie a quella finale della tempesta di Vaia l'incanto aleggia nell'aria come un possibile modo di abitare il mondo. Per cui, se vuoi, anche se il libro si fa beffe di certe retoriche dell'incanto, non lo esclude affatto come una componente sensata e significativa del modo umano di fare esperienza del mondo.

Riguardo al disincanto del mondo la tesi weberiana del trionfo della ragione strumentale la assumo come lo sfondo delle nostre vite. Prima ho menzionato *en passant* il Leviatano. Ecco il Leviatano è la gabbia d'acciaio entro cui sono costrette a prendere forma le nostre vite. Su questo c'è poco da fare.

Volendo trovare un lato positivo del disincanto — che non è necessariamente un disincanto metodologico — lo descriverei come la

consapevolezza dell'inevitabile parzialità del proprio punto di vista. Io la vivo come una microforma di saggezza di cui sono debitore alla mia esperienza di vita. È un senso ragionevole di umiltà, di modestia. Dietro c'è probabilmente anche l'orrore per la vanità a cui siamo come uomini tutti, volente o nolente, soggetti. È una trappola a cui non sfugge nessuno, per cui è meglio stare sempre in guardia. Questa è una buona forma di disincanto: un esercizio di misurazione del sé che fa continuamente la tara a questa disposizione umana alla vanità. Se vuoi, anche qui si può riconoscere in trasparenza la virtù che ammiro negli storici degni di questo nome: la capacità di inchinarsi di fronte alla realtà, al dato di fatto. La disponibilità a prenderne atto e mettere a tacere la vanità che ti spingerebbe invece ad accantonare le cose che non tornano, che ti fanno ombra, che frustrano i tuoi desideri.

Questo tipo di disincanto, il mettere le briglie all'incanto facile, a quello che oggi i tipi che la sanno lunga chiamano "hype", è un'attitudine che si colloca esattamente agli antipodi di ciò che ci si aspetta dalle persone nella nostra società. Ben venga il disincanto, dunque[1].

Il duca*, da questo punto di vista, sembra un po' un romanzo a chiave. Nella conversazione che hai intavolato a "RacConta la montagna" (Melchiorre 2023), per esempio, ti sei dilungato sulle diverse visioni della montagna — ma forse sarebbe più corretto chiamarle visioni della vita — che vengono inscenate nel teatro naturale e comunitario di Vallorgàna. C'è la visione "feudale" ereditata dal Duca, quella "capitalista" di Fastrèda, quella "romantica" dell'odontoiatra Felicetti, e quella relazionale di Maria. Da questa polifonia tipica del romanzo moderno ti sembra possibile ricavare una qualche lezione filosofica univoca ("ha ragione tizio e torto caio") oppure la morale della favola sta proprio nell'assunzione di una sorta di posizione, diciamo così, "stoica" di distacco e sopportazione dell'inevitabile*

(1) Cfr. Melchiorre 2007, pp. 157–158 e Melchiorre 2017, p. 245: "Nella descrizione dell'albero di Tomo c'è incanto, spero non sentimentalismo generico ma piuttosto l'adesione a un luogo noto. In Marc Bloch […] ho però letto il disincanto, un osservare che si interroga di continuo sulle forme di ciò che vede. Ho cercato di fare uso di questo sguardo. Così, alla fine, incanto e disincanto si combattono. Sarà un'incoerenza, sarebbe stato meglio decidere se stare dall'una o dall'altra parte. Ma: senza l'incanto, sarei mai stato ore e ore intorno a un albero crollato? E, senza il disincanto, avrei mai contato gli anni/anelli del tronco?".

scacco dell'esistenza individuale e del peso della necessità nelle vite umane ("hanno un po' ragione tutti e nessuno")?

Capisco quello che vuoi dire. La questione della polifonia è al centro anche del romanzo che sto scrivendo in questo periodo. Il protagonista è più giovane del duca, ma anche lui ignora quale sia il suo posto nel mondo. E il suo modo di misurarsi col mondo è all'insegna dell'odio: lui odia con tutte le sue forze la gente che ha attorno, il suo prossimo. Per gestire questo odio universale lo riveste poi di velleità scientifiche. In questo sforzo di dare ordine a un impulso sistematicamente oppositivo la polifonia diventa addirittura cacofonia e lo sforzo di trovare un punto di sintesi è ancora più disorientante.

Ne *Il Duca*, a ben vedere, c'è prima di tutto la verità dispersa dei destini, che è la verità che metto in bocca a Dina, la donna anziana che accudisce il duca: la verità, per così dire, del "sangue". Poi c'è la verità diciamo "ambientale" di Nelso, che sa distinguere ciò che è giusto e ciò che non è giusto fare nel bosco. Infine c'è quella che chiamerei la verità dell'epoca, che è legata al macroconflitto che incornicia le vicende narrate nel romanzo. Qui si fronteggiano le "verità" parziali, a cui hai fatto riferimento: la verità del duca, quella di Fastreda e quella di Felicetti. Secondo Fastreda è lecito distruggere l'ambiente in cui viviamo in vista del benessere individuale e/o collettivo. Secondo Felicetti la natura è fatta per essere contemplata. La verità del duca è meno chiara. Diciamo che è una sorta di terza via tra la ragione strumentale e l'estetizzazione del mondo. Segnaposti, per così dire, di questa via alternativa sono uno strumento come la roncola (con cui ci si fa strada nel bosco), Maria che è un po' la metafora della comunità, delle relazioni personali che tirano l'individuo fuori da sé stesso, lo strappano alla solitudine e all'egocentrismo. Infine c'è l'elemento più strano: la magia. L'essere disposti, cioè, a riconoscere, che esiste una soglia che si può oltrepassare e che conduce nella sfera dell'incanto, senza però fuoriuscire dalla realtà. Questo è un punto importante. Perché è qui che nasce il conflitto con Fastreda. Il mondo possibile del duca è un mondo più leggero, meno pesante, più delicato dell'universo entro cui si muove e agisce Fastreda. Se, come autore, dovessi scegliere il punto di vista a cui aderisco, quello che più mi rappresenta, è senza dubbio questo.

Nella storia raccontata ne Il Duca*, come hai appena spiegato, c'è spazio anche per una forma di incanto o magia che sembrano però rispondere a logiche non umane, non addomesticabili (sto pensando in particolare alla cornacchia dalle ali bianche che, sintomaticamente, apre e chiude il racconto). È a questa dimensione dell'esperienza che riserveresti l'etichetta di "sacro"? In* Storia degli alberi *l'alterità del sacro è incarnata dalle piante e dalla loro enigmatica forma di vita a cui il narratore risponde con un animismo che lo mette a disagio. Tu lo vedi o no questo parallelismo?*

Io mi spingerei fino a dire che il sacro è onnipresente in ciò che scrivo. C'è un passo ne *La Banda della superstrada* in cui il protagonista si reca da solo nel cantiere in costruzione e sperimenta una sorta di epifania di fronte al cavalcavia che si erge nel paesaggio come un tempio. Al pari dell'irrompere del magico ne *Il Duca* o della ricostruzione del passato profondo di un paesaggio, momenti del genere hanno la funzione di aggiungere una dimensione nascosta alla nostra esperienza del mondo allargando il nostro senso del possibile. È proprio l'invisibile che io cerco di mettere a fuoco attraverso la scrittura.

Che cos'è questo nucleo incandescente da cui dipende la tensione narrativa che si respira nei miei libri? Lo potremmo chiamare "sacro", proprio perché è circonfuso da una certa aura di ambiguità. Ne *La banda della superstrada* il Leviatano stesso assume le sembianze del sacro in certi passi, del numinoso. Nel romanzo che sto scrivendo adesso c'è l'apoteosi di questa ambivalenza perché il numinoso è il male, e se qualcuno volesse persino chiamarlo diavolo non mi offenderei di sicuro. Quindi il nucleo incandescente non è necessariamente misericordioso. E sicuramente non è ordinato, coerente, rassicurante. Come mi capitava da bambino ascoltando i racconti inverosimili di mia nonna, e c'è un riflesso di questa esperienza nella figura spiazzante della Dina ne *Il Duca*, il mistero ha la capacità di complicare le nostre aspettative nei confronti del mondo. È un'eccedenza. E l'apertura a questa dimensione del reale è a suo modo un gesto di umiltà o, come dici tu, di riapertura dei possibili.

La via di Schenèr *è forse il tuo libro in cui la dialettica tra le spinte contrastanti che ho appena descritto emerge con maggiore forza ed evidenza. Il*

bisogno di controllare e quello di lasciarsi andare, la curiosità e l'astenia, il desiderio di comunicare e la ricerca della solitudine competono l'uno con l'altro nel monologo del narratore. Nella tua visione del mondo, mi pare di capire, la Storia, le storie, la storicità (cioè il radicamento o posizionamento in un contesto storico specifico) sembrano essere gli elementi che definiscono i margini di dinamismo e inerzia, passività e attività, entro cui chi prende la parola nei tuoi libri è costretto a destreggiarsi[2]*. Detto ciò, è interessante notare come s'intreccino qui il volto spaziale (geografico o paesaggistico) e quello temporale della necessità, che assume le sembianze della potenza del Passato sulle vite delle persone. La fragilità del presente e del futuro rispetto alla forza di ciò che è stato è interpretabile come un'ulteriore faccia del disincanto oppure ha un'altra spiegazione secondo te?*

Questo è il filo conduttore della mia ricerca personale e quindi prendi ciò che sto per dirti come una riflessione intermedia. Voglio dire, è un tema che mi occuperà ancora per anni. Quello che so per certo è che il passato è il mio sacro. Non saprei come altro definirlo. Pur ignorando quello che il sacro possa significare in una dimensione strettamente confessionale, che personalmente non mi appartiene, se dovessi associare alla parola "sacro" un significato che entri in risonanza con la mia esperienza, ecco, chiamerei in causa proprio il passato. Il retroterra storico, fin dall'infanzia, fin da quando mi sono innamorato della leggenda della regina dei Goti Amalasunta, mi è sembrato incorporare qualcosa di numinoso. Quello che provo quando intercetto un documento che mi fa entrare in contatto con una persona, anche una persona qualsiasi a cui mi sento affratellato, non dico mica Giorgione di Castelfranco, ma anche solo un signor nessuno, be', è la cosa più simile

(2) Cfr. "I rami di Bob Marley" in Melchiorre 2007, pp. 133–134: "E qua salta fuori la storia. Di preciso salta fuori Marc Bloch, lo storico francese. Ha scritto una frase, tra le poche che io sappia a memoria: «La quercia nasce dalla ghianda. Ma questa diviene e resta quercia soltanto mediante condizioni ambientali favorevoli le quali non dipendono più dalla embriologia». Io aggiungo: non dipendono più dall'embriologia, ma dal contesto *storico* nel senso più ampio del termine. I semi di Alberón, insomma, potrebbero fruttificare, come la quercia di Bloch, solo qualora incontrassero condizioni favorevoli, di per sé. E queste *condizioni favorevoli* le creano gli uomini, non gli alberi. Gli uomini nel loro agire nel tempo e nello spazio. Se i semi semineranno semi per sviluppi diversi, dipenderà dagli uomini, dai poteri, dalle idee dominanti. Ma occorrono, specialmente vorrei dire, mani nella terra, scaglie di legno nel pollice, gente che viva. Intelligenza e dissenso"

a una ierofania che riesco a immaginarmi, tenuto conto della persona che sono. Quando questo manifestarsi opera simultaneamente sul piano della storia — quindi del tempo — e sul piano del luogo — quindi dello spazio — scatta la felicità.

Ed è la felicità della relazione, non dell'isolamento. È la costruzione di un legame, non il trionfo di una soggettività alla ricerca disperata di una facile autorealizzazione, come capita troppo spesso in certa letteratura di montagna. Questo è il sacro impacchettato che si può vendere a gente che, chiaramente, è insoddisfatta della propria vita, ma non vuole essere troppo scossa o destabilizzata dalla manifestazione di quella eccedenza di cui parlavamo sopra.

Per la mia ierofania personale il termine "abisso" — l'abisso del tempo — continua a essere la parola che esprime meglio ciò che penso. E in effetti il mio approccio alla storia è in origine archeologico. L'immagine che alimenta la mia passione è decisamente materiale, è proprio lo scavo della terra, come quando da ragazzo mi sono messo alla ricerca della torre del castello di Amalasunta e alla fine l'ho trovata, attirandomi le ire della Soprintendenza. Questo intreccio tra leggenda popolare, l'ostinata, umile ma rigorosa ricerca storica e la cronaca episodica dei successi, delle scoperte, non di rado casuali, comunque sempre avventurose, riassume alla perfezione il mio rapporto allo stesso tempo incantato e disincantato con la storia, addirittura con la cronografia degli eventi umani e dei paesaggi naturali.

L'ultima domanda che vorrei farti è la più diretta: come reagisci tu quando senti parlare di sacralità della montagna o addirittura di "sacralizzare" una montagna, come è capitato recentemente con la proposta sostenuta, tra gli altri, dal Club Alpino Italiano, dall'Alpine Club di Londra, e da nomi prestigiosi dell'alpinismo e della letteratura di montagna come Kurt Diemberger, Hervé Barmasse, Manolo, Enrico Camanni, Paolo Rumiz, Paolo Cognetti, Matteo Righetto, di sottrarre almeno una cima dell'arco alpino (nel caso in questione, il Monveso di Forzo) dalle brame di conquista degli esseri umani, spingendoli così a riscoprire il significato del limite? Ha senso per te usare il lessico religioso della sacralità anche in una società ampiamente secolarizzata come la nostra o ti suona anacronistico, retorico,

fuori bersaglio? Insomma, per come la vedi tu, c'è qualcosa di sacro o addirittura di "salvifico" nelle montagne oppure no?

Questione complicata. Provo a circoscriverla raccontandoti un'esperienza personale. Il titolo del racconto che sto per farti è "Boarnal". Siamo nel 2014. Immaginati un gruppo di persone più o meno giovani (si andava dal sottoscritto, nato nel 1981, a Sebastiano, che credo sia del 1995), unite, per motivi biografici diversi, dal desiderio, dal bisogno di quell'"eccedenza" di cui abbiamo appena parlato. Insieme abbiamo trovato una valle disabitata, all'interno della val di Seren, la Val Boarnal, la più abbandonata, trascurata, all'interno di un luogo montano di per sé marginale, periferico — periferia della periferia, per così dire. Le case, come puoi immaginare, erano in pessimo stato. Molte erano disabitate dalla fine degli anni Sessanta. Ed è lì che abbiamo deciso di compiere una serie di gesti di cura totalmente gratuiti. Siamo partiti cercando di conoscere meglio un territorio che anche a noi diceva poco o nulla. Abbiamo preparato delle schede in cui descrivevamo tutti gli edifici, nessuno escluso, fosse pure un tugurio diroccato. Abbiamo fotografato, misurato, schedato. Mano a mano che ci familiarizzavamo con quel posto — dove, tra l'altro c'era un orrido da paura, una cascata allucinante — abbiamo avuto un'esperienza genuinamente epifanica: l'eccedenza ce l'avevamo veramente di fronte, o meglio, c'eravamo proprio dentro. L'eccedenza consisteva in sostanza in un sovrappiù di dettagli portati alla luce grazie ai nostri "scavi" metaforici. Penso in particolare a un luogo che abbiamo chiamato il "pulpito", un angolo remoto oltre una casera diroccata, a cui si arrivava passando attraverso un prato con una vegetazione bassa, ruvida, per lo più di ginepro, dove di colpo ci si affacciava sulla valle di Seren. Noi andavamo lì in processione. Se vuoi, facevamo il nostro rito sacramentale. Finita l'esperienza, voilà, ci siamo persi di vista.

Nondimeno, questo gesto di cura collettiva, se vuoi un rito di riconnessione, sono sicuro che abbia avuto un significato speciale nelle nostre vite. Ed è interessante notare che anche qui la scrittura svolgeva un ruolo importante, perché dopo le spedizioni per così dire "cartografiche" ci trovavamo da qualche parte per mettere nero su bianco quanto avevamo vissuto insieme. Un vero e proprio rito di scrittura collettiva.

Questa è la mia esperienza personale di sacralizzazione di un luogo. Non particolarmente eclatante, come puoi capire. Senza un'apparente rilevanza pubblica. Quanto al resto, volendo essere schietti fino alla brutalità, ti direi che quello che dobbiamo fare è imparare a stare fermi: imparare la stanzialità. Riparametrare il mondo attraverso la stasi — questa sarebbe la mia ricetta, estremizzando un po'. Più che espansione, contrazione. Intensione invece che estensione. Limitare per quanto possibile il proprio raggio di movimento. So che è una posizione che può essere facilmente demolita con argomenti inoppugnabili e che qualcuno potrebbe vederci in trasparenza solo delle idiosincrasie personali, ma io ci credo veramente e, anzi, mi sento persino in colpa quando riscontro nel mio stile di vita delle forzate incoerenze rispetto al principio generale. D'altra parte, nell'epoca in cui ci è toccato di vivere l'unica possibilità di sopravvivenza per luoghi periferici come quelli che ci stanno a cuore — le terre alte — è allargare il raggio di movimento delle persone, visto che di lavoro retribuito in montagna ce n'è poco.

Resta comunque il fatto che per me il legame con il territorio, con i suoi abissi temporali, con le sue eccedenze, è una delle cose più sacre che abbiamo. Per farla breve, la montagna sacra è quella che abbiamo sopra la testa. È un sacro implicito che non ha bisogno di essere celebrato con gesti eclatanti, ma nella quotidianità. Ed è un sacro condiviso, che crea legami. Un sacro iterabile, per così dire. Non voglio dire che sia l'unico senso del sacro possibile — c'è sicuramente un numinoso ben più maestoso di quello che si può incontrare sul monte Tomatico o lungo la via di Schenèr — ma questo è quello che conosco meglio e che mi sembra trascurato oggi nella discussione sulla sacralità dei monti.

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LA MONTAGNA E IL CAMMINO DELL'ANIMA
SIMBOLO E TERRITORIO NEL CRISTIANESIMO D'ORIENTE

Veronica della Dora

Abstract: The essay explores how, in Eastern Christian theology and spirituality, the journey of the soul towards the ultimate goal of existence, that is, towards God, is often associated with the image of the mountain. Mountains are not experienced as obstacles or constraints, but as pathways towards the union with the heavenly Father. The complex "orography" underlying this spirituality is outlined through an analysis of the role of mountains in Scripture, their symbolic dimension in Greek Patristic literature, and, finally, the phenomenon of holy mountains in the Byzantine world.

Il saggio indaga il modo in cui nella teologia e nella tradizione spirituale cristiana orientale il cammino dell'anima verso il fine ultimo dell'esistenza, cioè verso Dio, è spesso associato all'immagine della montagna. Quest'ultima non è vissuta come un ostacolo o una morsa costringente, ma come un sentiero verso l'unione con il Padre celeste. La complessa "orografia" che sta alla base di questa spiritualità viene delineata nel testo attraverso un'analisi del ruolo della montagna nelle Scritture, della sua dimensione simbolica nella letteratura patristica greca e, infine, del fenomeno dei monti santi nel mondo bizantino.

Keywords: Holy mountains, Eastern Christianity, Sacred space, Ladder, Hierophany, Spiritual Journey, Ascetism

Parole chiave: Montagne sacre, Cristianesimo orientale, Spazio sacro, Scala, Ierofania, Itinerari spirituali, Ascesi

1. Oltre le vette

Bob Ingersoll era un ateo. Per tutta la vita aveva predicato che la morte è la fine di tutto. Un giorno, si trovò a dover pronunziare

> l'orazione per il funerale di suo fratello. Ora, immagina la difficoltà della situazione! Pare che all'inizio avesse cercato di procedere nella sua solita vena. Schiacciato dal dolore, però, crollò improvvisamente. Incapace di continuare, si appoggiò alla bara dentro la quale giaceva il fratello. Poi disse: "La vita è una stretta valle tra le fredde e nude cime di due eternità. Invano cerchiamo di vedere oltre le vette. Gridiamo in cerca di aiuto e l'unica risposta è l'eco del nostro urlo dolente. Dalle labbra mute del morto non arriva parola, ma nella buia notte della morte la speranza vede una stella. E l'amore che ascolta ode il fruscio di un'ala"[1].

Questa storia è riportata in una lettera di un giovane banchiere di Wall Street alla sua confidente nel 1925. Robert Ingersoll (1833–1899) era un famoso avvocato e oratore americano conosciuto come il "Grande Agnostico". Di lui possediamo una dettagliata biografia, le sue opere in dodici corposi volumi (Ingersoll 1900), un'imponente statua bronzea, un museo nella casa natale, nonché una montagna nominata in suo onore[2]. Nulla invece sappiamo del banchiere, Charlie. Tutto ciò che sopravvive oltre al suo nome sono solo poche lettere sbiadite dal tempo. Qualche accenno al proprio agnosticismo, a un amore non corrisposto, a una crisi depressiva. E poi, un trasferimento a Shanghai, lontano dal proprio paese, dai propri affetti e dalle proprie sconfitte — ma non dalla propria paralisi mentale. Un personaggio tragico e senza volto quello di Charlie. Senza volto come la maggior parte di coloro che percorrono l'angusta valle della vita per svanire nelle tenebre dell'oblio. Un'eco lontana della valle di lacrime (Sal 84,6) e dell'ombra della morte (Sal 23,4), l'immagine topografica dell'impervia gola pare una proiezione consona del mondo interiore dell'anonimo banchiere. Charlie, così come il suo illustre predecessore, sembra esservi intrappolato dentro. Spoglie e gelide, per l'agnostico le due vette dell'eternità sono una presenza imperscrutabile e opprimente. Tra di esse rimbomba solo un grido di disperazione, come tra le pareti di una fredda prigione.

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(1) La ricerca per questo saggio è stata supportata dal Leverhulme Trust (Major Research Fellowship 2022–026). Lettera di Charlie Biddle a Marion Rebuschatis, 30 luglio 1925 (archivio della famiglia Fagg, collezione privata). L'orazione originale si trova in Ingersoll (1909, pp. 131–133).

(2) La vetta Colonel Bob (in onore di Ingersoll) si trova nella parte nord–ovest dello stato di Washington. Il Robert Ingersoll Birthplace Museum è a Dresden, NY.

A rendere l'immagine ancor più drammatica è l'implicita antitesi con gli archetipi biblici del cammino e della montagna. L'esistenza umana come percorso spirituale è un motivo centrale nel Nuovo Testamento. La vita terrena di Cristo stesso è fondamentalmente peripatetica, e il Vangelo offre un itinerario per incamminarsi sulle sue orme. Ciascuno è invitato a prendere la propria croce e seguirlo (Mt 16,24; Mc 8,34; Lc 9,23), a scegliere la stretta via della virtù (Mt 7,13–14), a camminare nella luce (Gv 1,7). *Logos* è anche *hodos* (Gv 14,6), "la via del ritorno al Verbo che era in principio" (Monga 1996, p. 6). Il cammino implica scelta, movimento, nonché un senso di orientamento verso il fine ultimo dell'esistenza di ogni cristiano: la vita eterna. In altre parole, la stessa eternità che pare schiacciare Ingersoll e Charlie è per il fedele un orizzonte imperscrutabile ma pieno di luce.

Nella tradizione cristiana orientale, il cammino dell'anima verso questo orizzonte è in genere associato all'immagine della montagna. A differenza delle due vette di Ingersoll, la sagoma della montagna si profila non tanto come muro o ostacolo, quanto piuttosto come sentiero verso l'unione con il Padre celeste. Non una morsa costringente, ma un punto d'incontro tra terra e cielo, finitudine ed eternità, rivelazione e mistero. Tra questi poli si dispiega una complessa "orografia spirituale". Obbiettivo di questo breve saggio è accennarne i contorni, dal ruolo della montagna nelle Scritture, alla sua dimensione simbolica nella letteratura patristica greca, al fenomeno dei monti santi nel mondo bizantino. Questi tre aspetti — Verbo, simbolo e territorio — sono inestricabilmente interconnessi. Insieme, caratterizzano una particolare visione del creato profondamente diversa da quella della modernità occidentale — una visione intrinsecamente sacramentale e simbolica.

2. Montagne e prefigurazioni

Il termine greco *sym–bolon* implica l'unione di due parti: l'una visibile, l'altra invisibile. La natura e il paesaggio per i Padri della Chiesa greci e per i loro successori bizantini non sono un mero oggetto di piacere estetico, di ammirazione fine a sé stessa. Sono piuttosto un

vasto insieme di simboli attraverso i quali il Creatore si nasconde e al tempo stesso si rivela all'umanità — nella misura in cui Egli stesso stabilisce. Per i Padri della Chiesa, gli eventi dell'Antico Testamento, e con essi i paesaggi a loro associati, non sono altro che anticipazioni di quelli del Nuovo. La storia dell'umanità stessa è quindi un cammino di continua rivelazione. Dio aveva parlato agli ebrei attraverso "il roveto ardente e rugiadoso, la roccia che zampillava acqua, l'urna portatrice di manna, l'altare contenente il fuoco divino" (Giovanni Damasceno 1982, p. 79). In questi fenomeni soprannaturali, i Padri della Chiesa avevano scorto prefigurazioni della *Theotokos*, la Madre di Dio (Cunningham 2019). Ma la mano invisibile del Creatore è presente in ogni dettaglio del tessuto del creato, dall'immensità luccicante della distesa marina e la lontana stella tremolante, al tenero filo d'erba. Soprattutto, è manifesta nella loro funzione, nell'armoniosa integrazione del cosmo. Tutto ha uno scopo, tutto si muove verso un fine: l'unione in Cristo.

Nel corso della storia, Dio dunque continua a rivelarsi agli uomini attraverso le sue opere. Basilio di Cesarea (330–379 d.C.) le chiama "memorie lampanti delle sue meraviglie" (Basilio di Cesarea 1990, p. 269). L'iconografia e l'innografia bizantina si fondano su questa visione patristica del mondo. Vi ritroviamo pertanto una continua catena di simboli e rimandi, spesso topografici. Ad esempio, la scena della Natività è ambientata non in una stalla, ma in una grotta, in altre parole, nel grembo della terra; nella scena della Teofania, il Giordano figura come una "grotta d'acqua"; infine, nella discesa di Cristo negli inferi, l'Ade è pure rappresentato come una caverna. Cristo, dunque, discende nel grembo della Vergine, in quello del Giordano, e in quello dell'Ade. A loro volta, la sua *katabasis* nel ventre dell'Ade e la Resurrezione sono prefigurate da Giona uscito dalla pancia della balena dopo tre giorni, come Cristo (della Dora 2016, p. 57).

Le montagne sono gli elementi paesaggistici più cospicui e permanenti nel paesaggio. In quanto tali, formano i principali anelli di queste catene di simboli. La loro prominenza visiva è riflessa nella Bibbia non solo qualitativamente, ma anche quantitativamente. Nelle pagine del Vecchio e Nuovo Testamento ne troviamo, infatti, quasi mezzo migliaio di menzioni. Luoghi di rivelazione divina, di eventi significativi, o

simboli spirituali, queste sommità formano una sorta di "sintassi di pietra". In altre parole, non sono semplicemente luoghi geografici, ma ancorano al territorio momenti cruciali nella narrazione biblica. Fungono così da segnaposti, da punti di riferimento per il lettore nel corso del proprio cammino attraverso il testo. Mosè, ad esempio, riceve le tavole della Legge sulla cima del Sinai (Es 24,12; 31,18) e, prima di morire, vede la Terra Promessa su quella di un altro monte, il Nebo (Dt 34,1). Elia sfida i profeti di Baal sul Carmelo (1 Re 18,20) e incontra Dio nel silenzio di una caverna sul Monte Oreb (1 Re 19,9–13). Sul Moria, invece, Abramo è pronto a sacrificare il figlio Isacco (Gn 22,2) e, sullo stesso monte, Salomone edifica il Tempio (2 Cr 3,1)[3].

Questa funzione sintattica delle montagne è ancora più marcata nel Nuovo Testamento. Nel Vangelo secondo Matteo una sequela di monti segna diverse stazioni o eventi chiave nella vita di Cristo, a partire dal "monte altissimo" in cima al quale è tentato da Satana con la veduta di "tutti i regni del mondo e la loro gloria" (Mt 4,8). Seguono poi il monte delle Beatitudini, il monte della moltiplicazione dei pani e dei pesci, il monte della Trasfigurazione, il monte degli Ulivi, e infine il "monte" della Crocifissione, il Golgota.

La catena di montagne bibliche non si limita a un particolare libro delle Scritture. Al contrario, percorre, e unisce simbolicamente, Vecchio e Nuovo Testamento. Questi *landmarks* rocciosi attraversano la storia universale e si prefigurano a vicenda, a cominciare dall'Ararat, dove, dopo il diluvio, l'arca di Noè si incaglia con il suo prezioso carico di vita e di speranza (Gn 8,4). Questo monte maestoso e solenne, il più alto della Turchia e dell'altopiano armeno, segna dunque la rifondazione del mondo e un nuovo inizio[4]. Nel Nuovo Testamento, il nuovo inizio è invece marcato da una trascurabile protuberanza: il Golgota, ovvero "il luogo del cranio". Più che di una montagna si tratta in realtà di uno sperone roccioso di pochi metri inglobato a tutt'oggi nella basilica costantiniana del Santo Sepolcro a Gerusalemme. Nell'iconografia bizantina e postbizantina della Crocifissione è in genere rappresentato come una collinetta con una piccola cavità contenente il teschio di

(3) Per un'analisi dettagliata di queste montagne nella Bibbia, si veda Ravasi (2014); Bernbaum (1991).

(4) Rappresentazioni della scena sono discusse in Capriotti (2014, pp. 55–58).

Adamo e sovrastata da un'imponente croce. Con il suo sangue Cristo, quindi, lava i peccati del primo Adamo. Il suo sacrificio redime un'umanità caduta, purifica la terra come le acque del diluvio universale. Posta su una (seppur modesta) sommità, la croce allora funziona come un asse che collega terra e cielo, passato ed eternità (della Dora 2016, p. 180).

L'onnipresenza delle montagne nella Bibbia è legata alla topografia della regione. Israele abitava infatti un territorio per sua natura montuoso. "Pensiamo ai monti di Giuda, monti desertici ma pur sempre monti; ai monti di Samaria; pensiamo anche a quella grande pianura, quella di Izre'el o Esdrelon, la pianura di Galilea, che è circondata da monti attorno ai quali si addensano spesso episodi biblici tragici e anche curiosi. Il monte è quindi l'esperienza primaria che Israele ha di fronte a sé" (Ravasi 2014, p. 19). Ma la centralità della montagna nelle Scritture si collega altresì alla concezione cosmologica ebraica. Dio risiede nelle alte camere, oltre il firmamento. È quindi naturale che i luoghi dove scende per incontrare gli uomini siano le cime delle montagne, cioè i punti terrestri più vicini al cielo. Davide, ad esempio, invita i fedeli a lodare "l'Eterno nei luoghi altissimi" (Sal 148,1). Questa concezione "verticale" del cosmo è illustrata nella *Topografia cristiana* di Cosma Indicopleuste che, nel VI secolo, immaginava l'universo nella forma del tabernacolo del Tempio. La struttura è divisa in due parti: la terra e gli uomini sono relegati alla parte inferiore; Dio, invece, risiede nella parte alta sopra il velo del firmamento, oltre il mondo, oltre il tempo. L'intera struttura è dominata da un'enorme montagna marrone. Dietro le sue pendici, ogni giorno scompare e rispunta il sole[5].

Sia nel Vecchio che nel Nuovo Testamento, le montagne fungono allora da frontiere tra cielo e terra, da punti di dialogo tra finito ed infinito. Luoghi privilegiati di ritiro solitario e preghiera, esse sono anche *axis mundi*, ovvero luoghi teofanici, di rivelazioni divine[6]. In quest'ultimo senso, spiccano il Monte Sinai e il Monte Tabor: il monte dei Comandamenti e il monte della Trasfigurazione. La prima cosa che

(5) Sulla *Topografia cristiana* di Kosmas, si veda Kominko (2013). Sulla sua dimensione temporale, si veda Kessler (1995).

(6) Sul concetto di *axis mundi*, si veda Eliade (1976, pp. 28–31). I riferimenti a Cristo che si ritira su una montagna per pregare sono molteplici; si vedano, ad esempio, Mt 14,23, Mc 6,46, Lc 6,12, Gv 6,15.

colpisce di queste due sommità è il contrasto tra le loro rispettive topografie. Il Sinai, la montagna più sacra dell'Antico Testamento, è spoglio, aspro e solenne(7). Al contrario, il Tabor, il monte dove Cristo si trasfigurò dinanzi a tre suoi discepoli, è un luogo verdeggiante e ospitale, dai lineamenti soavi. Il Monte Sinai si trova nell'omonima penisola, in uno dei luoghi più aridi della terra. Un paesaggio lunare di nuda roccia granitica impervia all'umidità. Un paesaggio spazzato dal vento, bruciato dal sole incandescente del deserto. Il Tabor, invece, sorge nella Galilea, in uno scenario di straordinaria dolcezza, con le sue lievi ondulazioni, i suoi vigneti verdeggianti, uliveti argentei e ombrosi pini marittimi.

Il massiccio del Sinai supera i 2200 metri, ma la cima di Mosè è quasi indistinguibile da quelle circostanti. Il Tabor, viceversa, misura poco più di 570 metri. Più che una montagna, sembra una gigantesca collina. A differenza del monte di Mosè, il Tabor emerge dall'orizzonte in modo drammatico e misterioso, come una grossa bolla nella terra. Il contrasto con il paesaggio circostante cattura immediatamente lo sguardo. Più che l'altezza in sé, è quindi forse proprio questa rottura visiva che ha guadagnato al Tabor l'epiteto biblico di "alto monte" (Mt 17,1; Mc 9,2).

3. La montagna come simbolo e cammino spirituale

Nel corso dei secoli la drammatica giustapposizione tra monti così diversi come il Sinai e il Tabor si è fatta veicolo della duplice natura della tradizione cristiana orientale, al tempo stesso apofatica (o "negativa") e catafatica (cioè, "affermativa"). Il Sinai simboleggia il potere aniconico dell'approccio apofatico, per cui Dio è definito come ineffabile, irraggiungibile, incomprensibile. Il Tabor, al contrario, simboleggia la via che procede alla conoscenza di Dio tramite affermazioni e immagini; in altre parole, afferma di Dio tutto ciò che l'intelligenza umana ne può comprendere. Con i suoi tratti essenziali e assenza di vita, il Sinai ci invita a riconoscere la nostra agnosia, cioè, la nostra "conoscenza dell'ignoranza". Sul Sinai, Dio si rivela a Mosè in una paucità di immagini,

(7) Sulla topografia del Sinai si veda Hobbs (1995).

nel silenzio del deserto, nell'oscurità. Mosè chiede a Dio di vedere la sua faccia, ma gli viene mostrato solo il suo dorso. A Elia, Yahweh non si manifesta con il consueto apparato teofanico. "Dio non è nel vento che spacca la roccia, non è nel fulmine, nella folgore, non è nel terremoto che sommuove la terra," ma semplicemente in un mormorio di vento leggero, "nel suono del silenzio assoluto" (1 Re 19,11–13)[8]. L'impulso apofatico del Sinai, una montagna di roccia dura e sterile, è allora quello di "svuotarci di tutte le immagini inadeguate, di distruggere le idolatrie, di eliminare ogni falsa concezione del sacro" (Lane 1998, p. 137; della Dora 2016, pp. 152–153).

L'ascesa del Sinai come immagine del progresso spirituale attraverso la "via negativa" è un potente topos nella letteratura patristica. Secondo Gregorio di Nissa (335–394 d.C.), la struttura dell'Esodo descrive la vita perfetta del cristiano in cammino verso Dio. Nella sua *Vita di Mosè*, Gregorio (1984; vedi anche Lane 1998, pp. 101–102) utilizza il movimento del profeta attraverso il paesaggio sinaitico per mappare i tre stadi del cammino spirituale dell'animo umano verso l'unione con Dio: la purificazione dalle passioni egotistiche (*katharsis*), l'illuminazione (*phōtisis*) e la deificazione (*theosis*). Questo cammino è raffigurato come un viaggio notturno nel deserto (il vagabondaggio degli Israeliti nella penisola del Sinai), seguito dall'ascesa di Mosè sul monte Sinai (lo stadio dell'illuminazione dell'anima da parte dello Spirito Santo), e infine dal suo ingresso nell'impenetrabile oscurità di una nuvola e di una fenditura nella roccia, e dal suo incontro con Dio (Es 33,21–23).

L'unione con Dio avviene quindi oltre i limiti del linguaggio umano. Avviene oltre la comprensione razionale, oltre la vista, oltre il paesaggio e i suoi segni. Pur utilizzando immagini topografiche, la *Vita di Mosè* trascende il paesaggio e ogni logica cartografica. Nel tracciare un cammino, Gregorio apre un baratro senza fondo. Più che una mappa o un itinerario, l'ascesa sul Sinai di Mosè (cioè, dell'animo umano) raffigura un eterno progresso, un continuo viaggio verso l'infinito. "Il grande Mosè, pur diventando sempre più grande di sé, non si ferma mai nella salita, né pone a sé stesso alcun limite nell'ascesa alle realtà celesti," osserva Gregorio (1984, p. 199). "Una volta posato il piede sulla scala che, come dice Giacobbe, Dio aveva eretto, sale continuamente al

(8) Questi versi sono discussi in Ravasi (2014, p. 25).

gradino superiore e non smette mai di salire più in alto, perché trova sempre un gradino più alto di quello appena raggiunto. […] Poiché il solo limite della perfezione è non avere limiti […] come si può arrivare al limite prefisso quando non esiste alcun limite?" (Gregorio di Nissa 1984, pp. 199, 11 e 13).

L'immagine dell'ascesa graduale e infinita è cristallizzata nella *Scala* di San Giovanni Climaco, l'abate del monastero di Santa Caterina, ai piedi del monte Sinai (fig. 1). La *Scala* è un trattato del VI secolo che descrive il metodo attraverso il quale riuscire a innalzare la propria anima a Dio, utilizzando, appunto, la metafora della scala. A ognuno dei suoi trenta gradini corrisponde una passione da sconfiggere o una virtù da conquistare. La vita del monaco è quindi un movimento incessante. Un movimento verso e dentro la "compiutezza incompiuta" (Giovanni Climaco 1989, p. 343). Il suo fine e arco è l'amore, ultimo gradino della scala; ciò che Climaco chiama "dinamica angelica di eterno progresso" (Giovanni Climaco 1989, p. 353)[9]. La scala che si perde nelle profondità dell'infinito è ispirata a quella di Giacobbe, egli stesso un viandante e pellegrino in fuga lontano dalla sua terra. La scala che il padre delle dodici tribù d'Israele incontra nella sua visione notturna connette la polvere della terra con il cielo. Su di essa scendono e salgono gli angeli di Dio (Gn 28,12). Ma la scala è anche una stilizzazione del Sinai stesso. I cosiddetti 3750 "gradini del pentimento" che portano alla cima del monte si dice che siano stati scavati dai monaci nel VI secolo. Un percorso spirituale è quindi letteralmente scolpito nel paesaggio fisico, nella roccia dura della montagna (Hobbs 1995, 110).

Un altro esempio del potere apofatico del Sinai ci perviene da Gregorio di Nazianzo (329–390 d.C.), il quale utilizza l'immagine dell'ascesa di Mosè per raccontare la propria esperienza mistica:

> Io correvo per raggiungere Dio e così ero salito sulla montagna, avevo dischiuso la nube, vi ero entrato dentro, ponendomi lontano dalla materia e dalle cose materiali, raccogliendomi in me stesso per quanto è possibile e poi, quando ho guardato, ho visto, a malapena, le spalle di Dio (Gregorio Nazianzeno 2015, p. 99).

(9) Sul tema si veda Zecher (2015, p. 48). Il numero dei gradini della scala di San Giovanni corrisponde agli anni della vita segreta di Gesù.

Figura 1. La scala del paradiso. Monastero di Santa Caterina, Monte Sinai, Egitto, icona bizantina, XII sec. GRANGER - Historical Picture Archive per l'Alamy Stock Photo.

Qui l'ascesa del monte corrisponde a un movimento verso l'interno. Da un lato vi è il desiderio universale dell'anima di salire verso l'alto; dall'altro vi è il disorientamento, l'incapacità di comprendere l'incomprensibile. Quando il Teologo tenta di elevare lo sguardo, non vede la Trinità nascosta dietro il primo velo e celata dai Cherubini, ma semplicemente:

> ciò che sta all'esterno e arriva fino a noi. Ed è, per quanto ne so io, la grandezza di Dio nelle creature e nelle cose da lui prodotte e governate o, come la chiama il divino Davide, la sua "maestà". Queste sono infatti le spalle di Dio, quello che si conosce di lui dopo che è passato, come le pallide tracce del sole sulle acque e come le immagini mostrano il sole agli occhi deboli, poiché non è possibile guardarlo direttamente; con l'intensità della sua luce vince la nostra capacità sensitiva (Gregorio Nazianzeno 2015, pp. 99–101).

Se il Sinai annienta le immagini, il Tabor, la montagna della Trasfigurazione, simboleggia il potere iconico e immaginativo della tradizione catafatica, cioè l'approccio attraverso il quale comprendiamo il mondo naturale e lo traduciamo in conoscenza del divino. Sulla sommità del Tabor, Dio si manifesta a Pietro, Giacomo e Giovanni non più nell'oscurità come a Mosè, ma nella luce. Il volto di Gesù "risplendette come il sole e le sue vesti divennero candide come la luce", leggiamo nel Vangelo secondo Matteo (17,2; cf. Mc 9,3, Lc 9,29). Ciò che non viene dato a vedere e conoscere a Mosè, viene reso manifesto nel Nuovo Testamento attraverso la trasfigurazione di Cristo. Il Sinai prefigura il Tabor. I due monti sono poli che si compenetrano.

Nell'iconografia medievale bizantina il Tabor è in genere sdoppiato nel Sinai. Quest'ultimo è sormontato a sinistra da Elia, che simboleggia i Profeti, e a destra da Mosè, ovvero la Legge. Nella parte superiore della composizione, i due profeti si specchiano l'un l'altro mentre dialogano con Cristo, il compimento sia della Legge che dei Profeti (della Dora 2016, pp. 153–155). L'innografia bizantina della Festa della Trasfigurazione gioca continuamente con questa giustapposizione. Basti citare un paio di tropari:

> Colui che un tempo parlò con Mosè sul monte Sinai in immagini, dicendo "Io sono Dio, Colui che sono!", oggi, trasfigurato sul monte Tabor, mostra il Prototipo, risplendente di raggi di splendore. Perciò, o Cristo, magnifico la tua potenza![10]

> Il monte che prima era oscuro e tenebroso ora è onorevole e santo, perché su di esso si sono posati i tuoi piedi, o Signore; perché negli ultimi giorni hai manifestato a Pietro, Giovanni e Giacomo il mistero nascosto e pre–eterno, la tua tremenda trasfigurazione. Ma essi, incapaci di sopportare lo splendore del tuo volto e lo splendore delle tue vesti, caddero prostrati a terra e si coprirono. E, presi da terrore, si meravigliarono, vedendo Mosè ed Elia conversare con te mentre stavano con te; e la voce del Padre rese testimonianza, dicendo: "Questi è il mio Figlio prediletto, nel quale mi sono compiaciuto: a lui obbedite! Egli concederà al mondo grande misericordia!"[11]

L'iconografia traduce la duplice dimensione temporale della Trasfigurazione in termini spaziali. Se il fondo d'oro e le pose ieratiche dei profeti e di Cristo suggeriscono eternità, nella parte inferiore dell'icona, il tempo continua a scorrere. I tre apostoli in basso cadono a terra, spesso su un terreno fiorito, e pertanto indicativo di movimento come le loro vesti fluttuanti. Alcune varianti, come l'icona di Teofane il Greco (XIV sec.) (fig. 2), aggiungono tra questi due livelli un piano intermedio nel quale Cristo e i suoi tre discepoli salgono e scendono la montagna.

Sul Tabor, dunque, passato, presente ed eternità convergono in un unico momento. Allo stesso modo, la scala cosmografica e quella topografica si incontrano in un'unica scena. Tabor in ebraico significa "ombelico": il monte della Trasfigurazione è il centro del cosmo. Secondo il teologo Andreas Andreopoulos, la mandorla di luce in cui è racchiuso Gesù spesso ricorda il cosmo aristotelico. L'immagine sarebbe dunque una specie di "mandala cristiano" che ha il suo centro e compimento nella figura di Cristo. Ma queste sovrapposizioni di scale e simboli non riguardano semplicemente le montagne bibliche. Vi è infatti un

(10) *Stichera* del piccolo vespro della Trasfigurazione, 6 agosto (*Mēnaia*, Apostolikē Diakonia tēs Ekklesias tēs Hellados).

(11) *Stichera*, grande vespro della Trasfigurazione, 6 agosto.

Figura 2. Teofane il Greco, Icona della Trasfigurazione, Cattedrale della Trasfigurazione a Pereslav, 1403. CWB/Alamy Stock Photo.

altro tipo di "sovrapposizione", questa volta tra montagne santificate non attraverso teofanie, ma attraverso la presenza di carismatici asceti (Andreopoulos 2005, p. 240; si veda anche Todorova 2014).

4. I monti santi e il cammino ascetico

Nel mondo bizantino le prefigurazioni bibliche e le loro catene di simboli non sono limitate al passato, a un evento concluso. Al contrario, sono parte di una continua rivelazione che attraversa passato, presente e futuro[12]. Mentre la tradizione latina tende a concentrare l'attenzione su un arco narrativo ristretto (dalla caduta di Adamo alla sua redenzione attraverso il sacrificio di Cristo), i Padri greci estendono il proprio sguardo all'intera narrazione biblica, dalla creazione alla deificazione. Dio, in altre parole, creò il mondo e portò all'esistenza le sue creature per nessun altro motivo se non quello di unirli a Sé.

Questa differenza di enfasi si traduce nel cammino spirituale dell'individuo. Il cristianesimo dell'Occidente latino insiste sul fatto che il peccato originale avrebbe aperto un divario incolmabile tra Dio e l'umanità. Il cristianesimo d'Oriente, al contrario, sottolinea la possibilità per i suoi fedeli di incontrare, e persino unirsi a Dio. La *theosis* non si limita alla redenzione dal peccato, bensì rappresenta un percorso ascetico di progressiva unione con Dio, la meta ultima dell'esistenza umana. Questa unione mistica può essere raggiunta solo attraverso la *kenosis*, un processo di svuotamento di tutte le false idolatrie e passioni egotistiche. In questa concezione la geografia sacra non è semplice metafora, ma parte integrante della spiritualità: il Sinai e il Tabor non sono soltanto luoghi biblici, ma segni viventi del viaggio interiore dell'anima verso la luce divina. Questi paesaggi si fondono e si sovrappongono nel tempo e nello spazio. I deserti, le montagne e le grotte degli asceti diventano scenari sacri. La loro influenza si diffonde, creando corrispondenze tra luoghi lontani.

Se torniamo per un attimo all'iconografia della Trasfigurazione, possiamo notare come in varie icone bizantine e post–bizantine le

(12) Come proclama l'innografo, "oggi, trasfigurato sul monte Tabor, [Egli] mostra il Prototipo," cioè, non in un momento vincolato alla storia, ma nel tempo trascendente della funzione liturgica.

montagne dell'Antico Testamento sono concave. Le cavità sono state interpretate da alcuni come simboli della tradizione apofatica, cioè dell'oscurità divina e del silenzio che avevano circondato Mosè ed Elia al momento del loro incontro con Dio (Mosè in una fenditura nella roccia ed Elia in una grotta) (Nes 2007, pp. 86–90). Allo stesso tempo, queste cavità ricordano anche l'eredità spirituale dei Padri del deserto nei primi secoli del cristianesimo. Ci parlano, cioè, di vite ascetiche, come quelle di Sant'Antonio il Grande (251–356 d.C.), condotte nella solitudine e nel silenzio dei paesaggi desolati della Tebaide egizia o della Palestina sul modello dei profeti. Si offrono, allora, al nostro sguardo come memoriali del cammino di *kenosis* dei Padri, "svuotati" dalle passioni per divenire contenitori della grazia divina e della luce increata della Trasfigurazione, come i tre discepoli di Cristo (della Dora 2016, pp. 190–198).

Tra il IX e l'XI secolo, l'invasione araba e la perdita del controllo di Bisanzio sulla Terra Santa e sulle regioni circostanti costringono gli eremiti a spostarsi in altre parti dell'impero. E, insieme a essi, si sposta anche l'eremo. In regioni come i Balcani o la Cappadocia, questo non è un deserto di sabbia o nuda roccia, ma semplicemente natura selvaggia, spesso boschiva. Terra montuosa, aspra, incolta, in genere lontana dai centri abitati. Fiorisce dunque il fenomeno dei cosiddetti "monti santi". In altre parole, montagne nell'impero bizantino geograficamente distanti dalla Palestina e dall'Egitto divengono importanti centri monastici e spirituali: l'Auxentius, il Latros e il Kyminas in Bitinia; l'Olimpo in Mysia; il Galesio presso Efeso; il Ganos e Paroria in Tracia; il monte Athos nella penisola Calcidica; più tardi le Meteore nella Tessaglia, e così via (sulle montagne sante bizantine, si veda Talbot 2001). Nessuno di questi luoghi è nominato nella Bibbia. Al contrario, la loro trasformazione in "monti santi" ha in genere inizio con l'insediamento di un carismatico eremita alla ricerca di solitudine e silenzio. Successivamente gli si raccolgono attorno discepoli, e da lì sorgono comunità monastiche.

Questi monti formano nodi di una vera e propria rete attraverso i quali l'asceta spesso si sposta nel corso della propria vita. Come nelle Scritture, le montagne diventano così segnaposti, o stazioni nel cammino terrestre verso la deificazione. La vita di San Lazzaro del Monte

Galesio, un monaco stilita dell'XI secolo, è paradigmatica in tal senso. Nato vicino a Magnesia, sulla costa occidentale dell'Anatolia, da ragazzo Lazzaro si reca a Gerusalemme. A causa della crescente pressione araba sui cristiani, il pellegrino è però costretto a rimpatriare. Emblematicamente il viaggio di ritorno comincia con l'ascesa del Tabor. Successivamente Lazzaro visita la Montagna Meravigliosa a sud–ovest di Antiochia, che a quel tempo ospitava un complesso del VI secolo attorno alla colonna di Simeone lo Stilita il Giovane ed era quindi un famoso luogo di pellegrinaggio. In Cappadocia Lazzaro ascende l'Argeas dove Dio manifesta la sua protezione: la nebbia sulle pendici del monte è così fitta che, senza accorgersene, si imbatte in un orso, senza tuttavia venire attaccato. La destinazione finale di Lazzaro è il Monte Galesio, vicino a Efeso. All'eremita questo pare un luogo ideale per l'ascesi. Il suo biografo descrive infatti la montagna come "non solo impraticabile e scoscesa e molto aspra, ma anche senz'acqua, e perciò in grado di offrire molta tranquillità" (Greenfield 2000, p. 123).

Sulle pendici del Galesio, la vita di Lazzaro diviene una progressiva ascesa nel vero senso della parola. Inizialmente l'eremita si stabilisce in una grotta. Dopo alcuni mesi, si sposta su un pilastro che fa costruire appositamente. La sua fama di asceta e santo, intanto, si diffonde in fretta. Si recano da lui in cerca di consigli e preghiere uomini e donne, contadini e funzionari imperiali, nonché aspiranti monaci e asceti. Un certo numero di discepoli inizia a radunarsi attorno al santo, e così nasce la prima comunità monastica del Galesio. Dodici anni dopo Lazzaro si trasferisce su nuovo pilastro in un punto più in alto della montagna. Un'altra comunità monastica si sviluppa gradualmente attorno a questo secondo pilastro. Anni dopo, Lazzaro (che ha ormai probabilmente raggiunto la settantina) sale ulteriormente di quota e si insedia su un terzo pilastro, dove viene fondata una nuova comunità. Come nei cammini spirituali delineati da Gregorio di Nissa e Giovanni Climaco, in questo caso, l'altitudine equivale alla beatitudine. La via che conduce alla *theosis* è aspra e scoscesa, come le pareti del Galesio descritte dall'agiografo di Lazzaro. Scendere dal monte significherebbe lasciarsi sconfiggere dalle tentazioni e cadere drammaticamente, come gli asceti trascinati giù dalla scala di San Giovanni Climaco dai neri demoni alati (fig. 1).

In modo esplicito o implicito l'immagine della Scala del Paradiso è continuamente sovrapposta alla montagna e alla graduale ascesa di Lazzaro, ma anche alla scala di legno che i pellegrini e visitatori devono salire per confessarsi con lui. In una visione notturna di un suo discepolo, la scala di San Lazzaro si rivela ponte tra topografie terrestri e celesti:

> [Il monaco Photios] vide un complesso tra cielo e terra che vantava costruzioni meravigliose […] Sopra questo complesso, vicino al cielo, gli sembrò di vedere un altro complesso molto più glorioso e splendido del primo; tanto splendido che la lingua umana non è in grado di descriverne la bellezza. Tra i due complessi vi era una scala che splendeva più brillantemente dei raggi del sole. A volte si vedeva il santo padre [Lazzaro] indugiare nel complesso inferiore e impartire parole di istruzione ad alcune persone, [...] altre volte saliva la scala verso la dimora vicino al cielo affrettandosi a entrare in paradiso (Greenfield 2000, pp. 175–176).

Se per noi oggi la montagna è un oggetto di apprezzamento estetico, per Lazzaro e i suoi predecessori era invece sinonimo di luogo inospitale, ma anche scala e sentiero verso la deificazione.

Un affresco di fine Settecento all'ingresso del monastero di Docheiariou nel Monte Athos, il Monte Santo dell'Ortodossia per eccellenza, ci pone dinnanzi a una singolare visualizzazione di questo cammino di ascesi e ascesa (fig. 3). Nel Vangelo secondo Matteo (7,13–14), Cristo parla della stretta porta di accesso al Padre, ma pure della stretta via, del camminare insieme a lui. Nell'affresco di Docheiariou, la parabola evangelica e l'archetipica salita del Sinai sono sovrapposte a un paesaggio che ricorda i dintorni del monastero stesso. Ci sono il molo, le mura di cinta, nonché, in lontananza, la vetta scoscesa. Le anime che scelgono la porta larga vengono traghettate nell'Ade da scuri demoni in loro attesa all'attracco. L'asceta che si infila attraverso la porta stretta, al contrario, percorre il ripido e angusto sentiero della virtù verso la cima del monte e l'unione con Dio nella fitta nube apofatica. Dietro di sé lascia il mondo e i suoi piaceri, qui raffigurati come un bel frutteto recintato da mura e in netto contrasto con la montagna impervia. Senza distrazioni terrene, l'atleta spirituale volta letteralmente le spalle al mondo verso mete più elevate (della Dora in corso di stampa).

Figura 3. La parabola della Porta Larga e della Porta Stretta. Affresco all'ingresso del monastero di Docheiariou, 1783. Fotografia di Padre Apollò di Docheiariou.

Collocato esso stesso su una soglia (quella del monastero), l'affresco ritrae le fasi del progresso spirituale come successivi transiti di soglie, come un movimento attraverso diversi tipi di superfici e consistenze. La porta stretta separa e allo stesso tempo collega il mondo visibile con la realtà invisibile del cammino interiore. La densa nube sulla cima della montagna nasconde e allo stesso tempo rivela Cristo Dio. Al movimento verticale dell'ascesa spirituale corrisponde dunque una graduale progressione interiore dalla superficie del creato alla sua profondità. Il progresso spirituale, ci viene ricordato, non è un movimento ascendente che si allontana dal creato, ma "un approfondimento nel mistero della creazione. Entrare in questo mistero significa trovarsi al cospetto del Creatore" (Constas 2018, p. 7).

5. Scale verso l'infinito

Qualcuno ha scritto che la geografia non è altro che una forma visibile della teologia. Fari di pietra nel mare immobile della terra, le montagne si innalzano come punti eterni d'orientamento nell'incertezza del cammino. Spoglie o selvose, imponenti e misteriose o semplicemente elevate dagli eventi e personaggi sacri a esse associate, le loro sommità punteggiano

narrazioni bibliche e agiografiche. Ma le montagne non sono semplici "increspature della superficie terrestre" (Ravasi 2014, p. 13). Per i Padri della Chiesa esse erano prima di tutto, simboli, anelli di una lunga catena di prefigurazioni, luoghi di rivelazione. In altre parole, "scale" terrene verso l'infinitudine di Dio. Nel mondo bizantino, montagna e cammino spirituale si cristallizzarono nel fenomeno dei monti santi. Dalle sue origini nella Palestina e nella Tebaide alle varie incarnazioni medievali in Asia Minore e nei Balcani, è proprio questo incontro tra simbolo e territorio che ha dato vita e forma alla tradizione monastica ortodossa, e continua a regalare una scintilla della luce del Tabor al mondo.

Il fenomeno dei monti santi bizantini è radicato nelle loro topografie di isolamento e difficoltà, nella ripidità dell'impervio cammino ascetico, nella quiete come condizione per il dialogo con il trascendente. Nel silenzio. Eppure, vi è forse prima ancora qualcosa di intrinseco all'essenza stessa della montagna che ha reso questo oggetto geografico un potente magnete e allo stesso tempo un simbolo: il suo posizionamento tra il suolo e il firmamento. "La vetta di un monte costringe ad alzare lo sguardo verso l'alto ed è un invito a raggiungere ciò che è al contempo meraviglioso e faticoso" (de Censi 2014). Questo movimento, ovvero la capacità di sollevare gli occhi verso la cima, verso il cielo, è quello che ci rende umani nel senso greco del termine: *anthropoi*[13]. Ingersoll e l'anonimo banchiere di Wall Street erano inquieti prigionieri intrappolati nell'angusta gola della vita e del proprio agnosticismo. Eppure, questo semplice movimento dello sguardo verso le invisibili vette dell'eternità fece notare loro una stella. E la speranza, nella notte buia della morte.

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(13) Il termine ἄνθρωπος è definito così da Platone (1971, p. 34) in un passo del *Cratilo* (399c): "La parola «uomo» (ἄνθρωπος) significa che, mentre gli altri animali le cose che vedono non le considerano, non se ne rendono conto, né vi posano su lo sguardo (ἀναθρεῖ), l'uomo, invece, non appena vede, cioè ὄπωπε, alza lo sguardo e considera ciò che ha visto. Per questo, appunto, unico tra gli animali, l'uomo fu giustamente chiamato ἄνθρωπος, perché leva lo sguardo (ἀναθρεῖ) su ciò che ha visto (ὄπωπε)".

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SACRED MOUNTAINS OF THE ANDES: A COMPARATIVE REAPPRAISAL

Jon Mathieu

Abstract: In recent decades, an interdisciplinary *corpus* of comparative accounts about sacred mountains in the world has emerged, usually addressed to a broad readership. This paper first presents the *corpus* and then compares it to selected specialized studies on religious aspects of the Andes. What can comparative studies learn from Andean studies, and what can Andean studies vice versa learn from comparative studies? In its current state, there is a wide range of opinions. Considerable efforts are needed to promote scholarly quality. The conclusions touch on topics of historical change, mountain topography, mountain diversity and a possible model for further research.

Negli ultimi decenni si è affermato un *corpus* interdisciplinare di resoconti comparativi sulle montagne sacre del mondo, rivolto in genere al largo pubblico. Il saggio comincia presentando tale *corpus* per poi confrontarlo con una selezione di studi specialistici sugli aspetti religiosi delle Ande. Cosa possono imparare gli studi comparativi dagli studi andini e cosa possono imparare gli studi andini dagli studi comparativi? Allo stato attuale, la gamma di opinioni è molto ampia. Serviranno notevoli sforzi per promuovere un livello adeguato di qualità accademica. Le conclusioni, infine, affrontano argomenti quali il cambiamento storico, la topografia delle montagne, la diversità delle montagne e un possibile modello per ulteriori ricerche.

Keywords: Mountains, Sacred, Sacredness, Andes, Change, Topography, Diversity, Pilgrimage

Parole chiave: Montagne, Sacro, Sacralità, Ande, Cambiamento, Topografia, Diversità, Pellegrinaggi

1. Introduction

"Where the Gods become Mountains" — this is a slogan that Peru's tourism industry launched some time ago. The slogan is intended to convey the message that the mountains around the high–altitude Andean city of Cusco are located in a mysterious sphere between the natural and supernatural, making them an attractive tourist destination. Other advertisements are aimed more at an initiated, spiritually interested clientele from all over the world and present the country as the "magnetic center of the planet". In order to do their job professionally, tour operators and local guides today need to be up to date with the different expectations of this "mystical tourism". The touchstone for the magnetic attraction is "the planet" (De la Cadena 2015, p. 188; Galinier and Molinié 2013, pp. 237–239).

In the world of books there is a counterpart to this Peruvian development. Sacred mountains on a global scale have become the topic of a particular literature in recent decades. An interdisciplinary corpus of comparative accounts has emerged, usually for a broad readership. Contrary to what one might expect, the Andes do not play a prominent role in them. A fairly typical statement about sacred mountains in Latin America reads as follows: "The semicontinent, officially so Catholic that it was allowed to provide the new Pope, has remained true to its old myths under a thin Christian varnish." (Messner and Märtin 2013, p. 224). Spain's Christian colonialism, which wanted to suppress these "old myths", seems to stand in the way of increased interest. Most authors have a Christian background, but find other religions more attractive with regard to mountain experiences.

In general, Christianity occupies a peculiar position in the new genre. There are authors who make practically no distinction between religions when it comes to sacred mountains, along the lines of: all mountains are sacred, or all religions have their sacred mountains. Other authors, on the other hand, assume that Christianity and sacred mountains are mutually exclusive in the strict sense, because the worship of natural objects is considered idolatry in church dogma and constitutes a sin. Even if the religion has become "greener" as a result of the ecological movement, the theological reservation remains (Rime 2021, pp. 554–581; Mathieu

forthcoming). There is probably no more suitable terrain for exploring such questions than Latin America. After all, this continent was the scene of the earliest and largest "conversion" to Christianity in the world (Orique, Fitzpatrick–Behrens and Garrard 2020, p. 2).

The following essay first presents the state of comparative research on sacred mountains and then turns to the Andes. On the basis of five well–known authors, we sketch a historical outline of mountain worship in its respective social and political contexts. Finally, the question arises as to which paths future research on sacred mountains could take. What can comparative studies learn from Andean studies, and what can Andean studies vice versa learn from comparative studies[1]?

2. State of comparative research

The state of comparative research can best be assessed on the basis of a number of selected texts. I use certain formal criteria for sampling. The publications must be books (not journal articles) that deal with sacred mountains in more than one continent, irrespective of the specific method of presentation (more additive or more synthetic). For reasons of linguistic competence, I only consider books in a European language. This gives the sample a Western bias from the outset, but I suspect that the bias also reflects the current situation to a certain extent. China, for example, has an extremely rich and early literature on sacred mountains in its own country. But I am not sure how much globalization and a comparative outside perspective have developed in this field so far (Sheng 2013).

If one excludes books that simply deal with religious conditions in mountain regions and concentrates on books that really deal with the sacredness of mountains, one can, for example, compile ten publications by the following authors and editors for the last few decades: Samivel (pseudonym for Paul Gayet–Tancrède) 1984; Edwin Bernbaum 1990; Karl Gratzl as editor 1990 and Karl Gratzl as author 2000; Amilcare Barbero with Stefano Piano as editors 2006; Julien Ries as editor 2010; Marianne Boilève 2010; Pierre Chavot 2013; Reinhold Messner with

(1) I thank Raquel Gil Montero for her critical comments on a first version of the article.

Ralf–Peter Märtin 2013; Jon Mathieu (the author of these lines) 2023. Apart from translations, four books have been published in French, three in German, two in English and one in Italian. I reproduce all quotations here in English.

The foreword to Chavot's book begins as follows: "From time immemorial, mountains have fascinated and worried human beings, who have made them the abode of their gods and occult forces. Such is the merit of this magnificent album: to help us discover some of these mythical peaks across the five continents, in a veritable geography of the sacred" (Chavot 2013, p. 9). This expresses two important peculiarities of the sample. Most authors treat the sacred mountains strictly from a timeless perspective — from time immemorial, *de tout temps*. Secondly, Chavot's book, like almost all the others in the sample, contains many attractive pictures and is really a beautiful album. Obviously, the books are aimed at a broad readership and not specifically at an academic audience. However, this does not mean that the authors skip academic conventions altogether. This is demonstrated by the "footnote test", a formal criterion for scholarly texts. Of our ten books, only one has no footnotes at all; yet it provides references in the body text.

The main driving forces behind the emergence of this genre are the development of mountaineering and the emergence of global tourism. With Reinhold Messner, there is even a famous extreme mountaineer and adventurer among the authors. But cultural interest is also important. Some books were written with the strong support of publishers who wanted to appeal to a curious audience. And finally, there are also texts in this sample that stem from an academic specialization. As a rule, the authors have a university degree. However, only a few are professional researchers and teachers, which is likely to be a problem for the future development of the field, as methodological issues are less important outside academia.

Methods are indispensable for the topic insofar as the description of sacred mountains can also be understood as an act of consecration. Whether we adopt common attributions of holiness or reject them for certain reasons, or whether we "canonize" a mountain ourselves in our texts — these are questions that are sometimes difficult to decide and can have consequences. An attribution may be adopted unchecked by others and the mountain may take on a different face. The

scientific decision is made more difficult by the diverse sources and dimensions of religious traditions and actions. How meaningful is the mythology, the textual exegesis, the praxeology, the dogmatics? In our sample of books, two pioneers of religious studies are mentioned again and again: Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) and Mircea Eliade (1907–1986). Both were supposed to help link the confusingly diverse religious phenomena around the globe and understand their essence(2). However, the sample also indicates that both authors have recently been increasingly criticized or simply sidelined. Their phenomenological–structuralist approach has tended to give way to actor–centered approaches.

If there is a continent "where the gods become mountains", then according to the publications under study, it is not Latin America, but Asia. Among many other sacred mountains there is Mount Kailash, which in Western literature (not so much in Chinese literature) rose to become the "holiest mountain in the world" in the twentieth century, as a spiritual counterweight to the materialistic Mount Everest. The Andes are generally given much less attention, and in some of the books in our sample they are missing altogether. The fact that there was no scientific specialization in which the topic immediately imposed itself, as in Tibetology or Japanology, for example, probably played a part in this(3). In the depictions of the Andes, the sacred mountain Ausangate became a topic. In our sample, it first appears in Bernbaum 1990 and later three times, namely in Ries 2010, Boilève 2010 and Chavot 2013. This reflects the increasing reputation and touristic development of a major annual religious event at its lofty location (see below). It is quite easy, however, to overlook in these descriptions that it is not just about an "exotic pagan" mountain worship, but also a Catholic Corpus Christi festival.

The question of the sacred mountains in the Andes will now be presented in five sections, each with a well–known author. The sections follow a loose historical chronology. In order to keep the presentation

(2) This connecting function is particularly clear in the comparison of Gratzl 1990 and Gratzl 2000; in the first work, the editor juxtaposed texts by specialist scholars and left the connection to a cardinal with a short foreword (without Otto and Eliade); ten years later, in a lexicon, the two famous religious scholars are then mentioned as bridging the religions.

(3) This could have been the case, for example, with Barbero and Piano 2006: it is an anthology that arose from a public event and was organized by the University of Turin; I myself omitted the Andes mainly because the source situation makes the historical description of a single mountain difficult, which contradicted the concept of the book (Mathieu 2023).

manageable, I will only discuss selected works by these authors. Almost all of them have produced a rich oeuvre, so that a strict selection is inevitable. These contributions are further contextualized as required and linked to studies by others. I have chosen Johan Reinhard (High Altitude Archeology), Kenneth Mills (Extirpation of Idolatry), Gauvin Alexander Bailey (Andean Hybrid Baroque), Michael J. Sallnow (Pilgrimage) and Antoinette Molinié (New Andean Shamanism). It is known that in the fifteenth century the Inca empire with its center in Cusco stretched for about 5000 kilometers through the Andean mountains from what is now Chile to Colombia. From the 1530s onwards, Spanish invaders established secular and spiritual domination with their colonial headquarters in the new coastal city of Lima. In the early nineteenth century, the individual parts broke away from Spain and developed into nation states in an imperial world.

3. High altitude archeology

Johan Reinhard (born 1943) is an US–American anthropologist, archaeologist and mountaineer. He completed his doctorate in Vienna and spent many years researching in the Himalayas and other areas before moving to the Andes in 1980, where he became famous for his high mountain archaeology. He is certainly one of the people who have contributed a great deal to a religiously charged image of the Andes in recent decades. He still gives lectures worldwide on the subject of *The Sacred Andes. High Mountain Archeology*[4]. From his independent oeuvre, produced mainly outside the university, I am presenting an essay from 1985 and a book from 2010. They show his entry into a new field of research and a mature work with important results.

The essay from 1985 is entitled *Sacred Mountains: An Ethno–Archaeological Study of High Andean Ruins*. It contains cartographic plans of ruins on the summit and at the foot of the inactive Licancabur volcano on the border between Bolivia and Chile (5920 m), which Reinhard

(4) For example on May 27, 2024, at the University of Warsaw in Poland on the occasion of a personal award, https://en.uw.edu.pl/dr-johan-reinhard-with-the-uw-medal/#lightbox[galleryid-36323-1]/3/ (last access 7 July, 2024).

drafted himself with a colleague. Otherwise, the essay presents the general state of knowledge about such high–altitude ruins in the southern Andes, which are interpreted as cult sites. The author is interested in the origin of pre–colonial mountain worship and focuses on an ecological hypothesis: the most important motive was the control of weather and water sources and thus the fertility of crops and animals (Reinhard 1985).

The archaeological findings do not yet play a major role in this essay. It is more about the Spanish chronicles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which comment on the earlier Inca period, as well as observations made by anthropologists in the twentieth century, including some by Reinhard. As a historian, I find it remarkable how naturally he assumes a continuity of religious ideas and practices of the Indigenous population over many centuries. Without presenting any conclusive evidence, he repeatedly uses the phrase "just as today". Pre–colonial mountain worship "has persisted, despite considerable Christian proselytism, with few changes to the present day" (Reinhard 1985, p. 315). This "proselytism", however, is only mentioned in a footnote, and only to emphasize its minor effect. The Indigenous Pachamama is worshipped under the name of the Virgin Mary and the Inca weather god Illapa under the name of Santiago. There are more examples, "but it is clear that an interesting study remains to be made on the relationship of Christianity to mountain worship" (Reinhard 1985, p. 314).

Reinhard did not pursue this trail any further. Instead, he successfully devoted himself to the excavation and examination of mummies at high–altitude cult sites. In 2010, he summarized his findings in a richly illustrated volume written together with Argentinian researcher Maria Constanza Ceruti (Reinhard and Ceruti 2010). The starting point is the three frozen mummies that they recovered on the Llullaillaco volcano on the border between Argentina and Chile at 6740 m — according to their own statement, the highest archaeological site in the world. The mummies were a 7–year–old boy and two girls, aged around 6 and 15 respectively, who were sacrificed here for ritual purposes during the Inca period. The huddled bodies and grave goods were in remarkably good condition and could be studied in detail after the laborious excavation. It immediately becomes clear how great the difference is between ruins and mummies as archaeological evidence for religious questions. In

this environment, human bodies and their furnishings provide more detailed and convincing answers than architectural structures[5].

However, this is also thanks to the chronicle tradition. Reinhard and Ceruti systematically evaluated the early Spanish descriptions and brought them together with the mummies found on Llullaillaco and other Andean peaks. This made it possible to plausibly interpret the Inca rituals of human sacrifice at high altitude. The authors show how the rulers in Cusco institutionalized their extensive empire, not least by exchanging deities and offerings. Human beings — especially children and adolescents who were considered innocent — were selected from the individual ethnic groups and redistributed via the center of power to the regional imperial cult sites for sacrifice. It was an elaborate territorial ritual system in which mountains played a major role. At these altitudes, the mummies were also well protected from later Spanish destruction (Reinhard and Ceruti 2010, pp. 89–132).

The ecological thesis of Reinhard 1985 is relativized in this mature study from 2010. Other political–religious motives play a greater role. However, a one–to–one correlation of chronicles and archaeological sources is only possible in single cases. There is, for example, no historical information at all on the Llullaillaco, which forms the focus of the volume (Reinhard and Ceruti 2010, pp. 169–170). Overall, nonetheless, the mountain cult system seems to be so well documented that it should also be considered in a global context as a specific territorial variant. I will come back to this.

4. Extirpation of idolatry

The Spaniards, who established their colonial rule in the Andes from the sixteenth century onwards, referred to the measures to track down, ban and punish Indigenous cult forms as the "extirpation of idolatry". Some of these cults related to natural phenomena, not least mountains. They were regarded as idolatrous because they were seen as competing with the Christian God and thus as a violation of the Mosaic

(5) See also the more methodologically and theoretically oriented volume of archaeological research on rituals in the Andes by Rosenfeld and Bautista 2017.

commandments in the Bible. The Christianization of the population was an important goal and a justification for Spanish colonialism. A great deal of resources and personnel were invested in this. Kenneth Mills, a Canadian historian of religion and culture, completed his doctorate on this topic in Oxford in 1992 and later published his dissertation under the title *Idolatry and Its Enemies. Colonial Andean Religion and Extirpation, 1640–1750*. The book and other subsequent publications made him a prominent voice in the field.

As can be seen from Mills' vivid account, in 1609 a large auto–da–fé took place in the main square of Lima, which was to be the prelude to the extirpation campaign. The viceroy and the archbishop looked out from the balconies of their palaces onto the square, where a pulpit, two stages and a large pyre had been erected. A collection of objects and mummified corpses that had been confiscated as "idols" of a false religion in a mountainous area not far from the capital were publicly burned. An arrested Indigenous cult master was tied to a stake near the pyre. He had long since admitted his transgressions, but now he was to hear and feel the sentence: lashes, hair shaving and banishment to a remote Jesuit college. This message about the future treatment of non–Christian religious practices was directed above all at the many Indigenous people who had been summoned to the auto–da–fé (Mills 1997, pp. 30–33, 146–147).

The campaigns were carried out by spiritual *visitadores*, who "visited" the parishes of the diocese with assistants in order to uncover and punish the rampant "errors". These actions continued in various waves until the middle of the eighteenth century. It is important for us to note that some of them were directed against popular mountain cults. Mill's study focuses on the large archdiocese of Lima with its approximately 130.000 Indigenous people (as of 1664). From a socio–historical point of view, one could lament the lack of further statistics. The author's strength lies on another level. He has consulted a rich written tradition: protocols of idolatry visits and trials, ecclesiastical letters, catechisms, books of sermons, pastoral guides, and religious chronicles. In this way, many voices become audible, such as that of María Poma Ticcla. She was interrogated in 1660 in her Andean home and reported on offerings and community rituals that were made at a sacred place

on Mount Chanqui for a particular deity ("huaca"). María used to address the mountain with a short prayer, and she fed and gave it gifts so that it might ripen the maize and protect the llama herds (Mills 1997, pp. 64–66, 111, 115, 119, 129, 158–159).

Although the Indigenous people were victims of the Spanish colonial rulers in such campaigns, Mills emphasizes that they were also instrumental in creating an Andean Catholicism. He treats the beliefs of the two disparate groups of actors as interpenetrative, co–evolving traditions, thus challenging the dichotomous "self/other" view of the sources. In contrast to earlier interpretations, he considers the terms "syncretism" or "religious duality" to be unhelpful. In his eyes, one should speak of a "widespread mixture" and an "interculture". One may ask whether he pays enough attention to the existing and newly generated power relations. However, the longer the asymmetrical cultural contact lasted, the less the two original forms of faith could be kept strictly apart (Mills 1997, pp. 243–266).

This was also evident in the concept of the sacred. In the Spanish tradition of Christianity, the sacred emerged from acts of ecclesiastical consecration. At its center were the Holy Scriptures and precisely defined sacraments. The Indigenous people used the Quechua term "huaca" to designate the sacred and the extraordinary. In addition to certain ancestors, this also included natural phenomena such as mountains and rock formations as well as a variety of cult objects. Often, "huaca" phenomena were linked to stories that assigned a place in the landscape to an Indigenous group as a place of origin. In contrast to the Christian view, in which the worship of natural objects was considered a sin, the sacred was thus "independent of human activities and rituals" (MacCormack 1991, pp. 335–338; Mills 1997, pp. 39–74; Ramírez 2005).

Nevertheless, many Indigenous were able to combine the two conceptions, and the Spanish rulers never really succeeded in eradicating the tradition and evolution of the "huaca". Ten years after his major work, Kenneth Mills showed in an essay that the flourishing of the Catholic cult of saints in the Andes was based not least on this Indigenous conception of the sacred. The population was familiar with visible representatives of their deities and with the possibilities

of inspiring the deities to action through sacred narratives, offerings and visits to special places. This formed a zone of overlap that contributed to the dynamism of Andean Catholicism. This went so far that church exponents occasionally criticized not only the huaca cult, but also the exuberance of the cult of the saints they had imported (Mills 2007).

5. Andean hybrid Baroque

Churches and chapels were among the first manifestations of a permanent Spanish presence and rule in the Andes. To emphasize their relevance, they were often erected in places that had already had public significance in the past. However, the Spaniards quickly realized that Andean societies often practiced open–air cults, while they themselves had brought a distinctly indoor religion with them from Europe. As a result, at least in the sixteenth century, there were often improvised hybrid forms of church buildings, which were adjoined by demarcated or non–demarcated open spaces. The latter were used in particular for Christian worship and the instruction of the many Indigenous people (Abraham 2017).

Later, the material situation improved, allowing the construction of churches to proceed. Their splendid furnishings became a long–term project for generations of Catholic religious and secular clergy. A consecrated building was necessary for the correct, God–pleasing performance of religious acts. Around 1650, a Spanish Jesuit recorded in retrospect what they expected from their building in the large Peruvian city of Arequipa. As elsewhere, the Jesuits here were "engaged in building a church where they could celebrate the Holy Sacrament, celebrate Mass, preach the Divine Word, and hear the confessions of the people with decency" — *con desencia* (Bailey 2010, pp. 57 and 370).

This formulation can be found in the extensive, detailed work by art historian Gauvin Alexander Bailey entitled *The Andean Hybrid Baroque. Convergent Cultures in the Churches of Colonial Peru*. In it, the author examines a new baroque style of church decoration that

emerged in the late seventeenth century, spread across many regions in the eighteenth century and bore the stamp of Indigenous artisans with their own visual ideas. Bailey places this building in Arequipa at the beginning of the style movement. The façade portal facing the Plaza de Armas, built in 1698–99, became particularly famous. A Spanish master architect designed the façade structure and supervised the work, but the decorations were carried out by Indigenous craftsmen, mainly stonemasons. The cost amounted to over 8740 pesos (Bailey 2010, pp. 67–68).

The entire façade is covered with flat ornaments carved out of the stone between the columns (see fig. 1). They already contain almost the entire repertoire of the emergent hybrid style: plants such as cactus flowers, grapes and pomegranates; animals such as songbirds, hummingbirds, snakes; but also symbols of power, both those of the Incas and those of the Spanish Habsburgs; all interspersed with Christian elements and learned sayings such as the Latin initials SD/SF/SI/MN for "Holy God, Holy Strong One, Holy Immortal One, have mercy upon us" (Bailey 2010, pp. 52–54).

Bayley assumes that many ornaments originate from Indigenous people and had special meanings in their horizon. He considers the depiction of flora and fauna from the natural environment to be the most important contribution to the Andean Hybrid Baroque. "It is crucial that we discover what these animals and plants meant to ordinary Andeans, and we can do so by interpreting their mythological, ritual, medicinal, and alimentary associations and functions." The *yucyuc* bird, for example, appears not only on churches, but also in the above–mentioned forced confessions during extirpation interrogations. In certain Indigenous concepts, it was regarded as the "father of the potato" and was worshipped in a forbidden manner with prayer and ritual (Bailey 2010, pp. 321–324). The art historian goes even further in his interpretation and establishes a connection between church ornamentation and the highly developed female textile art of the Andes, in which dual and symmetrical arrangements played a major role. The Jesuit church in Arequipa is an excellent example of this (Bailey 2010, pp. 331–333).

Figure 1: Façade Portal of the Jesuit Church at Plaza de Armas in Arequipa, Peru. Photo by Pierre André Leclerq 2011, Wikimedia Commons License CC-BY-SA.

6. Pilgrimage

A classic study of Andean religiosity is by the anthropologist Michael J. Sallnow (1949–1990) and is called *Pilgrims of the Andes. Regional Cults in Cusco*. It was published in 1987, but it was a long–term project. The author had already undertaken his field research in 1973–74 and then devoted himself to additional archival work. Among his publications, it is worth consulting two articles that appeared in 1981 and posthumously in 1991. The fieldwork took place in the mountain village of Qamawara, in the district of San Salvador, east of Cusco. There, Sallnow studied the religious ideas and practices within and outside the Christian repertoire.

So, he inquired in the village about what he called "nature spirits" (*Apus* in the local Quechua language). "Among those who bring us justice are our apus, who are many", an old man told him. This was followed by a list of over forty such Apus: Apu Ausangate, Pachatusan, Ch'ayñakoto, Intiwatana, Willkar and so on. This was the longest list that the anthropologist was able to collect. The beginning of the list was also known to other informants and followed the same hierarchy. The very first Apu, Mount Ausangate, 6384 m high, 70 km from the village and not visible from there, was considered the most powerful. Most of the Apus in these various versions were mountains, some also lakes and swamps. They had their own specific areas of influence and characteristics. "Apu" can be translated as "lord" or "chief". They were responsible for the welfare and fertility of the inhabitants and their animals. Some guarded the underground mineral resources in the mountains. As a rule, the mountain Apus were male, but some were explicitly female. Sometimes they were related to each other, for example as twins. They were honored with casual gestures or with formal sacrifices (Sallnow 1987, pp. 127–131).

The village under study belonged to the parish of San Salvador as its own chapelry. The large church was located in the main town down in the valley. In this way, practically the entire country was included in the Catholic organization. The places of pilgrimage and shrines on which Sallnow concentrated were outside this system of ecclesiastical routine. Most of them were the result of "miracles" that had manifested

themselves since the beginning of the seventeenth century. According to the stories circulating, Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary in particular repeatedly intervened in worldly events for the good of mankind. The Catholic Church had a long tradition of such apparitions. For the Spaniards, they were comforting proof that the Christian God had confirmed their conquest and that the new world would now be freed from the clutches of Satan. The shrines that emerged were often located at or near older Andean places of worship, signaling both spiritual transformation and continuity (Sallnow 1991, pp. 139–140).

At the time of his field research, it was customary in Sallnow's village of Qamawara to visit six sites of pilgrimage, some in the surrounding area, others further afield. The inhabitants who went on pilgrimage often organized themselves as delegates of the village, as the "Nation of Qamawara". Accompanied by musicians and dancers, they carried a small statue of Christ or Mary, the *lámina*, to the shrines. On various days in August, the *Señores* of Aqcha, Kisikancha and Wat'a were visited, and in September and October those of Justo Juez and Saqaka. The most important and elaborate pilgrimage took place after Pentecost for the feast of Corpus Christi to the distant mountain Ausangate and the Señor de Qoyllur Rit'i (Sallnow 1981, pp. 166–169; 1987, pp. 63–88, 177–206).

Up there, at an altitude of around 4750 m, below the glaciers, legend has it that Jesus revealed himself to a shepherd boy from the pastoral society around 1780. Some researchers link this appearance of Jesus with the simultaneous rebellion of Tupac Amaru, as a Christian reaction to the endangered colonial rule. Qoyllur Rit'i is often translated as "Snow Star", but there are also other interpretations(6). Since the 1930s, there has been a lay confraternity that looks after the sanctuary and oversees the pilgrimage. In 1944 it was visited and upgraded by the Archbishop of Cusco (Sallnow 1991, pp. 143–144). Sallnow went to Qoyllur Rit'i several times from 1973 onwards and even arranged a film for a British television company. At that time, around 10.000 people from a very wide area came together for this Corpus Christi festival in the thin mountain air, the vast majority of them Indigenous people with their musicians and dance groups, some in regionally coded disguise. A part of the rituals

(6) See for example Ricard Lanata 2010, pp. 272 and 282.

took place at the sanctuary, others on the glaciers. There, certain groups of participants would cut, not without danger, heavy blocks out of the ice, which they consecrated in the sanctuary and later used as healing water (Sallnow 1987, pp. 177–199, 207–242).

Research has interpreted the belief in Apu Ausangate as a basis for these mountain rituals. The scenes with the ice have also been seen as the "eucharistic transfiguration of a glacier". Just as the consecrated host is transformed into the body of Jesus Christ during the Eucharist, the blessed blocks of ice give access to the body of the holy glacier (Molinié 2003; Ricard Lanata 2010, p. 271). Since Sallnow, the Corpus Christi festival of Qoyllur Rit'i has become very renowned and undergone major transformations. UNESCO included the festival in its inventory of intangible heritage in 2011. At that time, 90.000 people attended, including many non–indigenous people and tourists. In the meantime, the glaciers are in sharp decline, making the mountain ritual a suitable ecological illustration of climate change (UNESCO 2011).

7. New Andean Shamanism

One specialist in modern and postmodern developments is the French anthropologist Antoinette Molinié, who, like Sallnow, began her Andean research in the 1970s. In 2013, together with Jacques Galinier, she published the book *The Neo–Indians. A Religion for the Third Millennium*, which had appeared in French a few years earlier(7). Her colleague focused primarily on Mexico, Molinié mainly on Peru and partly on the neighboring Andean countries. In essence, the book deals with a complex "invention of tradition" linked to state formation and other factors, a concept introduced into the academic debate in 1983 by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. In a second phase, there was a fusion of this modern construction of identity with the *New Age* movement, which originated primarily in the USA and led to a globalization of religious–political trends.

(7) The French edition of 2006 and the English edition of 2013 are not completely identical; there are also small differences to the Spanish edition of 2013. A Spanish collection of essays with nineteen articles provides a good insight into Molinié's complete works: see Molinié 2022.

After the replacement of Spanish rule in the early nineteenth century, the Creole elite faced a dilemma. In order to emphasize the distance to the old rulers in Europe, it would have been obvious to give the Indigenous population a leading role in the identity of the republic. This, however, contradicted their social Darwinist conviction of the inferiority of these people. In order to move the nation forward on the road to modern progress, it was necessary to get rid of the archaic rural heritage. On the other hand, the Indigenous population formed the vast majority and could not be excluded from nation–building for reasons of taxation alone. One way out of the dilemma was to create the image of an idyllic, perfect Inca state that had been destroyed by the Spanish. Unlike the real Indigenous people, the constructed "Imperial Inca Indigenous" were well suited to establishing a national tradition. This view intensified after World War I. The 1920s also saw the rise of the fertility goddess Pachamama, who rarely appeared in early chronicles, and when she did, it was not as the beloved Mother Earth, but rather as a sacrifice–devouring deity (Galinier and Molinié 2013, pp. 100–107).

The "Incaization" of Andean culture progressed in waves and manifested itself above all in the old center of Cusco and in the archaeological citadel of Machu Pichu. The movement was supported by an urban educated bourgeoisie that maneuvered between the large landowners with their feudal–economic interests and the dependent rural population. From the 1920s onwards, indigenist societies used their own "Inca" flag, which was later declared the official city flag of Cusco. In 1944, the literary theater culture gave rise to a large annual ritual, the *Inti Raymi*, which performs the sun cult of the Inca state. At the same time, a hymn was sung for the first time ("Cusco is your sacred name, like the Sun of the immortal"). In 1990, the city tried to introduce a new spelling that was closer to the Quechua pronunciation ("Qosqo"). Built on top of a tower–like museum, a statue to Inca Pachacutec, considered the most powerful Inca ruler, was added in 1993. In 2011, the Inca managed to be placed on the baroque fountain in the center of the city as well (see fig. 2). Andean anthropology and the University of Cusco in particular played a significant role in this development. The latter also became a neo–shamanistic place of worship (Galinier and Molinié 2013, pp. 49–69, 120–146).

Figure 2: Statue of Inca Pachacutec in the Plaza de Armas in Cusco since 2011. Photo by Charles O. Cecil for Alamy Stock Photo.

This relaunched mountain worship. In her book, Molinié describes in detail a healing ritual performed by a famous neo–shaman who was rector of the University of Cusco in 2002. It took place at the foot of Mount Picol. First the Apu Picol received an offering, then small offerings were also made to other mountain Apus in the area. On another occasion, the rector/neo–shaman sacrificed lamas for the welfare of the Anthropology Department. As an introduction, he implored the mountain gods (Galinier and Molinié 2013, pp. 137–142). Since 1995, an annual festival of *curanderos andinos* (Andean healers) has been held near Cusco. It brings together specialists from southern Peru and Bolivia, who are consulted by people from the city and by tourists. The festival offers a variety of stalls, screened off with plastic curtains, behind which the "shamans" perform all kinds of alleged Andean rituals. In 2001, the cult also reached the highest political level. The new president of Peru, Alexandro Toledo, was also consecrated as the highest Inca in Machu Pichu after his regular inauguration. His wife Éliane Karp, a Belgian anthropologist, slipped into a sacerdotal role and addressed the mountain gods of the region in Quechua: now the golden times are returning, she explained to them and to the politicians and journalists present. Welfare, equality and joy for all will return. "Rejoice, Oh People! Thank you" (Galinier and Molinié 2013, pp. 144 and 193).

The main impetus for this development came from the flourishing tourism industry and especially from the US *New Age* movement, which expanded rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s and had many ecological and mystical aspects. The caring Pachamama of Andean indigenism could be easily combined with "Mother Earth" ideas of New Agers from California. As a result, the regional religious–commercial culture experienced a rapid globalization. Suddenly people were also discussing links to distant mountain regions of the world, especially Tibet, where the Dalai Lama and Buddhist monks seemed to offer promising spiritual energies. Expectations were raised at international congresses and by "mystical" travel agencies. Most people continued to identify themselves as Catholic Christians, but so–called Indigenous practices were now much more public and less localized than before (Galinier and Molinié 2013, pp. 218–244). This created a complex situation. In early December 2006, for example, over a thousand people gathered in the Plaza de Armas in Cusco to protest against a mining project that could affect the pilgrimage

to the sanctuary at Ausangate. Many demonstrators carried placards with political and ecological slogans. But some did not just want to protect their *patrimonio cultural*. They also feared, as in earlier times, that Mount Ausangate itself might become angry and take revenge — perhaps bloodily (De la Cadena 2015, pp. 273–275).

8. Conclusions

Johan Reinhard for High Altitude Archeology, Kenneth Mills for the Extirpation of Idolatry, Gauvin Alexander Bailey for the Andean Hybrid Baroque, Michael J. Sallnow for Pilgrimage Studies and Antoinette Molinié for New Andean Shamanism — I have selected five authoritative voices from a broad range of research in order to sketch a picture of the sacredness of the mountains in the Andes. I am aware that many aspects and other opinions have not been included. But for our purposes, the aspects covered should suffice. The key question is: What can comparative studies learn from Andean studies and vice versa? This, also with regard to the academic professionalization of the new literary genre presented at the beginning, which deals with sacred mountains on a global level, but still has a rather popular character. In these conclusions, I would like to touch on four points.

1. *Change Matters:* Most authors in the global section treat the sacred mountains from a timeless perspective and like to use expressions such as "from time immemorial". In doing so, they often reproduce an image that the religious leaders and followers give of themselves. They like to clothe their beliefs and rituals in eternal garments. An asserted longevity gives them stability and security. The tendency becomes particularly clear when we compare the texts on the Andes in the global publications with the texts of the Andean specialists summarized above. Ries, as editor, for example, accepted a chapter which has the Corpus Christi festival at Ausangate begin not less than "thousands of years" ago and apparently attracting 40.000 or more pilgrims even then (Ries 2010, p. 221). In the new edition of his 1990 book published in 2022, Bernbaum added a passage about two *curanderos* whom he had met in Cusco in the meantime and who told him, among other things, that

the Apu–Pachamama belief also affected the marriages of ordinary people. A woman marries her Apu with her husband, and a man marries his Pachamama with his wife (Bernbaum 2022, pp. 244–245).

This is remarkable insofar as Bernbaum is the author who most closely accompanied and influenced the global mountain movement. However, such an affinity often makes it difficult to maintain a critical, academic distance[8]. Yet the change is evident in all areas of Andean religiosity. The Apu healing specialists are no longer those of the Inca period, and Christianity is no longer that of the Spanish conquerors of 1532. Just as Indigenous "huaca" sanctity gave impetus to the Catholic cult of saints, this cult placed the "huaca" phenomena in a new context. In the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth century, "idolatry" was to be eradicated by force. Afterwards, the colonial clergy became more tolerant under the influence of the European Enlightenment; the Jesuits had to leave the field here too in 1767 (Schwaller 2020, p. 20). In the wake of the emerging Alpinism, towards the end of the nineteenth century, even the Holy See in Rome discovered the mountains as places for crosses and spiritual contemplation. In 2015, the encyclical *Laudato si'. On Care for our Common Home* also marked a late ecological turn. But anyone who thinks that it is now "Catholic" to properly canonize mountains is mistaken (Mathieu 2023, pp. 77–83, 109–110; Mathieu forthcoming).

2. *Sacred Mountain Topography*: The wealth of chronicles and ecclesiastical–legal sources on the colonial period has recently also led to a theory that emphasizes not the continuity but the change in Indigenous mountain perception in the Andes. The Canadian anthropologist Peter Gose uses these sources to propose a two–phase model. In an early phase, characterized by a local hereditary nobility, worship was primarily directed towards the mummies of the ancestors and thus helped to consolidate the power of the dynasties. In the mountain landscape, only certain places were highlighted that were considered to be the places of origin of these ancestors. Parallel to the interventions of the Spaniards and the decline in power of the local nobility, worship then shifted to the mountains as a whole, which now formed a counterpoint to the new Christian villages. Thus, according to the author, the actual Apu faith only dates back to the eighteenth century (Gose 2016).

(8) I have discussed Bernbaum's book in a methodologically oriented essay (Mathieu 2022).

His thesis has mostly been received critically. The documents are inconclusive, it appears to be an over–interpretation (Nielsen *et al.* 2016). Here I would like to add a "topographical" point that one encounters in comparative studies of sacred mountains: What exactly is revered when a mountain is venerated is often not precisely defined. Is it only certain spots that are associated with certain stories or events? Is it the mountain itself, or is it a deity who has taken up residence there? Such questions have been discussed in several places. For Tibet it was emphasized that this distinction was often unimportant in the thoughts of the believers, which also relativizes the value of the scholarly question. It cannot be the task of research to further refine a religious belief system (Blondeau and Steinkeller 1996, pp. VIII–IX). It should also be remembered that for many people the sacred has an infectious quality: it is passed on through proximity and touch. So, perhaps, when an ancestral spot is revered, this could also impact the environment.

3. *Sacred Mountain Diversity:* Among the Andean authors summarized above, Reinhard is the only one who refers directly to the general sacredness of mountains. At the end of the book *Inca Rituals and Sacred Mountains*, the view goes "beyond the Andes" primarily on the Himalayas, where the anthropologist and archaeologist himself conducted research in earlier years. He identifies many similarities between the sacred mountains on both sides and only points out that the high altitude of the Andean offerings during the Inca period was probably unique (Reinhard and Ceruti 2010, pp. 183–185). This may very well be true, but it also reveals the alpinist's point of view. We should be aware that it was only this modern movement of mountaineering, originating in the West, that made us aware of the mountains as a global ensemble linked through altitude. In this way, we can try to neutralize its unifying impact.

In my opinion, diversity should be emphasized more strongly than Reinhard does. Territorially extensive, almost proto–national mountain rituals such as that of the Incas also existed in some other places, but I am not aware of any that were kept going by human sacrifice. In the Chinese Empire, with its well–documented and institutionalized mountain worship, all three normative traditions — Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism — were involved. The predominant popular offering was incense. "Going on pilgrimage" was succinctly rendered

with two expressions: "paying respect to the mountain" (*ch'ao–shan*) and "offering incense" (*chin–hsiang*). Various important Buddhist currents even tried to protect the lives of all sentient beings, not just those of fellow human beings (Pei–yi Wu 1992, p. 65; Huber 2004; Sheng 2013). I wonder if there could be a clearer contrast to the Inca customs.

4. *Model Pilgrimage Studies:* An interesting path for future research has been pioneered by Sallnow, who gave us the work *Pilgrims of the Andes. Regional Cults in Cusco,* discussed above. During his research in the Andes, he wrestled with the problem of universalism and particularism. He turned critically away from leading universalist researchers such as Mircea Eliade and Victor Turner, who had placed pilgrimages under the unified idea of "communitas". Sallnow, on the other hand, brought the different experiences of pilgrims, and the competition and conflicts between various social groups into the discussion. He made this programmatically clear in a book published posthumously in 1991. Together with a colleague, Sallnow wanted to leave the level of sweeping generalizations that cover up important differences. To demonstrate diversity, the two editors designed a coordinate system consisting of three concepts: place, text and person. Depending on the site of pilgrimage, the weight of one or the other term and the relationships between them varied greatly (Eade and Sallnow 1991, pp. 6–9).

As far as the Andes are concerned, one could say that Christianity was strongly text– and person–oriented in an initial phase, while the Indigenous people assigned an important role to place and had no written tradition. Therefore, unfortunately, we only hear them in the echo of Spanish sources. In any case, Sallnow's suggestion has borne fruit in research. Today, there is a significant scholarly body of pilgrimage studies that can serve as a model for future global research on sacred mountains (Coleman and Elsner 1995, pp. 199–2005; Albera and Eade 2017, pp. 5–7).

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IL SACRO OBLIQUO
LA MONTAGNA COME SANTUARIO DELLE ANTINOMIE MODERNE

Paolo Costa

Abstract: The essay investigates the epiphanic and hierophanic dimension of the modern discovery of the aesthetic, cultural and philosophical values of mountains. It does so by focusing on the typically modern split between mind and nature and the no less typical modern need for a reconnection between the two. When the malaises of modernity are experienced subjectively as an actual crisis of presence, the oblique sacredness of mountain landscapes offers itself to lovers of uplands as a diagonal path long enough to enable them to imagine non–destructive ways of inhabiting modernity.

Il saggio indaga la dimensione epifanica e ierofanica della scoperta moderna dei valori estetici, culturali, filosofici della montagna. Lo fa ponendo al centro della discussione la scissione tipicamente moderna tra spirito e natura e il non meno tipico bisogno moderno di riconnessione tra i due. Quando i disagi della modernità vengono vissuti soggettivamente come una vera e propria crisi della presenza, il sacro obliquo dei paesaggi montani si offre agli amanti delle terre alte come una via diagonale lunga abbastanza per permettere di immaginare modi non distruttivi di abitare la modernità.

Keywords: Mountains, Sacred, Sacredness, Hierophany, Epiphany, Hope, Modernity

Parole chiave: Montagne, Sacro, Sacralità, Ierofania, Epifania, Speranza, Modernità

> There arises a problem, a temptation to confuse the idea of manipulation with the idea of a cure.
>
> G. Bateson, *Ecology of Mind: The Sacred*

1. Scismi

Poter distinguere tra figura e sfondo è uno dei requisiti fondamentali della percezione umana (Kanizsa 1980). L'atto di focalizzazione è l'espressione paradigmatica della capacità di rispondere con attenzione alle sollecitazioni del proprio ambiente di vita, di saperne cogliere le salienze. Lasciare o tenere qualcosa sullo sfondo rappresenta invece un modo di essere consapevoli senza *arousal*, senza attivazione, che, come la conoscenza tacita (Polanyi 1990), è uno dei fondamenti del nostro stare al mondo — il suo *ancoramento*, per così dire.

Sul pianeta terra l'orizzonte naturale è dato dal cielo, con gli astri (il sole, anzitutto, poi la luna, le stelle). Nel cielo si stagliano le nuvole, gli edifici più alti (i campanili, i "grattacieli") e, ovviamente, i rilievi della superficie terrestre: colline e montagne. In genere, come il cielo, le montagne sono per lo più *là*, sullo sfondo: presenze mute che appartengono alla scenografia della vita.

Nell'età moderna, è cosa nota, le cime dei monti, le "vette", fuoriescono dalla cornice e diventano il teatro di conflitti non meramente simbolici (Cuaz 2005; Armiero 2013; Hansen 2013; Leoni 2015). Nel momento in cui la condizione di piena sovranità territoriale assurge a criterio con cui misurare la ragion d'essere di uno Stato, tutte le barriere fisiche di una nazione (fiumi, mari, crinali) si trasformano in potenziali campi di battaglia. A quel punto una bandiera, una croce, un rifugio, un fortilizio, un santuario ben posizionati finiscono per assumere un'importanza storicamente inedita. Diventano, cioè, trofei, bottini, feticci della sovranità nelle sue varie manifestazioni (politica, ma anche culturale, tecnologica, persino spirituale, se vogliamo). La mobilitazione moderna, in breve, non prevede eccezioni. È principalmente per questo motivo che da un certo punto in poi le montagne vengono sistematicamente cartografate, misurate, nominate, esplorate, fortificate: in una parola, "conquistate" (Fleming 2012).

Transitando dallo sfondo al primo piano, le terre alte, gli *uplands*, si impongono, però, all'attenzione generale anche come il teatro di scontri meno cruenti o atletici: spazi contestati, *discursive battlefields*. La posta in gioco di questi conflitti, non meno moderni dei primi, è l'interpretazione, se non corretta in senso assoluto, quantomeno più convincente

del ruolo svolto dall'ambiente montano nella vita delle persone — più precisamente, del suo valore, significato, importanza (Macfarlane 2020; della Dora 2019; Mathieu 2000). Visto che la terra non è piatta in nessun senso possibile del termine, come dobbiamo comportarci con i suoi sommovimenti geologici? Sono un difetto da sopportare e correggere tutte le volte che la tecnologia ce lo consente (ad esempio, scavando tunnel, miniere, gallerie e spianando, ove possibile)? Sono un'opportunità? Una risorsa? Un ambiente di vita sfidante? Un'occasione ludica o ricreativa? Un rifugio? Un santuario naturale?

I diversi possibili atteggiamenti verso le terre alte sono rivelatori. Fa infatti una bella differenza se nelle montagne vediamo un'occasione preziosa per trasformare o per essere trasformati. Qualcosa da cui dobbiamo proteggerci o che dobbiamo proteggere. Un luogo in cui allentare o esercitare al massimo il controllo. Nel conflitto d'interpretazioni che accompagna le polemiche giornalistiche sull'*overtourism*, sulla sostenibilità delle Olimpiadi invernali, sulla costruzione di invasi per la neve programmata, sulla progettazione di un hotel di lusso o l'autorizzazione negata a un concerto ad alta quota, sull'introduzione di un pedaggio sui passi dolomitici, sugli effetti deleteri delle fiction televisive o dei romanzi sentimentali sulla natura "salvatica" (Rigoni Stern 2021), fanno costantemente capolino le classiche scissioni moderne (Habermas 1988, cap. 1): spirito e materia, natura e cultura, io e non–io, soggetto e oggetto, ragione e sentimento, utilità e obbligo, mezzi e fini, incanto e disincanto, ecc. Si tratta di dualismi che sono diventati quasi una seconda natura per gli individui oggi. La maggioranza, cioè, non li vive più come lacerazioni dolorose del tessuto dell'esistenza, ma come piani irriducibili della realtà, sue modalità di articolazione primaria, la roccia contro cui i nostri tentativi di scavare più a fondo cozzano e si infrangono.

Contemplati da un osservatorio d'alta quota, gli orizzonti fratturati moderni (Taylor 1993) possono apparire ancora più sconcertanti e dare adito a dubbi vertiginosi. A quale sfera della vita appartiene di diritto la montagna: ludica o seria? È natura selvaggia o spazio antropizzato? Ha un valore in sé o è solo il mezzo per soddisfare bisogni e preferenze? È uno scrigno di autenticità o un bene artefatto come tutte le merci che finiscono sul Mercato (Cox 2017)?

A chi capita di sperimentare l'ambiente montano — una cima innevata, una parete rocciosa, un bosco, un altopiano — come uno spazio epifanico, ossia come un luogo in cui il proprio senso di realtà viene messo a soqquadro da un groviglio di emozioni mai provate prima, domande del genere possono fare un effetto spaesante. Possono provocare, cioè, qualcosa di simile a un'inversione tra la figura e lo sfondo, tra il primo piano e l'orizzonte. Come in uno *switch* gestaltico l'atto di rifocalizzazione può trasformare allora magicamente la visione e far balenare qualcosa che prima non c'era. A quel punto le scissioni che fino ad allora potevano sembrare un dato ultimo di realtà svaniscono di colpo nell'intuizione di un'unità superiore, di un orizzonte di possibilità precedentemente inaccessibile in cui gli opposti entrano in una relazione risonante (Rosa 2016)[1]. Sono stati di grazia del genere che hanno spinto molte persone negli ultimi due secoli a intravedere nelle montagne una possibile via di fuga dalla lacerante forma di vita moderna.

Nella modernità, insomma, le terre alte rappresentano per alcuni lo scenario naturale di un esperimento di riconciliazione. Più precisamente, l'escursione, la passeggiata, la scalata, ma anche il firmamento, una nevicata o un temporale estivo possono assumere in quel contesto le sembianze di rituali privati, personali o, comunque, non formalizzati (Costa 2014) di *riconnessione* estatica con un luogo che viene vissuto come enigmaticamente *sacro*, dotato cioè di poteri sacramentali difficili da decifrare.

Le conseguenze di questi pellegrinaggi lungo e oltre le frontiere della propria forma di vita sono per certi versi assimilabili ai fenomeni di "crisi della presenza" studiati da Ernesto De Martino (2018; Cimatti 2023). All'inversione tra figura e sfondo causata dall'esperienza epifanica tra le vette corrisponde, infatti, un capovolgimento del gradiente tra realtà e illusione, tra ciò che veramente conta e ciò che è solo superficialmente importante, che fa saltare il modo in cui il testimone diretto della ierofania era abituato a incorniciare gli episodi ordinari della propria biografia (Costa 2023a, cap. 1). Quando il senso di realtà entra in crisi i dubbi, ovviamente, proliferano. Ci stiamo addentrando

(1) Cfr. Musil 1995, p. 154: "Se guardiamo *le cose* una per una, esse sono separate; ma se concentriamo l'attenzione sullo sfondo, le cose sono unite dallo sfondo stesso. Il loro aspetto muta e fra esse nascono strane relazioni. Qui non c'entra la filosofia, non c'entra la scepsi, non c'entra null'altro che l'esperienza viva".

nel territorio delle conversioni e delle esperienze mistiche. Utilizzando un'espressione fortunata di Robert Musil (Fontanari e Libardi 2012; Libardi 2024, pp. 79–122) potremmo dire che si entra così in contatto con un Altro Stato – *der andere Zustand*.

2. Sortilegi

Negli anni sconvolgenti della Grande guerra e in quelli, non meno frastornanti, del Primo dopoguerra l'accostamento tra la montagna, le terre alte, l'alpinismo e la magia, la religione, l'incanto sono talmente frequenti che si può legittimamente parlare in proposito della nascita di un *topos* letterario o culturale (Stutfield 2025). La montagna, per andare direttamente al punto, diventa quasi per definizione "incantata": è il *Zauberberg* (Mann 2017).

La questione è complessa, ma per brevità la riassumerei così. Tra Ottocento e Novecento, in Europa, l'alterità del paesaggio montano acquista nell'immaginario collettivo una valenza speciale. La montagna diventa una soglia attraverso cui si può avere accesso a un mondo a parte. Quando accade, come capita ad esempio nel racconto *Bergfahrt* di Ludwig Hohl (2024), si viene trasportati in una situazione–limite, umanamente esemplare, in cui l'ambivalenza, l'inquietudine e l'irresolutezza regnano sovrane. Tra le cime, in particolare, può verificarsi l'urto con qualcosa di singolarmente importante, ma il cui significato sfugge, è opaco. Le terre alte appaiono perciò come luoghi numinosi dove Eros e Thanatos, Vita e Morte, Terra e Cielo si danno battaglia (Frankl 2021)

La principale ambiguità concerne il tipo di magia di cui si subirebbe l'influsso in montagna. Si tratta di incanto o incantesimo? Un prodigio o un sortilegio?

In *Grigia*, il racconto giovanile che Robert Musil (2012) ambienta nella Valle dei Mocheni, il protagonista, Homo, si stacca gradualmente dal suo contesto di vita borghese e viene assorbito dal nuovo ambiente naturale e sociale in un crescendo narrativo per metà lirico e per metà opprimente. Dal processo di riconnessione con il paesaggio naturale scaturiscono infatti simultaneamente un'affermazione e una

negazione dell'io in un'atmosfera che appare allo stesso tempo fisicamente iperreale (carnale, sensuale, materica) e psicologicamente derealizzante (talvolta quasi allucinatoria, come nella scena finale che lascia presagire la morte del protagonista — una morte allo stesso tempo desiderata e subita).

Nel caso di Musil il superamento delle scissioni si compie sotto il segno dell'assoluta ambiguità (Costa 2024a). Se la civiltà borghese è naufragata nella barbarie insensata della guerra di trincea, il richiamo della montagna assomiglia al mitico canto delle sirene e sembra pretendere dal protagonista il sacrificio del *principium individuationis*. Il dubbio è se ne valga poi la pena. Qual è la lezione che si deve trarre dal contatto epifanico con l'altro stato in una valle incantata?

Anche in *Verzauberung*, romanzo incompiuto di Hermann Broch (2023), scritto nel 1935 e pubblicato postumo nel 1954, il protagonista — l'anziano dottore del paese — è testimone non distaccato di una sorta di epica battaglia tra magia bianca e magia nera impersonate, rispettivamente, dalla saggia ma sibillina madre Gisson e dal mefistofelico Marius Ratti, uno scaltro faccendiere, abile nello sfruttare il sortilegio del paesaggio alpino per inoculare disordine e discordia nel villaggio in cui ha trovato ospitalità.

La narrazione di Broch è impregnata di incanto da cima a fondo. Le descrizioni dell'ambiente naturale, per cominciare, toccano vette di lirismo che non hanno probabilmente eguali nella pur ricca letteratura di montagna europea. Le vicende che si susseguono con una lenta escalation drammatica nei due villaggi gemelli di Kuppron–di–sopra e Kuppron–di–sotto avvengono, poi, in un'atmosfera di progressiva perdita di contatto con la realtà. Il sortilegio raggiunge il suo apice nel rito sacrificale in cui viene uccisa Irmgard, la nipote adolescente di madre Gisson, in un'allucinazione collettiva in cui si mescolano profezie politiche deliranti, sentimenti apocalittici, pulsioni carnevalesche e pura e semplice avidità in un'apoteosi nichilistica dell'Altro Stato.

In questi processi di lenta ma inesorabile autodissoluzione collettiva la Montagna funge sia da spettatrice sia da ambigua potenza ordinatrice, allo stesso tempo generativa e dispensatrice di morte e distruzione. Se l'io narrante, un individuo moderno in fuga dall'aridità di uno stile di vita spersonalizzato ("muto come la dimensione infinita in cui

consisteva lo scopo di tutto ciò che si svolgeva e che continua a svolgersi laggiù", Broch 2023, p. 24), si aspettava da essa una risposta risolutiva alla domanda chiave di ogni autentica ricerca spirituale ("Ma può davvero essere tutto qui?"), l'esito sembra scoraggiante. E, nondimeno, nel transito dal fondale alla ribalta del monte Kuppron, la cui "presenza è qualcosa che si percepisce ininterrottamente" (Broch 2023, p. 23), una verità nondimeno prende forma, sebbene non si tratti di una verità facile da metabolizzare: "Quale sortilegio! Quale strada sbagliata per ritornare alla natura! E come la natura se ne vendicherà ancora! Giacché la natura si vendica quando lo spirito è violentato, visto che spirito e natura sono una cosa sola, e per l'uomo vi è una sola strada che guida alla natura e al suo infinito, ed è lo spirito, grazia donata all'uomo e suo divino segno di distinzione" (Broch 2023, p. 443).

Ma se la lezione della montagna è che spirito e natura sono una cosa sola — probabilmente l'idea più controintuitiva che un moderno possa vagheggiare — come si potrà mai tradurre in pratica tale verità? Se davvero "per chi sia andato a vivere sul limitare delle grandi montagne, tutto ciò che ne stimola i sensi, ogni suono, ogni colore, ogni grido d'uccello e ogni raggio di sole, tutto è un'eco della grande massa silenziosa della montagna in riposo, con le sue crepe accese dalla luce, dipinte dai colori, natanti nei suoni. Deve anche l'uomo allora essere sempre soltanto come un grido d'uccello, o colore, raggio di sole o notte? Non deve forse ugualmente divenire perenne eco di quel poderoso silenzio? Strumento intonato e riecheggiante su cui quel silenzio suona?" (Broch 2023, p. 23).

3. Profanazioni

Lo scoglio contro cui naufragano gli slanci di Homo, del medico condotto di Kuppron e, ovviamente, di Hans Castorp (Mann 2017), ha molti nomi. Il più popolare, nell'ambiente intellettuale sovraeccitato in cui è fiorito il genio di Musil, Broch e Mann, era proprio la scissione tra Mente e Natura. Sebbene quel pathos, l'atmosfera drammatica che si respira leggendo *L'uomo senza qualità*, *I sonnambuli* o il *Doctor Faustus*, non corrisponda più alla tonalità emotiva tipica dell'epoca che stiamo

vivendo, il rapporto degli amanti delle terre alte con la montagna è ancora talmente carico di aspettative che ha senso impiegare le categorie di incanto/disincanto o sacro/profano per rendere ragione dei conflitti culturali che infiammano regolarmente le discussioni attorno al governo dello spazio alpino.

Nella seconda parte del saggio vorrei soffermarmi proprio sullo sdegno che anima molte delle ricerche spirituali che hanno per teatro naturale le vette, le pareti, i boschi, i prati, le forre, i ghiaioni e ciò che resta oggi dei ghiacciai alpini (Righetto 2025). Si tratta, nel complesso, di itinerari eccentrici e largamente individualizzati. Ciò nonostante, vorrei esaminarli come un caso di studio istruttivo per chiunque sia interessato a studiare a fondo le manifestazioni del senso del sacro in società che apparentemente hanno secolarizzato tutto ciò che vi era di secolarizzabile (Costa 2017). Se il disgusto per la profanazione di qualcosa che viene vissuto come espressione di un sovrappiù, di un'eccedenza di valore enigmaticamente "venerabile", è veramente la molla di queste esplorazioni, è logico porre al centro dell'analisi il senso del sacro che esse presuppongono e che spesso rimane sullo sfondo, non detto e non tematizzato. "Obliquo" è l'aggettivo che proporrò alla fine del mio ragionamento per qualificare l'asse di questo esempio significativo di ierofania moderna.

Provo a riassumere quanto detto finora. Alla luce dell'immaginario che lo incornicia e configura è ragionevole descrivere il rapporto che i moderni intrattengono con i territori di montagna come un'esperienza (anche) estatica, epifanica. In montagna, siano essi scalatori, escursionisti o vecchi e nuovi montanari, un numero significativo di uomini e donne entra in contatto oggi con significati, valori, sentimenti morali che li toccano nel profondo e li trasformano. Questo potere causale enigmatico, a suo modo magico, persino "salvifico", dà loro molto da pensare. Per alcuni è una specie di terapia dell'anima con cui curare o alleviare i disagi della modernità. Per altri è la fonte di una conversione esistenziale, il possibile accesso a una vita nuova, migliore. Per altri ancora — probabilmente la maggioranza — è soprattutto un gigantesco punto interrogativo. Cosa mi è successo? Come devo interpretare lo scossone alle mie abitudini e certezze? È l'effetto di un incanto o di un sortilegio? È un'autentica liberazione o un desiderio illusorio di fuga dalla realtà?

Per capire come stanno le cose, suggerisco di partire da un dato di fatto minimale, cioè il bisogno di riconnessione con la natura che si riscontra trasversalmente nelle società odierne in quanti aspirano a uno stile di vita più armonioso, equilibrato, risonante, in una parola "sano" (Palmisano e Pannofino 2021, pp. 44–50; Taylor 2024). È verosimile che nella vita di molte persone questo bisogno basilare si manifesti inizialmente come una comune esigenza di "ricaricare le pile". Nella società della prestazione, in effetti, il riposo è solo un'altra forma di sforzo, una sollecitazione che risponde a una logica diversa da quella del lavoro ma non meno dispendiosa e non meno carica di aspettative.

Lo sci e l'arrampicata sono attività adrenaliniche che si praticano tipicamente in montagna e che, più che al bisogno di "staccare la spina", sembrano rispondere all'esigenza di attaccarla a un'altra fonte di energia. In montagna, tuttavia, può accadere qualcosa di inaspettato, un fenomeno a cavallo tra psicologia e spiritualità su cui scrisse parole illuminanti H.E.M. Stutfield (2025) già nel 1918, in un celebre sermone pronunciato davanti all'Alpine Club: *Mountaineering as a Religion*. Sebbene tutti comincino ad andare in montagna per distrarsi, col passare del tempo quell'attività ludica può assumere i connotati tipici della serietà religiosa: l'esclusività, la dedizione/devozione, l'adorazione, la dimensione soteriologica, lo sdegno verso i profanatori, l'intolleranza, il dogmatismo (Hansen 2013; per una storia aggiornata dell'alpinismo moderno, si veda Zannini 2024 e Costa 2025c).

Ricorrendo a un esempio familiare, immaginiamoci una persona che cominci ad arrampicare per diletto. Lo farà inizialmente insieme a un gruppo di amici per spirito di avventura o per sfida verso sé stesso. Da principio, probabilmente, dovrà farsi violenza per non desistere, perché la fatica è tanta e i risultati scarsi. A un certo punto, però, scatta qualcosa. A colpirla è il livello di concentrazione, di attenzione, di vera e propria *mindfulness* richiesta dal gesto dell'arrampicata. La cosa che la incanta è l'accesso a una dimensione temporale a sé stante, mai sperimentata prima. Scalando si entra come in una bolla in cui il tempo si dilata e nella mente resta posto solo per l'essenziale. E quando si esce da un simile stato di sospensione la realtà si presenta ai sensi con una forza sconosciuta (Lester 2004).

Chiamiamo *mountfulness* questa condizione fuori dall'ordinario di pienezza fisico–psicologica. Chi la sperimenta potrebbe tranquillamente descriverla come una forma d'incanto, di magia. L'effetto in fondo è lo stesso: dentro di sé avviene qualcosa di stupefacente che dà l'impressione di non essere spiegabile secondo la logica che governa l'altra metà della vita: quella degli obblighi lavorativi, famigliari, scolastici, civici — insomma, la gamma di discipline che regolano l'esistenza media di un uomo o una donna moderni. È a quel punto che la montagna può diventare l'asse di un'esperienza parareligiosa in cui, per esempio, s'incomincia a distinguere i veri credenti dai professanti tiepidi. Esistono infatti gli scettici che frenano l'entusiasmo: "Sì, certo, è divertente, ma è pur sempre ginnastica". Oppure quelli che vorrebbero magari trovare scorciatoie meno faticose o pericolose. Da qui può nascere l'esigenza di formulare un "credo", di chiarire il senso autentico della pratica, di pretendere una certa disposizione al sacrificio, di alzare l'asticella del proprio atletismo spirituale, denunciando l'"assassinio dell'impossibile" o caldeggiando il *free climbing* (Messner 1968; Calvi e Filippi 2018; Camanni 2018; Manolo 2018; Costa 2023b; Sloterdijk 2010).

Confido che a questo punto risulti chiara la logica che governa la transizione dal gioco, dal *ludus*, al rito, al mito, al canone, alla disciplina parareligiosa. Col crescere dell'intensità dell'esperienza aumenta infatti anche il desiderio e il bisogno di modi, luoghi, "scrigni" per custodirla, farne tesoro, valorizzarla come merita. Così si spiega, ad esempio, il fiorire di una "cultura" della montagna, che include un certo tipo di socialità, film, libri, racconti, festival, musei, *celebrities* (il pantheon degli alpinisti esemplari, quelli che non *scendono* a compromessi). Nasce così un senso di appartenenza che assomiglia a quello di una conventicola, una chiesa o, più neutralmente, una comunità elettiva di persone associate dal sentimento del valore forte, irriducibile, dell'esperienza per cui smaniano.

4. Indisponibilità

In breve: siamo partiti da un bisogno elementare di riconnessione, di superamento dello scisma moderno con la natura, e ci troviamo di fronte a una forma di spiritualità imperniata sulla forza trasformativa

della *mountfulness*. La conversione si è compiuta. Mi interessa ora soffermarmi brevemente sul modo in cui la radicalizzazione o purificazione dell'esperienza inducano a vivere la pratica inizialmente ricreativa dell'andare in montagna come un gesto di ribellione rispetto alla propria vita ordinaria, l'esistenza precedente, non rigenerata. In particolare, l'ascesi intramontana sfocia nella rivolta contro l'idea che la vita sia tutta "qui", che non esista un oltre, un orizzonte più ampio, un'idea migliore di libertà, felicità, comunità.

La ribellione è, per cominciare, una fuga dalla pazza folla e una ricerca di spazi e tempi propri, diversi da quelli ammessi e resi disponibili secondo logiche essenzialmente eteronormative. L'esperienza autentica della montagna non può essere massificata. Anzi, dev'essere rigorosamente individualizzata, al punto che le forme omologate di fruizione delle terre alte (le località alla moda, gli impianti di risalita, la montagna senza fatica, dove tutto è a portata di mano) sono destinate a suscitare un sentimento d'insofferenza, un senso di profanazione, di oltraggio a qualcosa di sacro (Righetto 2025).

Sebbene il contesto culturale e politico non sia più quello incandescente, da tramonto dell'Occidente, in cui hanno vissuto e operato Musil e Broch, anche ai nostri giorni l'abnegazione con cui ci si dedica al proprio passatempo ad alta quota può suscitare violenti moti d'indignazione per le sistematiche profanazioni del proprio bene costitutivo, insieme a una cognizione dolorosa dei rischi che ne derivano per la relazione sacramentale con il proprio luogo d'elezione. Da questo punto di vista il modo in cui Enrico Camanni (2024) ha sviluppato il suo ragionamento in *La montagna sacra* appare esemplare. Il presupposto è l'esperienza personale della sacralità della montagna. Sacra, in breve, è prima di tutto la propria o le proprie montagne del cuore (spesso la montagna dell'infanzia). L'esperienza individualizzata del sacro è però solo la premessa per un'estensione dei confini della "sacralità" al di là delle sue interpretazioni convenzionali e delle sue espressioni confessionali tradizionali. È dalla convergenza di diversi rituali personali di riconnessione, per esempio, che nasce l'idea di redigere una petizione intitolata "Una montagna sacra per il Gran Paradiso" allo scopo di onorare i cento anni dell'omonimo Parco Nazionale. La proposta viene sottoscritta, tra gli altri, dal Club Alpino Italiano, dall'Alpine

Club di Londra, e da nomi prestigiosi dell'alpinismo e della letteratura di montagna come Kurt Diemberger, Hervé Barmasse, Manolo, Paolo Rumiz, Paolo Cognetti, Matteo Righetto, e dallo stesso Enrico Camanni. L'iniziativa si propone di sottrarre almeno una cima dell'arco alpino (nel caso in questione, il Monveso di Forzo) dalle brame di conquista degli esseri umani, spingendoli così a riscoprire "praticamente" il significato del limite.

Il carattere simbolico di questo gesto all'apparenza anacronistico di "sacralizzazione" di un lembo del paesaggio è riconosciuto esplicitamente e persino rivendicato dai suoi promotori, che ne difendono nondimeno la valenza rivoluzionaria per una civiltà, come si legge nel documento, "avida di performance e povera di spirito". Non a caso, i sostenitori del progetto si affrettano a sottolinearne il carattere "laico" (finalizzato cioè alla riverenza e alla contemplazione, non alla venerazione) e non "costrittivo" (senza, cioè, alcun divieto formale o sanzione). Il loro obiettivo, sembra di capire, è promuovere nuovi tipi di desiderio e, con essi, una diversa gerarchia dei valori nelle persone che, in numero sempre crescente, frequentano le località montane con intenti ricreativi.

Tenendo questa intuizione basilare sullo sfondo, la desiderabilità di tale proclamazione di indisponibilità viene dimostrata *ex negativo* da Camanni mediante il racconto corale di un'occasione storica, se non persa, comunque non sfruttata al massimo delle sue potenzialità. È la storia della scoperta del valore speciale delle terre alte e del suo sistematico sabotaggio sull'altare del desiderio illusorio di renderlo disponibile, di sfruttarlo, di *consumarlo*. La sequenza di errori in cui precipita "la montagna delle illusioni" (Paci 2024) è ben nota: croci di vetta, trincee, altari patriottici, cantieri, strade, impianti, cemento e, infine, se e quando il turismo di massa diventerà insostenibile, la sostituzione di un *overtourism* autolesionista con un redditizio *hypertourism*, un turismo riservato alla nuova classe dei benestanti globali a cui offrire una montagna ridotta a kitsch alpino (De Rossi 2014): un bene posizionale pensato per chi consuma soprattutto per ostentare il proprio privilegio.

È rispetto a questo tipo di degenerazione sistemica che la riscoperta del sacro si offre come una potenziale drastica inversione di tendenza. Ma mentre il primo tipo di forza storica è facile da concepire e

soppesare, l'*empowerment* che può scaturire da una riscoperta del sacro è molto meno evidente. Nell'ultima sezione del saggio vorrei provare perciò a mettere meglio a fuoco le ierofanie montane collegandole al processo più generale di ridefinizione dei confini del "religioso" tipico del clima culturale "postsecolare" in cui le società occidentali si muovono a zig zag da alcuni decenni (Costa 2019; 2025b).

5. Rigenerazioni

In molte culture arcaiche o indigene la ritualità locale e le cosmogonie mitiche trovano un punto di conciliazione nel legame sacramentale con un'altura, una vetta (Grossato 2010; Mathieu 2022). In un orizzonte religioso di questo genere la montagna sacra funge cioè sia da *genius loci* sia da *axis mundi*, centro di una ritualità comunitaria e perno di una cosmologia e una geografia sacre. Sebbene il moderno disincanto del mondo abbia avuto un effetto irreversibile su qualsiasi tipo di relazione sacramentale con l'ambiente naturale, gli esiti specifici di questo processo di *Entzauberung* teorico e pratico sono meno univoci e deterministici di quanto non lasciasse supporre il senso comune diffusosi quando la parabola della teoria classica della secolarizzazione ha toccato il suo apice in Europa (Joas 2017). Contemplata col senno di poi, l'ambivalenza appare evidente. Basta pensare a quanto sia precoce e longeva la dialettica tra il razionalismo illuminista e l'antintellettualismo romantico nel rapido processo di formazione dell'identità culturale occidentale moderna (Taylor 1975, cap. 1). Nella visione romantica, in particolare, il sogno di riabitare poeticamente il mondo ha svolto un ruolo cruciale. L'idea che l'arte, più in particolare la poesia, possano fungere da *Ersatzreligion*, da surrogato della religione in un mondo che ha smesso di cantare, di risuonare ha avuto un'influenza duratura e profonda sulle ribellioni giovanili che hanno periodicamente turbato o ravvivato, a seconda dei punti di vista, la fase ascendente della modernità occidentale (Taylor 2021; Camanni 2018).

L'immagine della montagna che cura, che "salva" (Membretti *et al.* 2024), insieme all'esperienza delle terre alte come luogo dove sperimentare modi alternativi di realizzare la scommessa moderna, a cavallo tra

diserzione e trasformazione di sé (Camanni 2002; De Matteis 2011; Costa 2023c), rappresentano, secondo l'ipotesi di ricerca che ho cercato di avvalorare qui, un nuovo capitolo della medesima storia. Al centro di questa vicenda, che ha significative ricadute materiali e spirituali, troneggia la questione del disincanto moderno e delle sue ripercussioni individuali e sociali. Vivere in una condizione di *Entzauberung der Welt* realizzata non è semplice, soprattutto quando le condizioni esterne sono particolarmente difficili e reclamano una motivazione supplementare anche solo per dare una direzione chiara alla propria esistenza. La crisi della presenza tematizzata da Ernesto De Martino (2019; Lear 2006) non è un fenomeno circoscritto alle civiltà in rapida via d'estinzione. I casi di depressione o *burnout*, così frequenti nella società della prestazione, sono esempi emblematici di una dolorosa perdita di contatto con le cose e il loro significato, di vera e propria derealizzazione (Rosa 2016, pp. 178–211).

Lo straziante senso di paralisi e spaesamento che si sperimenta in queste circostanze può spingere le persone a cercare in un luogo geografico risonante la fonte di un possibile rinnovamento personale: l'*axis mundi* attorno a cui far ruotare la propria esistenza uscita provvisoriamente dai cardini. Questa è precisamente la condizione spirituale in cui si trova la voce narrante in *Verzauberung* di Hermann Broch (2023): nel momento in cui le cose cessano di essere disponibili, svelano un lato che interrompe la sequenza regolare del tempo e dischiude il *kairos*, la possibilità di una metamorfosi personale fuori dall'ordinario.

Anche nell'epoca del disincanto la grammatica del sacro può offrirsi, perciò, agli individui in crisi d'identità come una risorsa utile per tirarsi fuori da una condizione di scacco esistenziale. Si tratta, però, di una grammatica in continua evoluzione. Significativamente, in una situazione di disincanto generalizzato il sacro ha soprattutto una funzione di destabilizzazione dell'identità. Felice Cimatti, ad esempio, ha descritto le ierofanie moderne come fessurazioni dell'esperienza ordinaria in cui il mondo profano rivela un volto stupefacente. Per usare le sue parole, "sacro è *ciò che sorprende* e ci richiama alla forza del possibile, che ci ricorda che siamo umani, che ci mobilita verso un orizzonte diverso da quello miserabile del presente" (Cimatti 2009, p. 171). Riecheggiando due versi celebri di Leonard Cohen, la duplicità d'aspetto che le cose

manifestano nella relazione sacramentale ha un riflesso generativo affine a quello della luce che si infila nelle fenditure dell'esistenza ("there is a crack, a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in"). Per citare ancora Cimatti: "Quella del sacro è […] un'esperienza che rigenera, perché rimette in movimento le forze disperse nella vita profana, perché attraverso il possibile siamo in contatto con la speranza del futuro, del cambiamento, dell'inaspettato e magnifico" (Cimatti 2009, p. 169).

Suggerisco di interpretare i tentativi di ristabilire un legame sacramentale personale con le terre alte anche come la risposta al senso di soffocamento spirituale che può scaturire da un'esistenza condotta interamente entro una modulazione radicale dell'opzione secolare (Taylor 2009; Joas 2013). Quest'ultima si produce quando la moderna cornice immanente è sigillata grazie all'effetto combinato di competizione strutturale e consumo compulsivo. La fecondità di una simile operazione circolare di "doppia ermeneutica" (Costa 2025a) dipende evidentemente dalla grammatica del sacro che adottiamo. Se troviamo convincente l'idea che quelle di cui ci parlano gli amanti della montagna oggi, anche quando usano un vocabolario non religioso, siano epifanie o ierofanie postsecolari, ha senso chiedersi se le terre alte siano un teatro naturale particolarmente adatto per sperimentare questo tipo di relazione sacramentale con un luogo risonante in un'epoca dove il disincanto resta comunque la *default option*.

La mia impressione è che lo siano. Da un lato, infatti, le vette, i prati, i boschi, i ghiacciai, il firmamento sono quello che sono: per l'appunto, vette, prati, boschi, ghiacciai, firmamento — realtà inerti che le persone incontrano prima di tutto come entità "utilizzabili". È solo l'esperienza imprevista della loro indisponibilità, la loro resistenza al nostro desiderio di assimilazione, a rivelarne la funzione dinamogena, generativa (Rosa 2024). Il fatto che la montagna sia dopo tutto un "sasso" — pensiamo solo a una vetta dolomitica epica come il Sasso Lungo — è banalmente la manifestazione *prima facie* della sua alterità. Che sia dura come il granito o si sgretoli sotto i nostri piedi, che sia spigolosa o invitante, luminosa o cupa, abbiamo comunque a che fare con una realtà non responsiva. Al massimo essa ci restituisce un'eco attutita della nostra voce o della nostra finitezza, pochezza, inermità. E nondimeno in molti casi essa s'insedia nella vita interiore di chi ne subisce il fascino

come una presenza dotata di una forza enigmatica. Da qui sorge spontaneamente la domanda: ma può essere davvero tutto qui?

Gradualmente, e senza che la volontà svolga un ruolo significativo in questo cambiamento d'aspetto, chi ama la montagna è destinato a prendere atto che no, non è tutto qui. Nella sua indisponibilità, l'alterità montana entra infatti in risonanza con parti di sé che si offrono all'autoriflessione come un rompicapo esistenziale. L'alterità che risuona non è solo un'alterità esterna, ma anche interna (Costa 2024b). Questa precessione involontaria dell'asse della propria identità personale può modificare la relazione tra la figura e lo sfondo del proprio campo di esperienza ridefinendo drasticamente il senso del possibile.

Se giocando con i concetti di immanenza e trascendenza ci immaginiamo una vita vissuta interamente entro una cornice immanente come una vita piatta, orizzontale, e una vita orientata alla trascendenza come un'esistenza votata alla verticalità (Taylor 2023), la morfologia delle terre alte offre plasticamente a chi le frequenta una terza opzione: una via lunga, diagonale, obliqua che, pur non rinunciando al contatto con la terra, sale e scende, si arrampica e digrada, ha un lato in ombra e uno al sole e, grazie a queste modulazioni del paesaggio, promette tacitamente di moltiplicare le possibilità di riconnessione con la natura, dilatando lo spazio della presenza (Costa 2023a).

In questo senso non sorprende che la montagna si offra oggi allo sguardo degli studiosi delle metamorfosi della spiritualità contemporanea come un teatro naturale in cui si moltiplicano i segni di vitalità dell'esperienza del sacro dopo il declino delle agenzie religiose, che per secoli hanno svolto un ruolo essenziale di mediazione e messa in forma degli episodi di crisi della presenza (Joas 2024), È grazie all'urto con il valore non strumentale e l'indisponibilità dell'alterità naturale, e al temporaneo trascendimento dei confini del sé, che affiora la possibilità del superamento della scissione tra mente e natura o io e non–io investigata in questo saggio. Sebbene la grammatica del sacro obliquo sia un tema ancora largamente inesplorato, alcuni pattern, tuttavia, sono ricorrenti e riconoscibili. L'esperienza del sacro nelle terre alte, per cominciare, è caratterizzata dall'ingresso imprevisto dei testimoni diretti dell'evento ierofanico in un campo di tensione tra indisponibilità e risonanza, riverenza e profanazione, incanto e sortilegio. In secondo

luogo, lo stupore suscitato dalla duplicità di aspetto (profano e non profano) delle cose durante l'evento epifanico è potenzialmente ma non immediatamente trasformativo. L'incanto non equivale, cioè, a un incantesimo. Lo *Zauberberg*, in breve, non produce effetti immediati sul presente, ma riesce a incidere solo sul passato e sul futuro dell'individuo toccato dalla ierofania "salvatica", rendendo intermittente la relazione tra la figura e lo sfondo nel suo campo d'esperienza. Per citare il titolo di un libro di Corine Pelluchon (2023), le ierofanie oblique sembrano funzionare nella vita delle persone essenzialmente come esperienze misteriosamente trasversali che, con la loro eccedenza, alimentano la fiducia nella propria capacità di attraversare l'impossibile, di tracciare, cioè, una via diagonale lunga abbastanza per permettere di immaginare modi non distruttivi di abitare la modernità.

6. Postilla

Non tutti, evidentemente, sperimentano le scissioni moderne come una manifestazione contingente del possibile. Per alcuni un altro mondo è semplicemente irrealizzabile e il sacro, incluso il "sacro dopo la morte di Dio" (Cimatti 2009), non potrà mai essere la forza destabilizzante descritta nelle pagine precedenti. Per questi *buffered selves* (Taylor 2009) le montagne, lungi dall'essere spazi epifanici, e tanto meno ierofanici, sono e restano sassi. Non esiste alternativa al disincanto e nessuna riconnessione tangibile con la natura è all'orizzonte.

È questa divaricazione dell'esperienza che ha reso le terre alte dei campi di battaglia discorsivi nella modernità. Ed è grazie alla frattura degli orizzonti moderni (Taylor 1993) che hanno potuto prendere forma le polarizzazioni tipiche delle molteplici *culture wars* odierne, di cui quella di cui siamo testimoni ai nostri giorni in montagna è tra le meno virulente. Questo fatto è un'evidenza sociologica. Nondimeno, il significato di tali conflitti culturali, da cui dipende l'identità delle persone che li combattono pur con livelli diversi di coinvolgimento, sfugge a qualsiasi tipo di rappresentazione distaccata e oggettiva. Il conflitto d'interpretazioni ha luogo, infatti, a cavallo tra la sfera teorica e quella pratica e non può essere risolto né da un sovrappiù di informazioni

né da una decisione che tagli volontaristicamente il nodo gordiano in cui sono avviluppati incanto e disincanto nella forma di vita moderna.

Questo *entanglement* è precisamente l'asse attorno a cui ruotano i contributi narrativi (Musil e Broch), testimoniali (Stutfield e Camanni) e teorici (Cimatti e Rosa) su cui ha fatto leva il mio tentativo di fornire una visione panoramica dei movimenti tra figura e sfondo che hanno contribuito a rivoluzionare il modo di percepire e vivere le terre alte negli ultimi tre secoli. È ancora troppo presto per stabilire con cognizione di causa se le montagne potranno o no essere un laboratorio del futuro in un momento di radicale incertezza sul destino del pianeta. Al momento non resta che prendere atto che il senso più o meno acuto della loro sacralità dipende in pari misura dalla speranza e dalla fiducia nel loro poter essere la fonte o l'occasione di una rinascita per gli individui e le comunità che le popolano o le frequentano abitualmente. Anche da questo punto di vista l'esperienza del sacro tra i monti merita di essere definita obliqua.

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L'ALPINISMO COME RELIGIONE (TESTO PRESENTATO ALL'ALPINE CLUB IL 4 GIUGNO 1918)

H.E.M. Stutfield[1]

Abstract: This is the first Italian translation of a pioneering article published in "The Alpine Journal" in 1918. In the text, the Author reflects on the intensity with which many mountaineers live their passion for the peaks in a tone that is half light–hearted and half deferential. In particular, he discusses their sectarianism, their ethical and aesthetic tension, their aspiration to overcome the modern split between the good and the beautiful by immersing themselves into mountain wilderness, and the variety and power of the emotions aroused by the peaks in the hearts and minds of their modern worshipers.

Questa è la traduzione italiana di un articolo pionieristico pubblicato su "The Alpine Journal" nel 1918. Nel testo si ragiona con un tono per metà scanzonato e per metà ammirato dell'intensità con cui molti alpinisti vivono la loro passione per la montagna. L'Autore ne esamina, in particolare, il settarismo, la tensione etica ed estetica, l'aspirazione a superare la scissione moderna tra buono e bello immergendosi nella natura selvaggia, la varietà e la potenza delle emozioni suscitate dalle vette nel cuore e nella mente dei loro adoratori moderni.

Keywords: Mountaineering, Awe, Nature, Religion, Sacredness, Mountain Worship

Parole chiave: Alpinismo, Reverenza, Natura, Religione, Sacralità, Culto delle montagne

[Hugh Edward Millington Stutfield (1858–1929), avvocato, broker, giornalista, critico letterario, poeta, esploratore, non ha lasciato impronte durevoli sulla cultura del suo tempo. A giudicare da una sua

(1) H.E.M. Stutfield (1918), *Mountaineering as a Religion*, "The Alpine Journal", 32: 241–247. Traduzione di Paolo Costa.

raccolta di poesie satiriche (Stutfield 1905), aveva un gusto particolare per i capricci, le fisime, le stravaganze che hanno caratterizzato la società borghese fin dalle sue origini. Questa dote di osservatore dei costumi risulta evidente anche nella conferenza che pubblichiamo qui nella sua prima traduzione italiana. Con il senno di poi, la descrizione semiseria della "religionizzazione" dell'alpinismo appare come un'intuizione pionieristica che entra in risonanza con molti dei temi discussi in questa sezione degli "Annali di Studi Religiosi". La sensazione che il rapporto dei moderni con le cime avesse un che di religioso precede ovviamente il sermone di Stutfield. Già nel 1871 Leslie Stephen (1894, p. 40) aveva descritto Rousseau come il Lutero del "nuovo culto dell'adorazione delle montagne" (*the Luther of the new creed of mountain worship*). Stutfield si appropria dell'intuizione e la sviluppa con notevole verve intellettuale. Gli ingredienti ci sono tutti: la serietà religiosa con cui gli amanti della montagna coltivano la loro passione; il suo carattere esclusivo che spesso sfocia nel settarismo; la tensione etica a cui può dare origine; il desiderio di superare la scissione moderna tra valore morale e bellezza; la Natura come luogo in cui la conciliazione può realizzarsi in molti modi e senza sforzo; stupore, incanto, riverenza, *awe* come tonalità emotive tipiche degli alpinisti. Ma, al di là dei contenuti, anche il timbro della riflessione di Stutfield la rende sorprendentemente attuale. Nella sua prosa vivace ed elegante l'ardore romantico è infatti costantemente bilanciato e mitigato dall'ironia. La commistione non sorprende. È anzi perfettamente in sintonia con le condizioni della credenza tipiche di un'età secolare (Taylor 2009), in cui la fragilità e la riflessività ricorsiva plasmano anche le ricerche spirituali più perseveranti. Nel testo l'ironia, comunque, non diventa mai distacco perché sullo sfondo del discorso di Stutfield si sente pulsare come un basso continuo il mantra di ogni autentica ricerca spirituale moderna: "eppure non può essere tutto qui". *N.d.T.*]

Durante una riunione tenutasi in questa sala due anni fa, un noto socio del Club fece alcune osservazioni che mi colpirono molto. In un discorso pronunciato dopo una delle nostre relazioni egli fece riferimento (cito da una nota presa in quell'occasione) all'"aspetto religioso del nostro atteggiamento verso la purezza delle cime e delle nevi più alte". L'osservazione, come ho detto, mi colpì molto: cristallizzò, per così dire, alcune idee che da tempo mi frullavano in testa. In primo

luogo, che l'alpinismo ai nostri giorni ha smesso di essere un mero sport, un piacevole relax per lavoratori stressati. In secondo luogo, che il nostro atteggiamento nei suoi confronti è caratterizzato da un fervore e da un'intensità di intenti tipici del vero credente. Inoltre, mi è sembrato — e la riflessione successiva non ha fatto altro che consolidare la prima impressione — che nella confraternita degli scalatori si ritrovino opinioni e qualità uniche nel loro genere che, a mio avviso, possono essere legittimamente definite settarie. Dopo l'incontro di maggio ho timidamente condiviso queste idee con uno dei "nostri" (che in questo momento non si trova certo a mille miglia da me, ma nulla potrà persuadermi a rivelarne l'identità). Costui mi ha detto: "Be', l'alpinismo è la *mia* religione, la mia unica religione". Rincuorato da questa candida professione di fede, ho proseguito le mie ricerche con rinnovato vigore. Sono andato a cercare la parola "setta" nel dizionario e ho scoperto che significa "un gruppo di persone unite dagli stessi principi, che costituiscono un partito distinto, con sentimenti diversi da quelli degli altri". Ora mi sembra chiaro che chi ha stilato questa voce del dizionario deve avere avuto in mente proprio il Club Alpino mentre scriveva. L'alpinista medio è indubbiamente "un partito distinto" e i suoi sentimenti su molte cose sono nettamente differenziati da quelli del mondo esterno. Il mondo esterno, per esempio, si ostina a considerare l'alpinismo semplicemente come un passatempo, un passatempo piuttosto particolare, praticato da persone assai particolari. Ma per il vero alpinista è molto di più: è una gioia, una passione, un'ispirazione — si potrebbe dire, appunto, "una religione", perché difficilmente qualcuno potrà mettere in dubbio che la nostra devozione per le montagne e l'alpinismo assume le sembianze di una venerazione che a volte profuma proprio di culto. Consideriamo le prime come oggetti da omaggiare; perseguiamo il secondo con una serietà più che teutonica che suscita lo stupore dei nostri amici. E in questa gravità e serietà sembra celarsi il nucleo e il germe di una nuova fede o confessione. Una nuova denominazione religiosa dovrebbe, ovviamente, fornire ai propri fedeli dei principi, dei dogmi e un proprio diritto canonico. D'ora in avanti sarà mio compito indagare in che misura il Club Alpino ci fornisca simili requisiti. È normale, e per molti versi auspicabile, che una chiesa o una setta abbiano anche alcuni segni esteriori e visibili della propria

esistenza come entità collettiva, che i suoi discepoli siano cioè in grado di indicare alcuni emblemi o insegne che forniscano un mezzo di riconoscimento. Bisogna ammettere che in queste cose la nostra confraternita è un po' carente. L'eccessivo amore per gli ornamenti personali non è mai stato un difetto che si possa imputare alla classe degli alpinisti. Come simboli del nostro credo possediamo, a quel che mi consta, una cravatta e un bottone. Ma per il momento li ho visti soltanto con l'occhio della fede. Il nostro sommo sacerdote, come potete constatare con i vostri stessi occhi, non indossa una divisa sgargiante. I nostri vescovi, o diretti superiori, che siedono lì davanti, sono altrettanto poco appariscenti. I nostri iniziati, mentre compiono i loro riti sacri sulle montagne, appaiono vestiti con abiti che a volte sono tutt'altro che impressionanti. La montagna, come si sa, è un oggetto glorioso: l'alpinista tende a essere un oggetto piuttosto inglorioso.

È evidente, perciò, che dobbiamo scavare sotto la superficie se ci preme scoprire i segni distintivi della nostra confraternita alpina. Dobbiamo ricercare, cioè, alcune caratteristiche spirituali omogenee e interiori che ci contraddistinguono e fanno di noi una casta separata dagli altri uomini. Per quanto mi riguarda, rinvengo queste caratteristiche in una certa predisposizione mentale, una spiccata inclinazione individuale e morale, comune a tutti gli alpinisti, ma raramente riscontrabile in coloro che non sono dediti all'arrampicata. Il vero alpinista non è un semplice ginnasta, ma un uomo che adora le montagne. Come l'israelita dei tempi che furono, guarda alle colline come roccaforti "di dove ci verrà il soccorso" [Salmo 121; *N.d.T.*] e ai monti come consolazioni che "recheranno pace al popolo" [Salmo 71; *N.d.T.*]. Ama i luoghi elevati della terra e, come un innamorato, è solito dilungarsi, con quella che i non addetti ai lavori potrebbero considerare un'inutile prolissità, sulle perfezioni della sua adorabile amante. A differenza di Ruskin, non si accontenta però di venerare le cime più alte da lontano, ma esige un contatto più ravvicinato con gli oggetti della sua passione. Nondimeno, questa passione non è mai meno che devota e riverente. Per noi le grandi catene montuose e i ghiacciai che si distendono ai loro piedi sono cose sacre. Le nostre cattedrali sono le massicce cupole bianche e le esili guglie rocciose che si spingono in su nell'empireo azzurro. Il nostro *Sanctum sanctorum* è racchiuso da qualche parte nei recessi delle nevi

eterne. La loro invasione da parte di persone non ortodosse, o che si comportano in modi non ortodossi, è per noi una profanazione dei misteri sacri. Far passare un tunnel attraverso le viscere della nostra amata Jungfrau, piazzare un ristorante o una birreria come un brutto cappello sulla testa del maestoso Cervino, significa perpetrare un'offesa indicibile contro tutto ciò che ci è caro. Siamo zelanti con un credo non scritto. Ci sottoponiamo gioiosamente a martirî volontari per una fede di cui nessun Papa ha ancora trovato una definizione. E, come capita ad altre sette, il fervore del nostro zelo è in grado di spingerci a eccessi che a volte sfiorano il fanatismo. Lo scalatore eleva le proprie opinioni a dogmi, che mantiene ferocemente contro ogni nuovo adepto. In alcune occasioni mostra tracce di quel bigottismo, un pizzico di quello spirito persecutorio, senza il quale nessuna vera religione sarebbe mai veramente tale. I non adepti ci rimproverano, non senza motivo, una certa mancanza di cortesia e di simpatia verso i fratelli più deboli. Quando incontriamo l'immancabile innocuo turista su un ghiacciaio, i nostri sguardi e il nostro atteggiamento sembrano dirgli: "Non t'avvicinare! Togliti i sandali dai piedi perché il luogo dove stai è terra santa" [Esodo 3,5; *N.d.T.*], qui non possono entrare che i semidei dell'ascia e della corda! L'altro giorno stavo sfogliando le Scritture di uno dei nostri Profeti maggiori e ho letto che "il vero alpinista è senza dubbio l'opera più nobile di Dio" [Mummery 1895, p. 358; *N.d.T.*]. Una sana dottrina, forse; e c'è un bel timbro dogmatico in quel "senza dubbio". Ma il profeta prosegue poi "bollando" lo sfortunato uomo, che non è un vero alpinista, come una misera creatura inadatta a vivere, una sorta di eretico da scorticare e bruciare vivo tra le fiamme del feroce disprezzo di una qualche Inquisizione alpina. Qui, credo, abbiamo un'intolleranza di qualità decisamente ultramontana. Il termine "ultramontano", come sapete, indica uno che abita al di là delle montagne. Sto forse esagerando se suppongo che le Alpi siano qui impiegate come una sorta di linea di demarcazione tra l'eccesso e la moderazione, tra ciò che è ragionevole e il contrario del ragionevole, e che noi del Club alpino faremmo bene a non superare quella soglia?

La fede dell'alpinista, come ogni altra fede, ha i suoi aspetti etici oltre a quelli puramente dogmatici. Con l'alpinismo cerchiamo di migliorare la nostra mente e la nostra morale, oltre che i nostri muscoli; e si può

dire che il risultato sia una sorta di cristianesimo muscolare. La prestanza fisica è un oggetto di culto primario per noi, come per molti altri britannici. Il primo scalatore iniziò ad arrampicare per sgranchirsi le gambe, ma, mano a mano che ci prendeva gusto, scoprì che nel frattempo stava espandendo la propria mente. Ciò che all'inizio lo attraeva come mero esercizio o divertimento, a uno sguardo più attento si rivelò anche una scuola, una scuola molto severa, di buone maniere, di coraggio personale e di altri attributi desiderabili. Scoprì cioè che non gli forniva solo svago e vigore corporeo, ma anche un'educazione. E da quel momento in poi iniziò a scalare per un severo senso del dovere e per convinzione. Le montagne, ci dice Ruskin, oltre a purificare la fede religiosa e stimolare l'entusiasmo religioso, stimolano anche le facoltà poetiche e inventive. Le opere di Henry Savage Landor — per citare un solo scrittore — dimostrano in maniera convincente la verità di quest'ultima affermazione. Mentre l'alpinista si commuoveva ogni giorno di più per la magnificenza delle montagne, la loro contemplazione ampliava le sue facoltà spirituali e purificava la sua anima. Perseguendo piacere, salute e bellezza, è migliorato moralmente e intellettualmente. Così, seguendo l'esempio degli antichi greci, ha trasformato le sue emozioni estetiche in disposizioni virtuose. Come l'eroe norvegese di Ibsen, grazie alla solitudine, tra le cime delle montagne, l'alpinista impara il segreto della vita. Attraverso le nebbie che si depositano sui loro fianchi discerne cose viste prima solo "come per mezzo di uno specchio, in immagine" [1 Corinti, 13-12; *N.d.T.*]. I critici potrebbero obiettare che sto esagerando. Potrebbero dire che sto pretendendo troppo dalla nostra amata attività; che le sto attribuendo le proprietà educative e igieniche di una scuola di cultura fisica degna di Eugene Sandow(2), combinata con le influenze raffinate di un seminario di prima classe per giovani donne. Per quanto ne so, potrebbero anche avere ragione, le mie opinioni meritano comunque rispetto. E per la fede che dimora veramente in me, posso sempre ricorrere come ultima risorsa al motto patristico *Credo quia absurdum*.

Ho letto che uno dei principali fini ed esiti di tutte le religioni primitive è la consacrazione della vita, lo stimolo della volontà di vivere, di fare e osare. In effetti, la fede degli amanti della montagna è

(2) Eugene Sandow (1867–1925) è il nome d'arte di Friedrich Wilhelm Müller, inventore del culturismo moderno. [*N.d.T.*]

essenzialmente una fede pugnace. La loro chiesa è, al di là di tutto, una chiesa militante. Il monaco medievale, rifuggendo il mondo e la sua malvagità, si ritirava in qualche cavità per combattere contro i demoni, per lottare contro i principi e le potenze delle tenebre. Lo scalatore alimenta la sua voglia di fare e di osare affrontando temibili camini di roccia e pendii ghiacciati con un angolo di sessanta gradi. I nemici con cui si scontra sono quelli inanimati delle rupi e della neve. Nel corso delle sue battaglie egli, non meno del monaco, è talvolta assalito da dubbi e paure. L'eremita teme che i suoi avversari spettrali possano rivelarsi troppo forti per la debolezza della carne. Allo stesso modo, l'alpinista, quando contempla una nuova via pericolosa o un'altra spedizione disperata, spera che vada tutto bene, ma non è troppo ottimista sul successo e non dimentica mai che la cosa, dopo tutto, potrebbe non "andare". Il suo atteggiamento nei confronti dell'impresa progettata è quindi esattamente l'atteggiamento del giapponese moderno e colto nei confronti della sua religione: una postura di "cortesia verso le possibilità" [Chamberlain 1905, p. 333; *N.d.T.*].

La nostra fede deve, ovviamente, avere una base filosofica su cui poggiare — come ha scritto John Henry Newman: dobbiamo "cominciare col libero esame" [Newman 1881, p. 203: *private judgment*; trad. it. p. 216] — e la filosofia di qualsiasi credo stabile è sempre intrisa di misticismo. Ora, il misticismo è di tutti i tipi: buono e cattivo, elevato e degradante; e confido che il nostro non sia della qualità peggiore. Quale deve essere la base della nostra fede? Sarei propenso a fondarla principalmente su un intenso amore per la natura e la bellezza naturale, un certo sentimento o esperienza interiore, come dicono i teologi, la quale esperienza, ci fanno inoltre notare, è il fondamento più vero e sicuro della credenza. E la fede che è in noi ora non è venuta alla luce in un giorno, anche se la particolare forma di culto della natura a cui siamo dediti — la venerazione delle montagne — è, come sapete, una pianta con un'origine relativamente recente. Jean Jacques Rousseau è stato descritto come il primo dei sentimentalisti della natura, l'antenato del naturalismo romantico moderno che, nel suo caso, fu ispirato dalla gloriosa visione del Monte Bianco dalla sua città natale: Ginevra. Io stesso ho sempre pensato, insieme a molti altri, che egli sia stato in qualche modo il padre del nostro moderno culto delle montagne. Tuttavia, il signor

D.W. Freshfield, nel suo interessante intervento del mese scorso, ci ha fornito argomenti convincenti per screditare questa opinione. Credo, tuttavia, che si possa affermare con ragionevole certezza che, parlando in generale, la passione di Rousseau per la natura abbia dato impulso a quelle emozioni che oggi trovano espressione tra le cime e i ghiacciai alpini. Avevo pensato di dire qualcosa anche del suo concittadino, De Saussure, ma, dopo la conferenza del signor Freshfield, le mie parole sarebbero più che superflue. Dopo di loro venne Ruskin, le cui opere sono ben note a tutti voi. Questi ultimi due uomini adoravano le cime innevate: Ruskin a distanza, De Saussure da una prospettiva più ravvicinata. La pratica dell'alpinismo come mestiere o scienza era demandata a tempi posteriori. Quest'ultima forma di devozione può essere a volte, forse, un po' eccessiva, ma possiamo affermare con certezza che la grande maggioranza, anche degli alpinisti ginnici, non sono i semplici scalatori dell'albero della cuccagna denunciati con tanta ferocia da Ruskin. L'alpinista più audace tra le nostre fila può possedere, anzi spesso possiede, un acuto senso della natura che gli sussurra che la natura possiede la chiave che sola può dare accesso a molti tesori segreti. In fondo alla mente di ogni vero alpinista c'è, mi sembra, qualcosa che corrisponde all'antica idea greca del *Kalokagathon*, l'armonia del bene con il grande e il bello: un'idea che, checché ne dicano i filosofi, è profondamente radicata nell'animo umano. Stupore [awe] e riverenza sono due elementi chiave del culto, di cui la Natura fornisce una piena ispirazione. C'è un romanticismo spirituale, oltre che fisico, nei nostri viaggi tra le nevi. La nostra ricerca non si svolge interamente sul piano materiale e il mistero di ciò che ci circonda esercita un fascino a cui pochi possono resistere. Ortodossi o agnostici, dobbiamo tutti credere nella Natura e nei miracoli che compie quotidianamente: è in quelle che per noi sono le sue manifestazioni più nobili, le montagne, che scorgiamo il volto della Divinità.

La credenza monacale a cui ho accennato poc'anzi — che le montagne siano la dimora naturale dei demoni e di altre creature sgradevoli che rifuggono la pianura — mi suggerisce un altro argomento di riflessione. L'adoratore della natura è sempre un po' un amante del folklore locale, cioè un uomo dotato di senso della meraviglia: uno che osserva, forse in modo superficiale, ma riverente, i misteriosi processi della

natura e si sforza di apprezzarne il significato. Costui scorge, nel grande spettacolo che essa dispiega quotidianamente davanti ai suoi occhi, i simboli di realtà invisibili. Crede fermamente in una sorta di alleanza tra l'anima dell'uomo e l'anima della Natura. Anticamente, e in alcune popolazioni ancora oggi, i cultori delle fantasticherie e delle leggende popolari personificavano con grande libertà queste forze naturali e popolavano le solitudini da cui erano circondati con esseri adatti alle loro qualità. Secondo gli antichi greci e romani, come pure per i moderni celti e molti ecclesiastici di varie nazioni oggi, ogni luogo, sia naturale sia costruito da mano umana, avrebbe il proprio angelo custode o genio che lo presiede, e le intelligenze angeliche o soprannaturali sarebbero all'opera ovunque. Mia moglie ha ascoltato un eloquente sermone su questo argomento in una cattedrale di Londra giusto l'altro ieri. Ebbene, per citare un solo esempio dalle nostre amate Alpi, credo proprio che il Cervino dovrebbe avere una sua divinità tutelare. La immagino come un personaggio piuttosto cupo e severo, della schiatta di Alexander Burgener[3]. Perché non canonizzare Burgener come patrono del Cervino e collocare il suo santuario da qualche parte sulla cresta di Zmutt?

Il misticismo, come ho detto, ha varie forme. E a questo culto mistico e indefinito della Vergine–Madre Natura, di cui siamo tutti figli — i cinici potrebbero definirlo un feticismo partorito da un umore vago — mi sembra che partecipino in qualche misura anche gli alpinisti moderni, soprattutto quelli dotati di immaginazione o di un'indole iperattiva. Abbiamo nel nostro Club poeti che si sono procurati una catarsi, come dicevano i greci, dei loro sentimenti per le montagne tramite versi che rivelano a volte una qualità decisamente creativa. Altri si accontentano di esprimersi, come sto cercando di fare io, in una prosa più banale. Altri ancora, e in numero ben superiore, probabilmente provano questi sentimenti senza dare loro alcuna espressione esteriore. Il dottor Collie ci ha offerto lo scorso marzo un'immagine vivida dello scenario selvaggio e bizzarro delle nostre Highlands e delle relative isole. Nelle sue esplosioni di celtica ragione o irragionevolezza naturale e di flusso

(3) Alexander Burgener (1845–1910) è stato un alpinista e guida alpina svizzero noto per i suoi modi burberi ma rassicuranti. Sua è stata la prima ascensione alla cresta (*arête*) di Zmutt sul Cervino. [*N.d.T.*]

dell'anima, mi è parso di scorgere alcuni segni sicuri dell'immaginazione folkloristica dei gaeli. I celti irlandesi, negli intervalli di tempo che riescono a sottrarre all'agitazione politica, sono impegnati a ricostruire la poesia, e forse la religione, dei propri antenati, nate dalla natura selvaggia che li circonda e che sembra essere penetrata nel cuore e nella fibra stessa del loro essere. Gli ottusi sassoni che gli irlandesi detestano, o professano di detestare, sono un popolo più prosaico. Eppure nelle nostre regioni celesti delle Alpi, con le loro dimensioni più ampie e la loro magnificenza più sublime, ci sono momenti in cui ci sembra di entrare in più stretto e intimo contatto con la Natura: quando sembra che essa ci parli come a un amico e a un'anima gemella a cui può confidare con sicurezza i propri segreti. Nei momenti di stress e di pericolo, la persona più comune può entrare in contatto, per così dire, con gli spiriti della nuvola e della tempesta. Vede cose che non aveva mai visto prima. Le creste e i dirupi sporgenti assumono forme e volti stranamente umani; e fantasmi aerei infestano le nebbie avvolgenti. Le glorie (anche dette spettri di Brocken), come quelle che Whymper vide dalla spalla del Cervino — messaggere o presagio di sventure — volteggiano sui precipizi; e l'urlo della banshee si ode al di sopra del lamento dei venti invernali.

Anche noi abbiamo le nostre stagioni di riposo, quando prevalgono le emozioni più tranquille, e forse più profonde. Un bivacco di mezzanotte sotto le stelle, accanto a un ghiacciaio illuminato dalla luna tra le alte montagne, suscita una serie di impressioni auguste e indelebili. Nel rosso intenso del bagliore alpino della sera ci abbandoniamo al sortilegio della Natura: immersi nella magia sensuale dell'ora, i nostri spiriti sono in pace. Quando il mattino si presenta in vesti di zafferano sulle cime, il fascino tenue dell'alba è come il debole riflesso di uno splendore che non è di questa terra. In questi e in altri momenti simili, l'impressione di una specie di esaltazione spirituale, di una sorta di sottile comunione con il mondo invisibile, può facilmente diventare un'apprensione che trascende quella del semplice sogno di un visionario. Come si diceva un tempo in cima a un'altra montagna, si può esclamare allora, anche se in un senso un po' diverso: "È bello per noi stare qui" [Matteo 17,4; *N.d.T.*].

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SEZIONE 4
INTELLIGENZA ARTIFICIALE, ETICA E SOCIETÀ

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INTRODUZIONE. INTELLIGENZA ARTIFICIALE, ETICA E SOCIETÀ

Lucia Galvagni

In questo particolare momento storico le tecnologie digitali e l'Intelligenza Artificiale rappresentano sfide e temi centrali nel dibattito non solo tecnico e scientifico, ma anche sociale e politico, suscitando entusiasmi e stupori e generando al medesimo tempo paure e timori rispetto al loro possibile impatto e alle evoluzioni presunte e inattese che potrebbero avere. Per questo pare importante raccogliere spunti di riflessione da quegli ambiti di studio che tradizionalmente si sono interrogati sui fenomeni e sulla loro portata, interpretandoli alla luce del significato che essi possono avere e insieme per l'impatto che la loro introduzione può implicare rispetto alla ricerca e alla costruzione di senso che caratterizza l'esistenza e la vita degli esseri umani. Ci si può chiedere, ancora, quali siano e quali potrebbero essere gli effetti dell'uso di queste tecnologie per le persone e per le dinamiche interpersonali, sociali e politiche, così come nei termini delle evoluzioni possibili delle nostre società.

Dal momento che da essa dipende la progettazione, la realizzazione e la messa in opera di tali tecnologie, la dimensione tecnico–scientifica sembra rappresentare la voce prevalente nello scenario attuale e per questo essa sembrerebbe giocare il ruolo più importante: quale ruolo compete allora e ancora alle scienze umane e che contributo possono portare queste discipline nella riflessione sulle finalità da dare alle tecnologie, sui modelli ai quali ispirarle e sulle modalità per utilizzarle? Come la filosofia, la storia, il diritto, le scienze umane e sociali entrano nel dibattito e quali strumenti offrono non solo per capire e interpretare, ma

anche per prevedere e anticipare scenari che possono risultare più desiderabili e auspicabili, più equi ed egualitari, più rispettosi e sostenibili?

Per entrare in questo esercizio riflessivo ci è sembrato importante recuperare alcune nozioni etiche, politiche e più ampiamente filosofiche che possono orientare nella lettura e nella comprensione degli scenari e dei contesti che il digitale e l'artificiale sembrano profilare e definire oggi. In questa sezione degli "Annali di Studi Religiosi", intitolata *Intelligenza Artificiale, etica e società*, abbiamo raccolto per questo i contributi di alcuni studiosi che si sono interrogati in merito: da essi emerge una riflessione inter– e multi–disciplinare sulla realtà dell'Intelligenza Artificiale e sul ruolo che le tecnologie digitali giocano alla luce del loro valore epistemologico, del loro impatto etico, sociale e politico, del loro possibile contributo rispetto all'esistenza umana.

I temi sui quali si riflette e si dibatte così ampiamente non sono nuovi, basti pensare che in un suo famoso articolo del 1950 Alan Turing osservava che se la domanda "Le macchine sono in grado di pensare?" poteva sembrare insensata in quel particolare momento storico, in prospettiva, ad esempio alla fine del secolo, non sarebbe probabilmente suonata così impertinente (Turing 2024). A 75 anni di distanza da quelle riflessioni lo scenario sul quale ci confrontiamo e dibattiamo sembra essere proprio questo: le macchine non solo simulano — come si era immaginato e preventivato in passato in importanti convegni e conferenze —, ma esse a propria volta producono, pensano, interagiscono, mettendo in atto forme di esercizio della razionalità e della creatività attribuite e considerate come specificamente, sinora forse esclusivamente, umane (Cortesi 2025).

I saggi raccolti nella presente sezione portano lo sguardo su questioni diverse che l'Intelligenza Artificiale (IA) solleva e su alcune sfide che ci pone di fronte. I primi due contributi rappresentano un dialogo tra filosofia e informatica: James Brusseau riformula e rilancia quesiti antichi per meglio inquadrare e capire gli scenari dell'IA, mettendo in luce come essa permetta di rileggere questioni importanti, tradizionalmente dibattute dalla filosofia; un confronto a più voci, frutto di una tavola rotonda che ha coinvolto filosofi — Paolo Costa, Eugenia Lancellotta e Boris Rähme — ed informatici — Michela Milano e Paolo Traverso — della Fondazione Bruno Kessler mette a tema il valore delle credenze

e delle convinzioni presenti nelle nostre società rispetto alla realtà e alle applicazioni dell'Intelligenza Artificiale. Gli altri tre saggi della sezione pongono al centro e discutono importanti questioni etiche correlate all'uso dell'IA: Marta Fasan, in un contributo di taglio giuridico, considera il tema dell'equità e dell'eguaglianza alla luce delle applicazioni dell'Intelligenza Artificiale; Eugenia Lancellotta riflette sull'uso e l'applicazione delle tecnologie digitali in medicina, analizzando l'ambito e la cura della malattia mentale; Daniel Toscano Lopez, infine, entra nel merito della riflessione filosofico–politica e considera quale impatto etico e sociale le nuove tecnologie possono e potrebbero avere anche in una prospettiva globale.

Più in particolare, l'articolo di James Brusseau offre un approfondimento di tipo filosofico, nel quale quesiti antichi vengono riformulati per inquadrare e capire gli scenari che l'Intelligenza Artificiale crea, recuperando e problematizzando concetti quali l'identità e l'autenticità, la curiosità, la libertà e la creatività. Nella sua duplice competenza informatica e filosofica, Brusseau affronta nel merito ciascuna di queste nozioni e sottolinea quanto e come esse vengano interpellate dalle nuove tecnologie: come si definisce la convenienza, come si può ridefinire l'autenticità, interpretata secondo l'accezione heideggeriana e considerata rispetto agli scenari digitali, presenti e futuri? Come si potrebbe rimodulare la nozione di libertà e come le raccomandazioni fornite dagli algoritmi potrebbero tutelarne l'esercizio piuttosto che limitarla? L'Intelligenza Artificiale potrebbe modificare, in prospettiva, le dimensioni della curiosità e della serendipità? Per contrastare il rischio di omologazione e la possibile mancanza di variazioni si sono già identificati alcuni strumenti *ad hoc*, quali il *curiosity engine* e l'introduzione di raccomandazioni atipiche, che ricorrendo all'uso di filtri specifici permettono al sistema non solo di non precludere, ma al contrario addirittura di promuovere la libertà delle persone che utilizzano queste tecnologie.

Nella ricerca sull'IA, sottolinea Brusseau, si osservano al momento due linee principali, una prima che enfatizza in maniera quasi euforica il valore della convenienza e dell'autenticità digitale, una seconda orientata invece alla promozione della curiosità e della libertà intese in senso più creativo. Questi due diversi approcci riflettono anche le diverse

modalità di interpretare la questione dell'identità personale: lì dove l'identità personale venga intesa come possibilità di incontrare il proprio vero sé, la personalità potrebbe risultare valorizzata dal ricorso all'IA, favorendo la considerazione di interessi e inclinazioni della persona. D'altra parte, però, se si intende l'identità come qualcosa che si modifica e si definisce progressivamente, si potrebbe pensare a programmare gli algoritmi di raccomandazione ai fini di implementare cambiamenti in maniera provocatoria e imprevedibile, sollecitando ad esempio la curiosità verso spazi nuovi e realtà diverse. Le questioni etiche e filosofiche che si sollevano nel dibattito riguardano così l'identità sia da un punto di vista morale, che in termini giuridici: se ci può essere il desiderio di diventare qualcun altro, non solo nel senso di voler migliorare, ma anche e soprattutto nel senso di voler cambiare radicalmente il proprio modo di presentarsi e di proporsi, il ricorso all'Intelligenza Artificiale e agli algoritmi di raccomandazione potrebbe essere uno strumento per promuovere tale processo e attivare queste dinamiche.

Come si guarda oggi all'intelligenza artificiale, quali sono le convinzioni individuali e collettive e quali credenze sono presenti nelle nostre società rispetto a tali tecnologie? Come le nostre società vivono la crescente evoluzione digitale, che implica un'importante e impattante trasformazione?

In una riflessione sulle credenze e le convinzioni inerenti all'IA, i filosofi Paolo Costa, Eugenia Lancellotta e Boris Rähme hanno sollevato alcuni importanti quesiti, affrontati e approfonditi in un primo momento nelle scuole con gli studenti, e si sono poi confrontati in merito con Michela Milano e Paolo Traverso, informatici esperti di IA. Le "credenze resilienti" in merito all'IA, quelle che più sembrano venir messe in discussione, sono la nozione di intelligenza, il confronto tra intelligenza artificiale e intelligenza naturale/umana, il rapporto tra intelligenza artificiale e politica. Perché le convinzioni contano e sono importanti anche rispetto a come si progettano le tecnologie? Se si prende in considerazione il "senso comune", nel quale sono presenti anche le intuizioni e i bisogni delle persone, è possibile identificare importanti indicatori di quanto conta per loro e questo può già rappresentare un significativo insieme di credenze che fungono da riferimento nelle società, una sorta di "saggezza comunitaria". Qual è, quale può essere il

vantaggio di approcciare le nuove tecnologie tramite forme di saggezza comune, facendo spazio alla cosiddetta *common morality*? Creare un ambiente e un ecosistema dove l'Intelligenza Artificiale venga percepita come affidabile, *trustworthy* in inglese, può aiutare a muovere in direzione di concezioni e usi diversi dell'Intelligenza Artificiale, più consapevoli e più sostenibili: volendo, ad esempio, aumentare la fiducia e ridurre la sfiducia nei confronti dell'IA si potrebbero e si dovrebbero pensare tecnologie e sistemi che risultino più sicuri, rendendoli così anche più affidabili. Per chi si occupa di tecnologie digitali e di intelligenza artificiale, parlare di "*human–centered AI*" significa provare a progettare queste tecnologie considerando la persona come la finalità ultima e quella più alta, per promuovere la quale vanno orientati lo sviluppo e l'applicazione di queste tecnologie.

Le paure emergono dai discorsi degli studenti, le persone più giovani sollecitate a riflettere in merito, che considerano l'impatto e gli effetti più concreti legati alla diffusione e all'applicazione di queste tecnologie, ad esempio per quanto riguarda gli scenari futuri del lavoro. Come pensare allora a conciliare i timori inevitabili e le evoluzioni non prevedibili con l'aspirazione a definire condizioni di vita e modelli di società compatibili con un pieno, più ricco sviluppo umano e sociale? L'etica torna qui ad essere interpellata: i principi dell'equità, dell'eguaglianza e della giustizia rappresentano il tema che ritorna e una sorta di *fil rouge* che accomuna gli interventi di Marta Fasan, Eugenia Lancellotta e Daniel Toscano Lopez.

A partire da una prospettiva di diritto costituzionale, Marta Fasan sottolinea come l'IA, entrando nella vita delle società, induca modificazioni e produca nuovi modelli di assetto sociale, caratterizzati da matrici algoritmiche e digitali che plasmano anche le società. Questi scenari presentano rischi importanti, come quello legato a un controllo e a un possibile "governo" da parte dell'IA sulle persone e le popolazioni. Le nuove tecnologie non sono però neutre nel loro approccio, poiché sono caratterizzate da alcuni *bias* o precomprensioni importanti, che — se applicate su larga scala — possono generare forme di esclusione di gruppi e di discriminazione delle persone. L'equità può rappresentare un principio cui ispirarsi anche nel pensare allo sviluppo di tali tecnologie: a fronte di rischi crescenti di discriminazioni tecnologiche e

di "danni tecnologici" verso le persone e le popolazioni, sono state formulate regole a livello europeo, come l'*AI Act*, e a livello internazionale per provare a ridurre i *bias*, cercando di evitare o limitare conseguenze e trattamenti discriminatori. Gli scenari presenti e futuri interpellano l'etica e il diritto, invitando a riconsiderare la dimensione dell'eguaglianza come criterio ispiratore e orientativo nella progettazione stessa delle tecnologie, pensandole come centrate sulla persona e basate sui diritti fondamentali delle persone e delle comunità. È possibile infatti favorire dinamiche di riconoscimento della diversità anche nella progettazione e quindi nelle applicazioni dell'IA, permettendo così una maggiore inclusione e valorizzando approcci intersezionali.

Per pensare di rispettare e promuovere l'eguaglianza in maniera più specifica e particolare è importante riflettere considerando da vicino gli scenari concreti all'interno dei quali essa va garantita e implementata. Le applicazioni e l'uso dell'Intelligenza Artificiale in alcuni ambiti, tra cui quello della medicina, rappresentano una delle sfide e delle promesse più significative, al presente e in prospettiva: in alcuni settori però le tecnologie digitali non sono ancora state sviluppate in maniera approfondita, dal momento che in essi è più complesso coinvolgere le persone e i pazienti quali "utenti esperti". Partendo da una panoramica sulle diverse forme di IA, debole, generale e super, Eugenia Lancellotta riflette nel merito dell'IA pensata per la ricerca e la cura delle malattie e dei disagi mentali e rivisita la nozione di "ingiustizia epistemica" (Fricker 2007), cercando di comprendere quanto e come essa possa entrare in gioco in quest'ambito particolare. L'ingiustizia epistemica, che viene distinta in testimoniale ed ermeneutica, può risultare amplificata nelle sue diverse dimensioni, così come potrebbe risultare penalizzata la dimensione partecipativa. Fare ricerca sull'IA per quanto riguarda salute e malattia mentale richiede di adottare approcci e sguardi differenti sulle persone che vivono la malattia mentale, favorendo ad esempio la consapevolezza della presenza di dinamiche di ingiustizia epistemica tra chi cura le persone e chi progetta le tecnologie per permettere loro di maturare uno sguardo diverso e una diversa comprensione della condizione specifica e complessa che il disagio e la malattia mentale generano.

Partendo infine da un excursus storico che ripercorre le tappe fondamentali dell'evoluzione dell'IA, Daniel Toscano Lopez sviluppa una

riflessione critica sull'Intelligenza Artificiale, cercando di identificarne la specificità e di capire quale valore essa possa avere in termini etici, sociali e politici. In una prospettiva filosofico–politica l'Intelligenza Artificiale sembra essere caratterizzata da una significativa ambivalenza: accanto alle indiscutibili abilità che essa offre, che fanno pensare ad una sorta di "eccezionalità" che la caratterizza, l'IA genera anche un sentimento di estraneità rispetto a quei fenomeni che vengono percepiti e considerati come più noti e consueti. Analizzando alcuni casi e scenari particolari, Daniel Toscano Lopez propone di osservare le evoluzioni e di pensare agli scenari futuri dell'IA in un'ottica più ampia, che sappia considerare la sua rilevanza biopolitica, accostando tali evoluzioni in un'ottica di responsabilità, di trasparenza, di attenzione pedagogica ed adottando infine, ma non da ultimo, come parametro di giudizio e di valutazione di queste tecnologie la cosiddetta "giustizia globale", orientata a promuovere tramite esse sostenibilità, democratizzazione e partecipazione, così come a prevenirne un uso geopolitico improprio.

A fronte del dibattito in corso sull'IA, che è molto intenso e significativo (Floridi e Cabitza 2021), resta aperto il bisogno di riflettere, confrontarsi e pensare. Come il rapporto con le macchine ci modifica, ad esempio, cosa cambia e potrebbe cambiare nel nostro modo di guardare il mondo, di percepire noi stessi e di entrare in relazione con gli altri? Le nuove tecnologie digitali e l'intelligenza artificiale sembrano in certo qual modo poterci potenziare, perché possono aumentare e amplificare le nostre capacità. Quel che non sappiamo però è come questo aumento di abilità e questo miglioramento di performance possa incidere sul nostro modo di conoscere, di pensare e di percepire, come lo possa modificare e trasformare. Ci possiamo chiedere — ancora — se al potenziamento delle nostre abilità cognitive possa corrispondere anche un miglioramento più complessivo, di noi in quanto esseri umani, un miglioramento della nostra umanità, nei termini ad esempio delle nostre capacità di sentire l'altro, di percepirne le difficoltà e coglierne i punti di forza, così come di intuirne le paure, le debolezze e le vulnerabilità, per esercitare abilità di comprensione e compassione, che forse rappresentano ancora — e ancor di più oggi — la vera sfida per la quale ci potremmo e ci dovremmo impegnare. Alla "Darmouth Conference" sull'Intelligenza Artificiale del 1956, nel corso della quale si era affrontata e

discussa la questione delle macchine intelligenti, ci si era interrogati sulla possibilità di simulare — e non di sostituire — l'intelligenza. Anche se oggi pare che una forma di "sostituzione" stia diventando e sia diventata possibile, resta forse la combinazione — specifica e sapiente — di artificiale e naturale quello che potrà permettere di ottenere forme e modalità nuove di riflettere e agire, anche per quanto riguarda le nostre capacità di interazione, di attenzione e comprensione.

Un'ulteriore preoccupazione emerge quando si entra nel dibattito più sociale e comunitario. Come si può pensare di garantire che il ricorso alle nuove tecnologie possa permettere lo sviluppo e l'esercizio di capacità fondamentali quali la creatività e l'immaginazione, consentendo di mantenere e promuovere la componente della speranza e la dimensione della fiducia, le abilità di interazione e quelle di autoriflessione, delle quali c'è e abbiamo un estremo bisogno, se vogliamo preservare la nostra capacità di essere e rimanere umani? Serve forse ancora, come è stato sottolineato riprendendo un termine e una riflessione di Henri Bergson (Gaillard 2024), dotarsi di un "supplemento d'anima", che ci permetta di ripensarci e spenderci considerando come promuovere ed esercitare abilità antiche e risalenti secondo modalità nuove, mettendole a servizio di forme d'attenzione per gli esseri e la vita umani, in un rapporto di scambio costante e in una dinamica di ridefinizione e trasformazione continua, che ci e che la caratterizzano.

Entro questo "supplemento d'anima" possiamo ricomprendere alcune tra le facoltà e le abilità che più forse ci caratterizzano, come l'immaginazione, la capacità di intuizione e di interpretazione, la dimensione e lo sguardo poetico con il quale noi esseri umani sappiamo talvolta guardare al mondo, alle persone, alla vita, l'abilità di sentire e cogliere la bellezza dell'altro, degli altri e di quanto ci circonda. Resta aperta anche, infine, la sfida al miglioramento e al potenziamento di quella dimensione che potremmo definire come la nostra capacità d'amare, che richiede una buona dose di intelligenza, di umiltà, di ironia e di … perdono.

Vediamo, vedremo come e quanto queste nuove tecnologie potranno migliorare e implementare tali capacità non solo di comprendere, ma anche di incontrare e incrociare lo sguardo di un altro essere umano, per coglierne la sua, e la nostra, profonda umanità.

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THE DILEMMA BETWEEN EUPHORIA AND FREEDOM IN RECOMMENDATION ALGORITHMS

James Brusseau

Abstract: Today's AI recommendation algorithms produce a human dilemma between euphoria and freedom. To elaborate, four ways that recommenders reshape experience are delineated. First, the human experience of convenience is tuned to euphoric perfection. Second, a kind of personal authenticity becomes capturable with algorithms and data. Third, a conception of human freedom emerges, one that promotes unfamiliar interests for users instead of satisfying those that already exist. Finally, a new human dilemma is posed between two types of personal identity. On one side, there are recommendation algorithms that locate a user's core preferences, and then reinforce that identity with options designed to resemble those that have already proved satisfying. The result is an algorithmic production of euphoria and authenticity. On the other side, there are recommenders that provoke unfamiliar interests and curiosities. These proposals deny the existence of an authentic self and instead promote new preferences and experiences. The result is a human freedom of new personal identity.

Gli attuali algoritmi di raccomandazione dell'intelligenza artificiale generano un dilemma umano tra euforia e libertà. Per chiarire tale dinamica, si delineano quattro modalità attraverso cui i sistemi di raccomandazione trasformano l'esperienza. In primo luogo, l'esperienza umana della comodità viene modulata fino a una perfezione euforica. In secondo luogo, una forma di autenticità personale diventa catturabile mediante algoritmi e dati. In terzo luogo, emerge una concezione della libertà umana che non si limita a soddisfare interessi già esistenti, ma promuove interessi ancora inesplorati da parte dell'utente. Infine, si configura un nuovo dilemma identitario tra due modalità di costruzione del sé. Da un lato, vi sono algoritmi che individuano le preferenze centrali dell'utente e le rafforzano offrendo opzioni simili a quelle già risultate gratificanti: ciò genera una produzione algoritmica di euforia e autenticità. Dall'altro lato, vi sono agenti di raccomandazione che sollecitano curiosità e interessi inediti: tali proposte negano l'esistenza di un sé autentico, promuovendo invece l'emergere di nuove preferenze e di nuove

esperienze. Il risultato è una forma di libertà fondata sulla possibilità di una rinnovata identità personale.

Keywords: Recommendation algorithms, Euphoria Convenience, Freedom, Personal identity, Discontinuity in identity

Parole chiave: Algoritmi di raccomandazione, Euforia Convenienza, Libertà, Identità personale, Discontinuità nell'identità

Recommendation algorithms are everywhere. They determine the songs we hear on Spotify, the films we watch on Netflix, the occupations we find on LinkedIn, the social circles we join on X, and who we will love — or, try to love — on dating platforms like Tinder. As more aspects of our lives move online, so too more of our experiences fall under the control of artificial intelligence suggestions.

A continuing longitudinal study of couples in the United States reveals that almost none met through online platforms in 1990, but today the percentage has climbed above 60, more than every other way of meeting combined. So, it is not just that increasing aspects of our human experiences are being touched by algorithmic filtering, it is that within each aspect the influence is expanding.

Once, human experience included recommendation algorithms, now the recommenders shape human experience.

The purpose of this paper is to begin mapping this reshaping, and to show how recommendation algorithms are changing the kinds of experiences we can have.

Specifically, four clusters of questions will be pursued. One concerns convenience. What potential for convenience emerges as recommendation technology advances? What does perfect convenience mean, and what will we sacrifice for the automated ability to get what we want? The second questions concern human authenticity. How much can predictive algorithms tell us about who we are as unique persons? What does uniqueness mean in this context? The third group of questions address human freedom. What kinds of human autonomy are enabled by recommenders? Which kinds are created? Finally, questions will be asked about personal identity. Today's recommendation algorithms are built on data about who we have already been. What does this mean for

who we could be, and how do recommenders intersect with the human potential to change, to become someone else?

1. Euphoria convenience

On two levels, recommendation algorithms produce user convenience. Prosaically, they streamline discovery. As digital curators, they make it easier to find engaging films on Netflix, professional opportunities on LinkedIn, matches on dating sites (Abbas *et al.* 2022).

Above this prosaic convenience, there is one more radical. It is not just that we get what we want faster, it is that we get it before we know that we want it. The logical endpoint of recommendation strategies is anticipation. After reducing the multitude of possibilities to a manageable set, and then after reducing that set to a single best choice, the remaining challenge is to offer that choice at the critical moment: just before it is sought. This convenience is so perfect, in other words, that there is no time for inconvenience. There is no time to ask what we want or how to get it.

We already have hints of this convenience when Netflix begins running a recommended movie on one side of the screen, just as the last movie ends on the screen's other side. The idea is that the viewing experience continues seamlessly. The question "What should we watch now," or, "What should we do now," never comes up. The satisfying answer is given before anything can be asked.

How much of our experience will be exposed to this euphoria of convenience remains an open question, one to be decided by advances in data gathering and processing to predict the oncoming psychological states of users (Yang *et al.* 2024). What is certain, though, is that wherever human behavioral cues can anticipate interests or needs, there is potential for algorithmic convenience that is not less than perfect, but *more* than perfect. The problem — if there is one — is not that the recommender is insufficiently good, but that it is too good.

It is so good that it breaks convenience's conceptual limit: convenience peaks as its own disappearance. Getting what we want before we know that we want it directly means the end of inconvenience, but it also means that the dialectical idea of convenience can find no

meaning: because one without the other is nothing, the entire question of convenience and inconvenience evaporates.

More, personal freedom disappears at the same instant. The act of freely choosing becomes redundant because getting what we want comes most easily by not making any choice at all. Stronger, choosing is a contradiction since any choice can only be inferior to what we already have, and so defeat the reason for making a selection in the first place. In the end, this convenience of perfect satisfaction is a state where having the freedom to choose is literally an inconvenience.

2. Authenticity

Euphoria convenience is also, potentially, a termination of the search for personal authenticity. For Martin Heidegger (1927), the idea of authenticity meant aligning our lives with our own unique purposes and projects. His ethical compass was not steered by external duties, it was not oriented by the metaphysical Good as Plato proposed, and it was not aligned with perfected rationality as Descartes and Kant advocated. Instead, authenticity was always internal and accessible. For each of us, authenticity meant discerning our own singular identity, and incarnating it as distinct from all those around us. To say, finally, that Heidegger's authenticity meant being true to oneself would be a gross simplification, but it would not be inaccurate.

The difficulty in Heidegger's philosophy is knowing ourselves. In a crowded world governed by social conventions and massified behaviors, it can be challenging for individuals to discern their own unique ambitions, fears, and hopes. To do that, Heidegger's instructions were to face our own death, to take it seriously. From that foundation of singularity and finitude — from the realization that no one can die for me — there comes a resoluteness. This is an ability to take responsibility for my own life, and to soberly determine what to do with the time that remains. This determining is the realization of authenticity. It is how I learn who I am, uniquely.

For euphoria convenience, the process of authenticity is very different. It is less human and more mathematical. Instead of existential

experiments there are algorithms. Instead of resolutely facing our own deaths, there is data organization. The authenticity question as posed by euphoria convenience is: can our true and identifying needs, fears, and desires be assembled for us by binary information machines? Can our authentic selves be discerned by filtering data about our lives? Can, finally, algorithms construct a picture of individual users that is as true (or truer) than the one that users can self-discover?

About data and recommenders, Apple CEO Tim Cook has said:

> Scraps of data, each one harmless enough on its own, are carefully assembled, synthesized, traded, and sold. This process creates an enduring digital profile and lets companies know you better than you may know yourself. (Evans 2018)

What is being contemplated here is the possibility that, just as calculators perfect our human ability to multiply and divide, recommendation algorithms could perfect our self–knowledge. More reliably than our inner–reflections, they could determine the occupations we are meant to fill, the places we are most organically suited to live, the women and men who will truly be our most compatible and supporting partners. And, they could do all that as reliably as calculators do math.

Of course, no one believe that today's recommendation algorithms can circumscribe users, and few believe that inert algorithms and data will ever be able to delineate human being, but it nevertheless remains true that authenticity is on the horizon of recommendation technology.

3. Freedom to choose

While recommendation algorithms numb human freedom with euphoria convenience, they can also vitalize freedom on two levels: choice and creation.

Choice freedom is the ability to make purposeful selections within the context of overabundant options. This is not the ability to choose

better or worse possibilities but, before that, the ability to make any meaningful selection.

The paradox of abundant choices overwhelming the human ability to make any intentional selection was rehearsed by Jorge Borges (1941) in his short story *Library of Babel*, which featured a library holding every alphabetically possible book, every combination of letters, spaces, and punctuation was written out and gathered as a volume on the endless shelves. This interminable book collection presented the tantalizing problem. The perfect novel and the ideal poem were in there, but actually *finding* them was practically impossible. Randomly pulling one or another volume from the countless stacks was futile, a mockery of the idea of choosing.

An analogous problem faces today's subscribers to Spotify and Tinder. The irresistible song, the perfect soulmate are literally there in your hand. But, distinguishing them from all the others in the electronic library is an initially hopeless task. Spotify (2024) has a catalog of 100 million songs, Tinder has 50 million users ("Wall Street Journal" 2024). With so many, there are no options at all. There is no intentional choosing until a provisional filtering reduces the random chaos to a manageable set (Ricci *et al.* 2022). When recommenders do that filtering, they are not just helping to make a choice, they are making meaningful choosing possible. They are converting a state of elective despair into an intentional reality where distinctions can be capably drawn, and where personal preferences can be expressed.

4. Freedom to choose differently

Besides making choosing itself possible, recommenders promote human freedom creatively, they open horizons of unfamiliar interests and experiences. Here, freedom is not so much about being able to make particular selections, but about opening new ranges of potential selecting.

When a restaurant recommender proposes a location that is unfamiliar not only because it has not yet been patronized, but also because of the style of food it serves, then it is proposing a new *kind* of place.

And when that happens it is not just a single restaurant that opens for the user, but a whole set of subsequent possibilities not previously envisioned. So, a pasta lover may be pleased to find that an AI recommender has proposed a previously unknown Italian restaurant, but it is a more creative possibility when an Asian–Italian fusion restaurant is suggested because dining there may open the way to a deeper interest in Asian cuisine, and then to an entirely unexpected preference and subsequently a host of new restaurant possibilities. A whole set of Asian restaurants that would never have been entertained are now spun into the recommendation funnel because of that single, original and creative algorithmic proposal.

Analogously, an online learning platform that had been responding to a user's established interest in conventional, representational art may recommend a lecture on Pablo Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907), and that work may be described as a precursor to cubism. Then, that recommended subject may lead to another lecture on Georges Braque's *Houses at L'Estaque* (1908), which is sometimes understood as paradigmatic cubism. The extended result may be a lengthening set of learning opportunities stretching through the broad Cubist artistic movement. Technically, this passage would include discussions of geometric shapes, and the origins of influence, and the abandonment of traditional perspective in painting, but in term of human freedom, the movement of recommendations would be radically creative. A new horizon of art appreciation and interest opens. Because of the freedom recommendation, innumerable subsequent paintings become visible to explore.

Of course, these kinds of serendipitous moments are common in everyday life. Anyone who has visited an art museum has had the experience of randomly wandering into an exhibition room and discovering an unfamiliar artistic style. From there, a greater interest may grow. Or, maybe it will recede and be forgotten. Regardless, there is a discovery freedom that commonly exists in physical life. The question is: How can this type of discovery be produced by algorithmic recommendations?

5. The Curiosity Engine

Recommendation system research in the area of discovery and creative freedom has been pursued under the title of curiosity (Ethics Workshop 2025), as well as serendipity (Fu *et al.* 2023). In both cases, what is sought are recommendations that are unfamiliar but also provocative and engaging.

Producing this curiosity is practically challenging, and also internally contradictory. The practical challenge derives from how typical recommendation algorithms are designed: they recycle established interests and preferences. The central strategy is "collaborative filtering," which means the recommenders screen for resemblances between options that a user has already enjoyed, and options that have not yet been selected. Then, once a similarity has been established, the resembling option is suggested (Munson *et al.* 2025).

The strategy of observing what a user likes and then finding more of the same makes intuitive sense. For someone enjoying a *Mission Impossible* film, the next offering may be another Tom Cruise action movie. For an aficionado of Dave Brubeck's jazz there may follow a Bill Evans track. In any case, what matters is that suggestions are built in a way that succeeds by *precluding* creative freedom. On the practical level, the entire process flows in the opposite direction, away from new possibilities and toward those already tried and proven. Inescapably, novel opportunities are filtered out as a byproduct of how recommenders are designed to function.

Besides being practically difficult, there is also a conceptual obstacle blocking recommendations geared for curiosity. It resembles the attempt to predict the unpredictable in the sense that recommendations must fall outside the scope of already established interests and behaviors, but they must nevertheless be inviting and attractive. They must be unexpected but also reassuring. Joining these qualities is challenging since we customarily find a proposal to be appealing *because* it resembles another that has already proven satisfying. However, if the aim is to generate dissimilar recommendations — options unlike previous satisfactions — then it is hard to know what elements of that unknown possibility will be agreeable, and which will not. The idea that

a suggestion be both unfamiliar and engaging is almost a contradiction in terms.

To manage the problem and promote serendipity, some platforms pepper their recommendations with random selections (Munson *et al*. 2025). The hope is to intermittently present unfamiliar options that spur a new interest. Superficially, the strategy makes sense, but it also seems self–defeating: if a user is employing a recommender system, doesn't offering random possibilities undercut the entire idea? Isn't the original reason for recommenders precisely to escape haphazard selection?

One way to generate unfamiliar recommendations that are also engaging with a frequency that is higher than random has been explored under the title of the Curiosity Engine (Ethics Workshop 2025). And, one concept central to that work is antagonistic filtering (Brusseau 2025), which uses the same data and mechanisms of collaborative filtering, but adjusts the algorithmic priorities to privilege options that initially seem dissimilar to established preferences. The process starts from users divided into sets of divergent interests. Next, and across those separate groups, some few similarities are sought. Then, recommendations can be passed between them. These are suggestions that originate outside of established preferences, but that nevertheless promise some resonance with current tastes.

This resonance is not the comforting attraction of the familiar, but a response to provocation. When something is different but not entirely foreign, it can attract as a challenge, as a stimulation, as a subject of curiosity.

Because this is not a technical paper, the details of antagonistic filtering are secondary to the aim, which is to show that recommenders can promote user freedom by opening new horizons of interest.

6. Personal identity: Who we are and who we could be

Collaborative and antagonistic filtering move human experience in different directions. Going one way, recommenders are tuned for convenience, euphoria, and authenticity. They reinforce users' established preferences, and they create engagement through familiarity. Going the other way, recommenders are tuned to curiosity and creative freedom.

They function by generating interests that break away from who the user has been, and they produce engagement by being provocative.

This divergence is also a split in personal identity. It divides how identity is conceived. In one direction, the ideal individual life leads to an encounter with the true self, and then to the endeavor to remain consonant with that single identity. In the other direction, there is no true self, and the humanistic goal of recommender systems is to help users discover ways of becoming someone else. Instead of reinforcing what someone is, recommenders locate new identities to explore.

There is no indubitable way to select between these two human alternatives in today's digital reality. But, the contemporary default leans toward the first. The ethical and philosophical goal of establishing and stabilizing a person's single identity coheres well with the technical strategies that most recommendation systems currently employ. In accord with widespread collaborative filtering techniques, platforms seek their users' deep and true preferences, and then reinforce them by recommending similar offerings. Of course, the complexities of human personalities and corporate interests will blur this conclusion, but the foundational idea remains. The project is to identify and fortify a user's core inclinations.

Contrastingly, if human experience is turned toward discovery and the creation of new personal identities, then innovative work in recommendation algorithms will be required. Most important, research will need to proceed in the direction of provocative and serendipitous recommendations. The task will be to provoke user curiosity about new ways of being instead of reinforcing tastes and behaviors that define the identity that already exists.

Accompanying this technical research in the generation of curiosity, there is connected philosophical and ethical work to be done in the area of discontinuous personal identity. The theoretical question to be investigated is: How can selfhood be conceived as fundamentally disruptive? How can it be, in other words, that the basic condition is one of identities splitting away from their own pasts, with a multiplicity that is innate rather than being the result of imperfect or incomplete self–understanding? One source for guidance is David Hume's notion of selfhood as a bundle of interests, memories, and psychological states (Hume 1739). Another source is Gilles Deleuze's work on rhizomatic

identities (Deleuze and Guattari 1980). A third direction is the idea of disintegration as the deepest source of selfhood (Brusseau 2019), and also the conception of genhumanism (Brusseau 2023).

Besides the technical work in recommendation algorithms and the philosophical work in fragmenting identity, there are pathways to open in law. Carlo Casonato (2023) has done introductory work in the development of a new human right: the right to discontinuity. The broad idea resembles earlier European stipulations in the area of privacy and the right to be forgotten. As currently established, the right to be forgotten is negative in the sense that it endows individuals with the ability to disappear from online reality and corporate data. Concretely, people can request the deletion of their personally identifying information from third–party databases. This disappearance — the forgetting — *is* the aim. By contrast, the right to discontinuity starts with the forgetting, but the aim is the ability to re–emerge online with new preferences and as a new collection of personally identifying information. So, the right to be forgotten is the idea that I can stop being who I am in digital reality, and the right to discontinuity is the idea that I can go on to become someone else.

Finally, dilemmas about the nature of human identity, about who we are and who we can be, are as old as the study of philosophy. What is different today, however, is that these questions are also choices that will be made for us — and done to us — by the AI technology of recommendation algorithms.

7. Conclusion

Recommendation systems interact with human identity in two ways: they can find new possibilities within the spectrum of our expectations, and they can produce new spectrums of expectation. The first corresponds with recommenders as providing convenience and authenticity, while the second corresponds with recommenders as generators of curiosity and human freedom. Further, the dilemma is exclusionary, it is between the contentment of who we are at the cost of freedom, and the freedom to become someone else but at the cost of a convenience that is euphoric.

The results of this study are summarized in table 1.

Human Experience of Recommendation Algorithms	
Euphoria Convenience	• The perfect choice offered at the critical moment: just before it is sought. There is no time for inconvenience, no time to ask what is wanted or how to get it. • Euphoria convenience means the freedom to choose is literally an inconvenience.
Digital Authenticity	• Recommendation algorithms perfect self-knowledge from established behaviors.
Collaborative Filtering	• Generating recommendations and future preferences by recycling accurate understandings of past interests.
Antagonistic Filtering ("Creative Freedom")	• Unfamiliar but engaging recommendations. • Recommendations that open ranges of potential recommending by provoking curiosity about new interests and experiences, as opposed to reinforcing established preferences and habits.
Personal Identity & Recommendation Algorithms	• Recommenders can generate new possibilities within the spectrum of current expectations, or they can produce new spectrums of expectation. The first corresponds with euphoric convenience and authenticity, the second with the human freedom of antagonistic filtering. • The dilemma is between the contentment of being one person, and curiosity about becoming someone else.

Table 1: The human experiences of recommendation algorithms.

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DOBBIAMO *CREDERE* NELL'INTELLIGENZA ARTIFICIALE? UN DIALOGO PER COMPRENDERE IL PRESENTE CON MICHELA MILANO E PAOLO TRAVERSO

Paolo Costa, Eugenia Lancellotta e Boris Rähme

Abstract: This is the transcript of a round table discussion on the topic of trustworthy Artificial Intelligence (AI) organized and conducted by three FBK–ISR researchers involved in the project "Resilient Beliefs: Religion and Beyond." The experts consulted are Michela Milano and Paolo Traverso, two leading scholars in the field of AI. Starting from the notion of resilient belief, topics such as the difference between human and artificial intelligence, the danger of replacing people with intelligent machines even in jobs traditionally considered creative, the geopolitical dimension of the AI Revolution, the legal regulation of AI hazards and the goal of consistent human oversight, how to create an epistemic and social environment conducive to the human–centric development of new digital technologies, are discussed.

Questa è la trascrizione di una tavola rotonda sul tema della *trustworthy AI* organizzata e condotta da tre ricercatori di FBK–ISR impegnati nel progetto "Resilient Beliefs: Religion and Beyond". Gli esperti consultati sono Michela Milano e Paolo Traverso, due studiosi di frontiera nel campo dell'Intelligenza Artificiale. Proprio a partire dalla nozione di convinzione resiliente vengono discussi temi quali: la differenza tra intelligenza umana e artificiale; il pericolo di sostituzione delle persone con macchine intelligenti anche in lavori tradizionalmente considerati creativi; la dimensione geopolitica della Rivoluzione dell'Intelligenza Artificiale; la regolamentazione giuridica dei rischi dell'IA e l'obiettivo di un sistematico *human oversight*; la creazione di un ambiente epistemico e sociale favorevole a uno sviluppo umanocentrico delle nuove tecnologie digitali.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Resilient Beliefs, Geopolitical challenges, Human-centeredness, EU AI Act

Parole chiave: Intelligenza Artificiale, Convinzioni resilienti, Sfide geopolitiche, Centralità dell'umano, Regolamento UE sull'IA

> Che cosa ci preoccupa davvero nell'Intelligenza Artificiale? Qual è esattamente il problema?
>
> Nello Cristianini

1. La cornice teorica

Prima di dare il via al dibattito con Michela Milano e Paolo Traverso, vale la pena dire qualcosa sulla cornice dell'evento[1]. Il dialogo con due esperti di una delle trasformazioni tecnologiche che più scuotono l'opinione pubblica oggi è anche l'occasione per onorare la conclusione di un progetto di ricerca biennale intitolato "Resilient Beliefs: Religion and Beyond", finanziato dall'Euregio Science Fund e condotto in collaborazione con l'Università di Innsbruck e lo Studio Teologico Accademico di Bressanone.

Che cosa sono i "resilient beliefs"? I *resilient beliefs* sono le convinzioni tenaci che ciascuno di noi ha e a sostegno delle quali non servono particolari evidenze (pensiamo, per esempio, alla credenza che non sia possibile respirare sott'acqua) o che resistono alle evidenze contrarie (pensiamo, ad esempio, alla fiducia nell'esistenza del libero arbitrio). Siccome le credenze religiose sono un caso paradigmatico di convinzioni resilienti, nel disegnare il progetto abbiamo pensato che potesse essere interessante partire dal modo in cui funzionano queste credenze per investigare altri tipi di convinzioni resilienti, dalla fede nella democrazia alle teorie del complotto, dalla fiducia cieca nella crescita economica alle manie di persecuzione. Uno degli obiettivi della ricerca era proprio l'identificazione di criteri per distinguere tipologie buone e cattive di resilienza delle opinioni.

Più lo utilizzavamo e più ci è parso che il concetto di *resilient belief* avesse la capacità di illuminare una serie di fenomeni interessanti anche dal punto di vista, diciamo così, "pedagogico". Per questo nella primavera del 2024 abbiamo organizzato un breve ciclo di incontri con due classi IV dell'Istituto Artigianelli di Trento. Lavorando fianco a fianco

(1) Pubblichiamo qui la trascrizione, rivista dai partecipanti, della tavola rotonda tenutasi a Trento, nell'Aula grande di FBK, il 21 gennaio 2025 e intitolata "Dobbiamo *credere* nell'Intelligenza Artificiale". La ricerca che sta alla base di questo lavoro è stata condotta all'interno dell'Interregional Project Network IPN 175 "Resilient Beliefs: Religion and Beyond" (2022-2024), finanziato dall'Euregio Science Fund.

con gli studenti abbiamo provato a far emergere le loro convinzioni resilienti riguardo alla trasformazione tecnologica con cui tutti dobbiamo fare i conti oggi: la rivoluzione digitale e, soprattutto, i progressi impetuosi nel campo dell'Intelligenza Artificiale. L'obiettivo, in breve, era aiutare gli studenti a mettere a fuoco la nozione di credenza resiliente; sforzarsi di portare a galla casi esemplari di convinzioni forti; spingerli a confrontarle con quelle dei propri compagni; provare a capire su quali tipo di evidenze poggiassero; ecc.

Dal lavoro svolto in classe sono emersi numerosi spunti che abbiamo deciso di usare come filo rosso per conversare con due esperti del campo, le cui convinzioni resilienti circa i recenti sviluppi della *Computer science* sono della tipologia migliore, quella, cioè, basata su informazioni affidabili e buone ragioni. *Michela Milano* è professoressa ordinaria nel Dipartimento di Informatica, Scienza e Ingegneria dell'Università di Bologna e Direttrice del Centre for Digital Society di FBK. La sua attività di ricerca riguarda l'Intelligenza Artificiale con un focus particolare sui sistemi di supporto alle decisioni. In questo settore ha raggiunto visibilità internazionale collaborando con diversi gruppi di ricerca, dentro e fuori l'Università. È stata vicepresidente dell'European Association of Artificial Intelligence. *Paolo Traverso* è stato Direttore del Centro di Ricerca Tecnologie dell'Informazione e Comunicazione di FBK dal 2007 al 2020. Ha diretto diversi progetti di Intelligenza Artificiale per l'Industria Digitale, per la Salute e il Benessere e per la Pubblica Amministrazione. Ha pubblicato oltre cento articoli scientifici — su riviste internazionali e atti di convegni — ed è anche co–autore di tre libri di testo sulla Pianificazione Automatica e l'Intelligenza Artificiale.

2. Convinzioni resilienti I: la questione dell'intelligenza

Partiamo dal tema dei temi quando si discute di macchine intelligenti. Per cominciare, con gli studenti ci siamo soffermati sull'aura che circonda il concetto di "intelligenza". Molti di loro erano effettivamente inclini a collegare l'intelligenza a qualche forma di creatività. Da questo punto di vista, essere intelligenti significa essere capaci di rispondere in

maniera non banale a una situazione problematica, escogitare soluzioni, per l'appunto, ingegnose a problemi complessi. Una macchina che sa giocare bene a scacchi, sa tradurre velocemente o addirittura scrivere un testo, comporre una canzone o dipingere, suscita meraviglia perché riesce a fare cose che ci aspetteremmo soltanto da una persona.

Molte applicazioni dell'AI sono lì a dimostrarci che l'intelligenza umana può essere simulata da macchine in grado di supervisionare e combinare autonomamente moltissime informazioni in pochissimo tempo per risolvere in maniera efficiente problemi specifici. Ma, hanno osservato molti studenti, si tratta pur sempre di un'intelligenza senza cognizione, cioè senza discernimento, e senza sentimenti, in cui, per esempio, non sembra avere rilevanza la distinzione tra bene e male o quella tra reale e non reale – distinzioni che sembrano invece fondamentali per noi umani. La dimensione più tipica dell'intelligenza umana si direbbe essere, dunque, fuori dalla portata delle macchine. Che tipo di intelligenza è un'intelligenza senza interiorità? È una nuova forma d'intelligenza? Un'intelligenza aliena?

Paolo Traverso: Comincio col dire che sono d'accordo con gli studenti. L'intelligenza artificiale è un'intelligenza senza discernimento e senza emozioni. Certo, abbiamo macchine capaci di fare "sentiment analysis" e stabilire se un testo esprime, per dire, paura o rabbia. Non possiamo però sostenere che le macchine, per quanto intelligenti siano, capiscano che cosa si provi ad arrabbiarsi perché qualcosa che credevamo reale non esiste o indignarsi perché qualcosa a cui attribuiamo un valore speciale viene maltrattato. D'altronde, si tratta di una forma d'intelligenza i cui risultati strabilianti sono stati ottenuti in maniera molto diversa da come avviene nel caso dell'intelligenza umana. Al famoso ChatGPT sono stati dati in pasto miliardi di testi "intelligenti" dai quali, poi, grazie alla teoria della probabilità, è possibile ricavare risposte intelligenti alle nostre domande e curiosità. Il meccanismo, in fondo, è quello di un "riempibuco" statistico.

Possiamo definire tutto ciò "creatività"? Sì, certo, queste macchine possono produrre testi, poesie, canzoni, immagini che prima non esistevano. Un giorno faranno anche film. Ci siamo già molto vicini con Sora,

l'applicazione di OpenAI. Lo stupore è quindi giustificato. È un'intelligenza che emerge ed emerge in maniere diverse, anche perché i metodi di addestramento sono diversi. Ma, come non si stanca mai di ricordarci Nello Cristianini (2025), l'intelligenza prende sempre forme diverse e ha persino poco senso provare a immaginare la natura di un'intelligenza aliena. Sarà sicuramente un'intelligenza totalmente diversa dalla nostra, anche se noi fatichiamo a immaginarcela così *diversa* dalla nostra. È chiaramente un difetto strutturale della nostra immaginazione.

Anche se sono in molti a farlo, non ha perciò senso chiedere scusa a ChatGPT o insultarla. Alle nostre scuse o insulti può infatti reagire, ma non può certo dargli l'importanza che gli diamo noi. E non mi sembra che abbia nemmeno molto senso chiedersi se dovremo prima o poi dare la cittadinanza a un robot. Alla fine, dietro ChatGPT ci sono solo bit, anche se la combinazione di questi bit, grazie all'enorme potere computazionale delle nuove macchine, può produrre effetti stupefacenti. Ma "stupefacente" è poi davvero sinonimo di "creativo"? Sappiamo tutti come scrive le poesie ChatGPT: i programmatori hanno inserito un parametro per cui, anziché cercare sempre la parola più probabile, periodicamente ne viene scelta una a caso. È creatività poetica questa? Non lo so. So però che ci sono persone che usano le poesie scritte con l'IA per dare forma a emozioni ed esprimere sentimenti. C'è un difetto di autenticità in questi casi? A me il sospetto rimane, ma vale comunque la pena di continuare a interrogarci.

Personalmente, comunque, a me preme soprattutto che continuiamo a riflettere sulla possibilità di fare cose buone e utili grazie a queste nuove tecnologie. Restiamo nell'ambito della scuola. Ovvio, nel caso di uno studente che si serve di ChatGPT solo per fare i compiti senza imparare nulla da quello che fa ha poco senso parlare di intelligenza aumentata. Il discorso è diverso per un ragazzo o una ragazza che scelgano di usare questo nuovo strumento allo scopo di accrescere le proprie possibilità di apprendimento. Se ci pensate, quanto sto dicendo riguardo a ChatGPT vale anche per la calcolatrice: se mi sostituisce e basta, perdo competenze, se mi affianca, me le allarga. E quando dico "affiancare" mi riferisco al fatto che chi la usa non deve mai rinunciare alla propria capacità critica e quindi, in caso di bisogno, alla possibilità di discernere un mal funzionamento dello strumento.

Discernimento, appunto. Per quanto riguarda, poi, la distinzione tra il bene e il male, già adesso si può fare in modo che la macchina la incorpori nel proprio funzionamento, ad esempio inserendo dei paletti, i cosiddetti *guardrails*, che escludono dalle risposte corrette quelle che per noi superano i confini della decenza o del decoro morale perché razziste, offensive, violente. Ma sono curioso di sentire che cos'ha da dire Michela in proposito.

Michela Milano: Penso anch'io che le due forme d'intelligenza, naturale e artificiale, siano molto diverse. A dire il vero, fin dall'inizio, e per inizio intendo il 1956, cioè l'anno in cui è stato effettivamente lanciato in una conferenza a Dartmouth il progetto di creare macchine intelligenti, l'obiettivo non era quello di *sostituire*, ma di *simulare* l'intelligenza umana. Poco importa, insomma, cosa ci sta dietro. L'importante è che all'esterno — ai "morsetti" come ci piace dire — il risultato sia simile.

Pensiamo ai sistemi di pianificazione. Pianificare, cioè disporre secondo una sequenza logica un certo numero di azioni, è una cosa che anche i bambini molto piccoli sanno fare benissimo. Per una macchina, tuttavia, pianificare è un compito molto difficile. Per raggiungere lo scopo deve operare in modo sintattico, cioè lineare, mettendo insieme dei blocchetti. Il risultato, alla fine, è lo stesso, ma i modi di arrivarci sono totalmente diversi. Ragionando pragmaticamente, non c'è motivo di scandalizzarsi. Ci limitiamo a prenderne atto.

Lo stesso atteggiamento laico lo adotterei anche rispetto alla questione dei sentimenti. Do per scontato che le macchine non provino sentimenti. Ma questo è necessariamente un difetto? Un'intelligenza senza sentimento potrebbe esserci utile in qualche caso. Pensiamo ai sistemi di IA che stiamo progettando per supportare un processo decisionale, ad esempio per stabilire un ordine di precedenza nelle liste d'attesa per i trapianti d'organo. Non c'è dubbio che il processo decisionale umano è molto più complicato dei processi automatizzati. Ma "complicato" non vuol necessariamente dire più efficiente o giusto. In qualche caso un processo decisionale più asettico, più oggettivo può essere esattamente ciò di cui abbiamo bisogno o ciò a cui aspiriamo. Il che non esclude che, quando serve, non si possano poi inserire nei modelli dei

vincoli etici per evitare che l'asetticità delle decisioni produca delle mostruosità morali (che, per altro, non è che manchino nelle normali decisioni degli esseri umani in carne e ossa…).

Vi racconto un aneddoto per darvi un'idea di quanto le emozioni umane interferiscano con il nostro rapporto con le macchine. A Bologna abbiamo un piccolo robot, il NAO. È un cosino di dimensioni ridotte, poco più di cinquanta centimetri. Lo portiamo in giro per aiutarci nell'opera di divulgazione. Le reazioni che suscita NAO nelle persone sono rivelatrici. Per i bambini è ovviamente un giocattolo. Per i maschi, in genere, è una diavoleria che li appassiona, come fosse una moto di grande cilindrata. Nelle donne spesso suscita l'istinto materno, perché ha due occhioni che ricordano quelli di un bambino. Se tutto ciò succede a questo livello basilare, figuriamoci se possiamo sperare di separare l'intelligenza e i sentimenti nel nostro rapporto con le macchine…

Paolo Traverso: D'altra parte, se posso aggiungere una postilla a quanto ha appena detto Michela, la relazione tra le persone e le cose è sempre carica di sentimenti, proiezioni, strani giochi della mente. Ne abbiamo ragionato proprio in questa aula qualche settimana fa. Le cose non sono mai solo "cose" per noi umani. L'importante è non farsi sopraffare da questo gioco di specchi e non perdere di vista la distinzione tra ciò che è tipicamente nostro e quello che stiamo progettando e costruendo proprio per affiancare, supportare e, se possibile, migliorare le nostre doti e qualità, come pure per compensare i nostri difetti.

3. Convinzioni resilienti II: la competizione con l'intelligenza umana

Discutendo con gli studenti sono emerse spesso — forse addirittura più spesso di quanto ci aspettassimo — inquietudini legate alla diffusione delle nuove tecnologie. Sono convinzioni robuste che riguardano, anzitutto, il loro futuro lavorativo. È viva nei giovani con cui abbiamo dialogato la percezione del rischio di una progressiva sostituzione del lavoro umano. Anche del lavoro creativo. Un esempio ricorrente che ci veniva fatto concerne le mansioni classiche del grafico pubblicitario.

Non di rado, comunque, l'ansia era bilanciata dalla speranza che le nuove tecnologie possano semplificare e quindi migliorare il lavoro, delegando alla macchina le parti più ripetitive e meccaniche o favorendo la gestione simultanea di più processi. Nello scenario più ottimistico, le nuove macchine intelligenti potrebbero addirittura servire da stimolo e spingere le persone a sviluppare nuove competenze, nuovi *skills*.

Un'altra preoccupazione che abbiamo riscontrato ruota attorno al rischio di una crescente dipendenza degli individui dalle macchine, della cessione, cioè, alle macchine di una parte significativa delle capacità umane più preziose (attenzione, pazienza, iniziativa, senso della realtà). Il timore, insomma, è che le macchine finiscano per dettare alle persone i tempi di vita e influire sulla qualità delle loro relazioni. In un gruppo di discussione ha fatto capolino la parola "brainrot", come a dire che i computer hanno in sé qualcosa di vampiresco. In qualche caso, la preoccupazione scaturiva da un'esperienza diretta. Già oggi l'IA è presente nel lavoro scolastico, ma non è sempre vissuta come un sostegno affidabile. Da qui nasce il timore che possa rendere le persone meno intelligenti, impigrendole, rendendole passive, disincentivandole a studiare – timore che si accompagna alla paura per gli effetti che la diffusione dell'IA potrebbe avere sui bambini, sulla loro crescita e capacità di relazionarsi con gli altri.

Michela Milano: Il rischio della sostituzione del lavoro umano è un rischio concreto, non dobbiamo nascondercelo. Se facciamo il confronto con le precedenti rivoluzioni tecnologiche (l'invenzione della macchina a vapore, l'automazione, ecc.), la vera novità è che con l'*AI Revolution* vengono messi a rischio non solo i lavori di fatica, ma anche quelli che una volta chiamavamo i lavori di concetto. Questo è un fatto assodato.

Verso questa rivoluzione si possono poi assumere due atteggiamenti opposti, ambedue legittimi. Il primo è una sacrosanta diffidenza. Uno vuole vederci chiaro e sceglie perciò di muoversi con la massima cautela. Il timore è che possa avvenire una delega completa alla macchina, anche in materia di decisioni che hanno un impatto rilevante sulla vita delle persone. I diffidenti sono spaventati, in particolare, dal rischio di una totale deresponsabilizzazione degli esperti, di coloro che sono

chiamati a dare una direzione alla società. Per fare fronte a questo pericolo, l'UE ha insistito molto sul principio della supervisione umana, dello "human oversight".

Il secondo atteggiamento è più ottimistico. In questo caso, anziché come una rivale, la macchina appare piuttosto come un'alleata. Recentemente sono stata coinvolta in un progetto che mi ha consentito di entrare in contatto con aziende che producono ceramiche. I designer che ho conosciuto erano in genere felici di potersi concentrare solo sulle fasi iniziali del processo creativo, quello più appassionante, allorché si apre effettivamente un nuovo orizzonte. Lo sviluppo dell'intuizione originale, alla fine, è per loro meno interessante, più meccanico, e le macchine possono svolgerlo più velocemente e con precisione assoluta.

La mia impressione è che l'avvento dei *Large Language Models* abbia dischiuso effettivamente nuove possibilità al genere umano. Una di quelle che viene sistematicamente sottovalutata è, secondo me, la possibilità di lavorare un po' meno, tenendoci la parte più creativa del lavoro.

Paolo Traverso: Anch'io vorrei concentrarmi sul lato positivo della faccenda. Ho in mente un esempio che, più che alla sostituzione, ci fa pensare a un allargamento degli orizzonti che non ha precedenti nella storia. Sto pensando al futuro della Sanità pubblica e, vista la crescita esponenziale della popolazione anziana, alla necessità di puntare massicciamente sulla prevenzione delle malattie. Pensate solo a quello che potrebbe fare un sistema d'intelligenza artificiale in grado di analizzare l'immagine della retina di una persona che soffre di diabete e dirci se si tratta di una retina sana o malata. Solo in Italia ci sono più di due milioni e mezzo di persone che soffrono di diabete e corrono il rischio di sviluppare una retinopatia, che è una complicazione classica di questa patologia. Queste persone non sono visitate come si dovrebbe perché non ci sono abbastanza specialisti per effettuare le necessarie visite con regolarità. È un fatto che, senza questo tipo d'innovazione tecnologica, non avremo mai le risorse umane e finanziarie per portare avanti una campagna di prevenzione a tappeto. Solo le nuove macchine intelligenti possono consentirci di tradurre in pratica la massima secondo cui prevenire è meglio che curare, realizzando così il sogno di una sanità veramente pubblica.

Personalmente interpreto in questo modo il principio della supervisione umana sposato dall'*AI Act* europeo. Esseri umani e macchine devono essere alleati, e a questo scopo bisogna fare in modo che i primi affianchino le seconde e le aiutino ad aggiustare sistematicamente i loro risultati. È quello che noi informatici chiamiamo "Human in the loop": un circolo d'intelligenza in cui umano e artificiale sono entrambi indispensabili.

Offrire occhi instancabili ai medici non significa rimpiazzare il loro lavoro, che resta preziosissimo. Ma non fraintendetemi. Con ciò non voglio dire che il pericolo della sostituzione non esista. Molte persone, in fondo, svolgono mansioni "intelligenti", ma non così intelligenti da non poter essere sostituite da macchine intelligenti. Gestire la transizione non sarà facile. Come diceva Michela, bisognerà ragionare su una riorganizzazione complessiva del lavoro, della formazione, e del suo peso nella vita delle persone.

Ritornando ai *resilient beliefs* degli studenti, qualcuno di loro si è aggrappato all'idea che l'IA non possa essere davvero innovativa, che solo l'arte sia veramente creativa. La genialità, però, è patrimonio di pochi. Viene perciò da chiedersi che cosa ne sarà delle forme di creatività più "artigianali", ad esempio il fumetto o la musica pop. Perderanno la loro "unicità", la loro aura, e quindi anche il prestigio e i relativi riconoscimenti economici? Non è che i programmatori, i *computer scientists* finiranno per monopolizzare gran parte della qualità "attiva", non meccanica, del lavoro?

Michela Milano: Personalmente non vedo questo pericolo. Chi escogita gli algoritmi che consentono alle macchine di imparare ha pur sempre bisogno di dati con cui addestrare i computer e questi dati sono il frutto della creatività umana. La fonte primaria dell'intelligenza restiamo noi umani. L'orizzonte non è quindi quello della sostituzione, ma della co-creazione: non *substitution*, ma *co-creation*. Quando parliamo d'intelligenza aumentata pensiamo proprio a questo scenario: mettere a disposizione delle persone più creative strumenti nuovi che potenzino la loro creatività liberando tempo ed energia.

Paolo Traverso: Sì, anch'io concentrerei l'attenzione soprattutto sull'estensione del campo di possibilità. Pensate alla musica. Un nostro

ricercatore, Michele Baldo, ha dato vita a una start-up rivolta proprio ai giovani musicisti. In questo caso la macchina viene in soccorso dei musicisti in erba perché procura loro, a costi infinitamente più bassi, tutti quei supporti tecnici e musicali che una volta erano accessibili solo ai musicisti già affermati. Insomma, dà loro una base su cui esercitare al massimo la propria creatività. La macchina in questo caso funge da supporto e da stimolo. Si affianca al musicista e lo sprona a dare il meglio di sé. Se volete, rappresenta anche una sfida, perché toglie di mezzo ogni ostacolo esterno alla creatività e, quindi, ogni scusa.

4. Convinzioni resilienti III: le implicazioni politiche

Ci resta da affrontare una delle questioni più spinose sul tavolo oggi: quella del rapporto tra Intelligenza Artificiale e politica. Anche gli studenti, con la loro tipica sensibilità per le questioni etiche, hanno l'impressione che oggi siamo chiamati a misurarci con gigantesche questioni geopolitiche. Nello specifico, molti di loro temono che lo sviluppo dell'IA finisca per essere guidato solo dalla ricerca del profitto o che venga usata come strumento di potere, come arma contro specifici gruppi di persone, o per scopi sbagliati (ad esempio per controllare la gente, violandone sistematicamente la sfera della privacy). Sono poi consapevoli del rischio che una simulazione sempre più accurata dell'intelligenza umana possa distorcere la realtà creando confusione nelle persone. Secondo alcuni la capacità di simulazione delle macchine intelligenti andrebbe contrastata con piccole o grandi precauzioni, ad esempio evitando che i robot assumano sembianze umane e facciano così leva sui meccanismi dell'empatia. Il principale pericolo, insomma, è che la nuova tecnologia sfugga al controllo dei suoi creatori, producendo un classico effetto Frankenstein. In generale, molti studenti oscillano tra il timore che l'accelerazione di questa nuova rivoluzione tecnologica aumenti il rischio di catastrofi inedite per il genere umano e il sospetto che, alla fine, anche l'esito dell'*AI Revolution*, come qualsiasi altra rivoluzione tecnologica avvenuta nel corso della storia umana, dipenderà dall'uso che ne faranno le persone che hanno in mano le leve del potere.

Un modo per riassumere la questione è constatare che ci troviamo di fronte a tre grandi alternative: (a) la via del *Big State* (Cina); (b) quella della *Big democracy* (UE); quella del *Big business* (USA). Sappiamo che l'Europa ha sposato la prospettiva di una via democratica, partecipativa, umanocentrica all'IA, promuovendo un enorme sforzo legislativo a più livelli, ispirato all'ideale dell'*accountability* democratica. Sicuramente è uno sforzo di cui andare fieri. Ma qual è il vostro parere sugli effetti reali dell'*AI Act* europeo sulla ricerca? Abbiamo compiuto qualche passo significativo nella direzione di una *trustworthy AI*? Se veramente ci preme avere un'Intelligenza Artificiale centrata sull'umano, non dovremmo cercare anzitutto di impedire la concentrazione del potere politico, economico, mediatico nelle mani di pochi tecnomiliardari?

Michela Milano: Partiamo dall'*AI Act*. Non c'è dubbio che abbiamo assistito a un grande sforzo della Commissione europea. È partito un po' tardi, ma lo sforzo è stato ammirevole. Ci sono lacune, ma è un buon punto di partenza. L'idea generale è che l'IA vada regolata non solo rispetto agli usi intenzionalmente malevoli, ma anche tenendo presente le conseguenze indesiderate che derivano dai pregiudizi diffusi attualmente nella società. I tentativi di correzione non sono facili, ma non per colpa delle macchine. Il problema principale è come siamo fatti noi esseri umani. Il vero guaio sono i nostri *bias*, cioè i pregiudizi contro le donne, contro le minoranze, che sono già all'opera nelle nostre società. Non è certo colpa dei computer se i principali CEO sono tutti maschi e bianchi e le poche donne a capo di grandi aziende sono e si presentano come delle specie di *superwomen*. È forse colpa dell'Intelligenza Artificiale se quando si pensa alla segretaria di un'azienda scatta subito l'associazione con una donna e che i sottintesi sessuali non manchino mai? Per tacere del fatto che per noi italiani un addetto alle pulizie è automaticamente una "donna delle pulizie"…

Da questo punto di vista, vogliamo che l'IA *non* ci assomigli. "Human–centered", quindi, non va inteso come "human–like". "Umanocentrico" significa che la persona deve restare al centro dello sviluppo di queste nuove potentissime tecnologie. Non dimentichiamoci che il chatbot Tay di Microsoft, addestrato su milioni di messaggi di Twitter, è stato spento dopo solo sedici ore nel 2016, perché nelle

sue repliche agli utenti del social network aveva immediatamente perso qualsiasi inibizione. Per come è fatto oggi l'ambiente digitale, il contesto non ci aiuta e non alimenta la speranza o la fiducia. Dobbiamo trovare altre vie rispetto alla mera simulazione di ciò che siamo. Almeno per quanto riguarda i numerosi difetti della nostra specie è meglio, a conti fatti, che l'Intelligenza Artificiale non ci assomigli. L'obiettivo che dovremmo porci è piuttosto quello di orientare gli sviluppi dell'AI in modo da correggere o compensare le ingiustizie presenti nella nostra società. È la direzione in cui si sta muovendo, per esempio, Francesca Rossi, ricercatrice di punta dell'IBM, che ha messo in piedi un consorzio per spingere verso un'integrazione dei principi etici nei sistemi decisionali.

Per quanto riguarda invece l'impatto della nuova normativa europea, stiamo facendo partire in FBK un'iniziativa sull'*AI Act* che dovrebbe aiutarci a capire i suoi effetti concreti sulle ricerche di frontiera nel campo dell'Intelligenza Artificiale.

Paolo Traverso: Il problema geopolitico è reale. I pericoli li conosciamo bene e già l'esito sorprendente del referendum sulla Brexit ci aveva messo in guardia rispetto ai rischi di una distorsione del dibattito pubblico attraverso un uso spregiudicato dell'IA nei social network. Servirebbero più controlli, più regolamentazione, ma questa è spesso ostacolata dall'esistenza di un oligopolio informatico. Il problema non è nuovo nella storia, ma è stato sicuramente esacerbato dalle dimensioni attuali di un mercato globalizzato. Il ruolo di capofila dell'Europa in uno scenario così ricco di insidie è innegabile. Se non possiamo essere la potenza egemone in termini economici o militari, cerchiamo almeno di esserlo in termini di civiltà e progresso. Da questo punto di vista, il riferimento alla centralità dell'umano è prezioso e direi persino imprescindibile. Metterei tuttavia in guardia anche dal rischio di un eccesso di regolamentazione. Non credo che la soluzione sia quella di far andare una Ferrari a venticinque chilometri all'ora, come ho sentito dire da qualcuno.

In Europa, tenuto conto delle nostre dimensioni, della nostra storia e della nostra sensibilità ambientale e democratica, credo che ci sia spazio per interventi meno mastodontici e meno dispendiosi, anche da un punto di vista energetico. Sappiamo, infatti, che qualsiasi innovazione

tecnologica della portata della *AI Revolution* non può essere a costo zero. E i cambiamenti sono appena cominciati. Fra un po' i computer non avranno più le tastiere ed entreremo in quello che, per chi ha la mia età, è uno scenario alla "Star Trek": con le nostre macchine intelligenti parleremo, daremo loro ordini, sbarazzandoci di mouse e tastiere. Anche la lotta tra le Big Tech per i nuovi motori di ricerca è appena cominciata. Con l'IA andremo a caccia d'informazioni in maniera molto più diretta. Tutto ciò avrà dei costi ambientali, che al momento sono prevedibili solo in parte.

Michela Milano: D'altronde, nelle nostre vite non c'è solo il business. In Europa lo capiamo forse meglio che altrove perché il welfare state è stato inventato qui. Una delle priorità del futuro, quindi, sarà usare i sistemi di Intelligenza Artificiale per rendere il welfare più efficiente ed equo. Come diceva prima Paolo, c'è un problema di sostenibilità economica in ambiti della vita in cui l'intervento pubblico resterà fondamentale. Pensiamo agli effetti del cambiamento climatico. In Emilia Romagna l'attenzione è ai massimi livelli per via delle alluvioni susseguitesi nel corso degli ultimi anni. Proprio il settore del *disaster recovery*, della sostenibilità intesa in un senso ampio, inclusa la protezione delle nostre infrastrutture informatiche in caso di catastrofi naturali o artificiali, è un ambito di ricerca in cui investimenti orientati non al profitto, ma al bene comune, potrebbero produrre ottimi risultati.

5. Conclusione: le questioni aperte

A conti fatti, per riassumere quanto abbiamo detto finora, la questione centrale sembra essere quella che passa in genere sotto il nome di "Trustworthy AI", un'intelligenza artificiale capace di creare attorno a sé un'atmosfera di fiducia, anziché di sospetto generalizzato. Per usare il nostro lessico è un'IA che si sviluppa in un ambiente sociale favorevole sia da un punto di vista epistemico (le persone capiscono ciò che sta avvenendo e non se ne fanno un'immagine distorta in senso positivo o negativo) sia da un punto di vista pratico (le persone vigilano sugli usi

dell'Intelligenza Artificiale e si impegnano per favorire quelli che contribuiscono al progresso della società).

Ma esistono modi efficaci per costruire un ambiente epistemico non dominato dallo scetticismo, dalla sfiducia, dal sospetto nei confronti di una rivoluzione tecnologica con cui dovremo fare i conti tutti, senza eccezione, nel futuro prossimo? Non possiamo infatti sorvolare sul fatto che, come ci ha appena fatto notare Michela Milano, questa auspicabile cultura della fiducia deve fare i conti non solo con credenze resilienti ragionevoli, ma con la proliferazione di credenze resilienti più inquietanti che pure, come sappiamo, popolano l'ambiente epistemico delle nostre società: pregiudizi, paranoie, fissazioni, fantasie persecutorie, antipatie viscerali. Esistono convinzioni dure a morire con cui dovete fare i conti nella vostra comunità di ricerca?

Michela Milano: I pregiudizi esistono ovunque. Io, però, vorrei richiamare l'attenzione sui nostri pregiudizi nei confronti delle macchine. Gli esseri umani, come sappiamo, sbagliano. E non sempre si tratta di errori innocenti. I giudici che devono scegliere tra severità e clemenza spesso optano per l'una o per l'altra per motivi che hanno più a che fare con l'umore che con la riflessione ponderata. Abbiamo studi empirici che lo dimostrano. Poi, però, ci indigniamo se il software COMPAS (Correctional Offender Management Profiling for Alternative Sanctions) manifesta dei bias razziali nel valutare i rischi di recidiva dei carcerati, senza chiederci se non siano inferiori a quelli dei giudici in carne e ossa…

Qualcosa di analogo capita con le macchine a guida automatizzata. Siamo circondati da persone che provocano incidenti perché si distraggono per colpa del telefonino, della stanchezza, di un colpo di sonno o di comportamenti ancora più irresponsabili, però gli errori delle macchine ci appaiono inaccettabili e imperdonabili. Perché questo doppio standard? Siamo tornati lì dove siamo partiti: nel campo dei sentimenti. Vale sempre la pena chiedersi, perciò, se l'interferenza delle emozioni ci aiuti o no a mettere le cose nella giusta prospettiva.

Paolo Traverso: A mio avviso il concetto di "trustworthiness" è fondamentale: è la chiave di tutto ciò che abbiamo discusso oggi. Come

facciamo ad alimentare la fiducia e ridurre la sfiducia della gente, che magari conosce poco i temi di cui abbiamo parlato finora? Il mio suggerimento, in parole povere, è andare nella direzione di sistemi che magari ci stupiscano un po' meno, ma siano più affidabili. Una *reliable AI*, che abbia un impatto concreto sulla vita delle persone senza indulgere nell'effetto "Star Trek": questo mi sembra un grande tema di ricerca per il futuro prossimo. Io punterei, quindi, su una Intelligenza Artificiale meno sbalorditiva, basata su un affiancamento costante degli umani che trasferisca alle macchine quel senso del limite che spesso manca anche a noi Homo sapiens del XXI secolo. A questo scopo, è essenziale mettere insieme tutte le competenze (tecnico-scientifiche, ma anche umanistiche) per evitare quello che Stephen Hawking, e altri dopo di lui, hanno paventato, forse esagerando un po', cioè la fine della specie umana per opera dell'IA.

Tornando alla questione della prevenzione sanitaria, il primo esempio che mi viene in mente è il lavoro che stiamo facendo con la dottoressa Maria Chiara Malaguti per monitorare i rischi di peggioramento nei malati di Parkinson. Il nostro obiettivo non è fare miracoli, ma offrire ai medici strumenti, magari imperfetti, ma continuamente correggibili. Non sarà la trasformazione globale dell'ambiente epistemico o sociale che avete in mente voi quando ragionate sulle convinzioni resilienti, ma è comunque una strategia dei piccoli passi che potrebbe familiarizzare gradualmente le persone con l'utilità delle nuove tecnologie in ambiti in cui i progressi si possono toccare con mano e non sono eticamente controversi perché servono per alleviare le sofferenze umane.

Il diritto, le leggi, sono ovviamente importanti per rassicurare le persone e cementare la loro fiducia nel fatto che le nuove tecnologie non verranno usate contro di loro. Parlando in generale, i giuristi oggi oscillano tra entusiasmo e cautela. Non hanno problemi a liberalizzare l'uso di tecnologie dell'IA quando i benefici per la salute umana sono evidenti al di là di ogni ragionevole dubbio. Sulla sostituzione del giudice con una macchina prevalgono invece le perplessità. Se è indubbio, infatti, che i giudici sono pieni di pregiudizi e nella storia dell'umanità ne hanno combinate di tutti i colori, tuttavia la spiegabilità delle sentenze resta un requisito fondamentale per arrivare a una giustizia sempre più

"giusta" e a una forma di *accountability*. Un processo decisionale totalmente automatizzato non sembra garantire questo diritto a sapere come si sia giunti al verdetto in questione. E c'è poi la questione dell'applicazione delle norme in un quadro generale così fluido. Da questo punto di vista, nemmeno uno sforzo di regolamentazione ambizioso come l'*AI Act* può rappresentare un traguardo definitivo.

Paolo Traverso: La sfida secondo me sta nel mettere insieme competenze diverse. Da questo punto di vista la collaborazione con i giuristi è fondamentale e anche noi "tecnici" dovremmo imparare a tenere a bada la nostra impazienza e apprezzare i pregi di un sapere più paziente. Forse ci farebbe bene recuperare un po' di logica aristotelica e fare tesoro di ciò che vi è di saggio nel senso comune, nelle intuizioni e nei bisogni delle persone che subiscono le conseguenze più pesanti dei grandi cambiamenti storici.

Ma, tirando le somme, alla fine le macchine possono pensare o no? E che tipo di pensieri sono in grado di produrre?

Michela Milano: Dovendo esprimermi fuori dai denti, direi chiaro e tondo che secondo me le macchine non pensano. Possono scimmiottare un ragionamento, però l'esperienza del pensiero per come la facciamo noi dall'interno, un pensiero che è *tuo* in senso proprio, non appartiene alla macchina. Intelligenti sì, ma non pensanti, è la mia conclusione, stante così le cose.

Paolo Traverso: Le macchine calcolatrici pensano? Turing se lo chiedeva in un saggio che ha fatto epoca: *Computing Machinery and Intelligence* (Turing 2025). E la sua curiosità si spingeva ben al di là del test che ha poi escogitato e che è passato alla storia proprio come test di Turing. Anche lui era consapevole che, al di là degli agenti conversazionali, resta irrisolto il problema dell'*embodiment*, delle implicazioni dell'incarnazione dell'intelligenza in un corpo e delle sue interazioni col mondo. La macchina magari può arrivare a pensare astrattamente, elaborando dei simboli o identificando dei pattern, ma il fatto che "pensi" non è certo la soluzione a tutti i problemi che ruotano attorno

alla realtà della coscienza umana. Anche le innovazioni più spericolate e sbalorditive hanno bisogno di un contesto per dare i frutti che contengono potenzialmente dentro di sé. Oggi siamo tutti impegnati nel tentativo di creare il contesto più ospitale e fiducioso affinché la nuova forma di intelligenza che abbiamo creato ci aiuti a costruire società migliori, più umane. Speriamo che i nostri sforzi vadano a buon fine.

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L'INTELLIGENZA ARTIFICIALE ALLA PROVA DELL'EGUAGLIANZA
L'EVOLUZIONE DEL DIRITTO COSTITUZIONALE TRA SCENARI ATTUALI E FUTURI

Marta Fasan

Abstract: In the context of the ongoing changes and evolution of the current era, this paper investigates the impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies on certain structural elements of society. It analyzes how Constitutional Law must adapt to face new and unprecedented challenges. Specifically, this examination focuses on the emergence of new protection needs within what is defined as an "algorithmic" society. The paper approaches this issue through the lens of the principle of equality and raises the question of which tools can be used to address the forms of discrimination that AI can create. In light of these considerations, this contribution aims to explore potential new interpretations of the principle of equality, with the goal of achieving an AI that is both human–centric and rights–based.

Nel contesto del continuo mutare ed evolversi dell'epoca attuale, il presente contributo indaga i cambiamenti dettati dall'avvento delle tecnologie di Intelligenza Artificiale (IA) su alcuni elementi strutturali della società e analizza come il diritto costituzionale sia chiamato ad affrontare nuove inedite sfide. Più nello specifico, il contributo esamina l'emergere di nuove esigenze di tutela all'interno dell'attuale modello di società, definibile "algoritmica", nella prospettiva dell'applicazione del principio di eguaglianza, interrogandosi su quali strumenti possano applicarsi alle forme di discriminazione create dall'intelligenza artificiale. Alla luce di ciò, il contributo prova a riflettere su quali possano essere le nuove declinazioni da dare al principio di eguaglianza nell'ottica di raggiungere l'obiettivo di un'IA *human–centered* e *rights–based*.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Constitutional law, Bias, Principle of equality, Discrimination

Parole chiave: Intelligenza Artificiale, Diritto costituzionale, Bias, Eguaglianza, Discriminazione

1. L'intelligenza artificiale nella società contemporanea. Prime coordinate di una rivoluzione algoritmica

Nell'epoca attuale la società è chiamata ad affrontare numerose sfide e mutamenti, spesso caratterizzati da effetti di portata globale. L'insorgere di guerre e conflitti armati, l'aumento dei fenomeni migratori, le conseguenze del cambiamento climatico, il ritorno di eventi pandemici, l'acuirsi delle discriminazioni e la crescita dei divari economico–sociali, come nel caso di *Global North* e *Global South* (Arrighi 2001), sono tutti fenomeni che stanno mettendo fortemente alla prova la società nel suo insieme, portando cambiamenti significativi al suo interno anche in termini di dinamiche relazionali.

Tra questi avvenimenti, però, uno risulta particolarmente significativo alla luce dell'impatto che sta dimostrando di poter produrre sulla società contemporanea, tanto da poterlo considerare una tra le cifre caratterizzanti il periodo storico attuale: l'avvento dell'intelligenza artificiale (d'ora in poi, IA).

Lo sviluppo e l'uso delle nuove tecnologie di IA sono, infatti, fenomeni che negli ultimi anni hanno assunto un'importanza crescente nella quotidianità delle persone, investendo le sfere della vita privata, professionale e pubblica di ognuno di noi. Tale assunto è confermato dall'ampia varietà di ambiti e di scopi d'uso rispetto a cui trovano applicazione i sistemi di IA (Scherer 2016, p. 354). Così, e a titolo esemplificativo, questa tecnologia viene impiegata nella Pubblica Amministrazione; nel settore medico; nelle attività di amministrazione della giustizia; nelle azioni di polizia e di tutela della pubblica sicurezza; nel contesto bellico e militare; in ambito economico–finanziario; nel controllo delle frontiere e dei flussi migratori; nel campo dell'istruzione; nelle attività di ricerca; nelle politiche del lavoro; nel settore dell'informazione; nei meccanismi elettorali del circuito democratico e in ogni altro contesto in cui le capacità tecniche dell'IA trovano terreno fertile per una loro implementazione. Le ragioni di una diffusione su così larga scala (Sartor e Lagioia 2020), ancor più accentuata dalla presenza sul mercato di modelli di AI per finalità generali come ChatGPT, Grok e DeepSeek (Sarker 2024; Wangsa *et al.* 2024; Hong e Hu 2025), possono essere facilmente spiegate alla luce della tipologia

di funzioni tipicamente esercitate dai sistemi di IA. Se, infatti, si prendono in considerazione le definizioni di IA date dai recenti atti normativi adottati per regolare lo sviluppo e l'uso di questa tecnologia, secondo cui ciò che caratterizza questa tecnologia è la capacità, con un certo grado di autonomia e in base a obiettivi predefiniti, di trarre inferenze dai dati input per generare risultati quali previsioni, raccomandazioni e decisioni che possono influenzare l'ambiente circostante[1], risulta evidente come una tecnologia in grado di svolgere simili funzioni possa essere impiegata in un'ampia gamma di settori, anche molto differenti tra loro. Di fatto, ogni volta che sia richiesto lo svolgimento di un'attività decisionale, o preparatoria alla stessa, i sistemi di IA possono trovare applicazione in sostituzione o in supporto all'attività umana grazie alle capacità tecniche che sanno esprimere (Santosuosso e Sartor 2024).

Tale circostanza pone di fronte a una situazione finora inedita, o quantomeno fatta emergere in modo manifesto dalle specifiche funzionalità di questi sistemi tecnologici. L'IA, infatti, sta dimostrando la capacità di incidere in modo sempre più pervasivo sui meccanismi di funzionamento delle organizzazioni sociali umane e di plasmare, quindi, la società anche nei suoi elementi fondanti (Rodotà 2012). Ciò attribuisce alle tecnologie di IA la capacità, o meglio il potere, di definire le caratteristiche del complessivo assetto sociale in cui viene a essere inserita, tanto da poter prospettare l'emergere di un nuovo modello di società forgiato secondo la matrice algoritmica e digitale che contraddistingue le nuove tecnologie intelligenti (Bassini, Liguori e Pollicino 2018).

2. La società algoritmica e le nuove sfide per il diritto costituzionale

L'impiego diffuso dei sistemi di IA e l'incisività dei loro effetti sono, quindi, fattori che stanno contribuendo a modificare sostanzialmente le strutture organizzative sociali, dettando mutamenti anche radicali come la nascita di un nuovo modello di società. In particolare, negli ultimi anni si è affermata l'idea che si stia assistendo alla creazione di una nuova tipologia di società a opera delle tecnologie intelligenti, definita, per

(1) Questa la definizione di sistema di IA data all'art. 3, n. 1), Regolamento (UE) 1689/2024, meglio noto come AI Act.

l'appunto, "società algoritmica". Con questo termine si fa riferimento a una società "[…] organized around social and economic decision–making by algorithms, robots, and AI agents, who not only make the decisions but also, in some cases, carry them out" (Balkin 2017), e, cioè, a un modello sociale in cui i sistemi di IA non si limitano a supportare i processi decisionali, ma ne diventano i principali artefici, assumendo un ruolo primario anche nella loro implementazione. Due sono, infatti, le caratteristiche che contraddistinguono la società algoritmica: la presenza di piattaforme digitali multinazionali che si collocano in posizione intermedia tra gli Stati nazionali e i cittadini; e l'uso dei sistemi di IA quale strumento idoneo a governare le popolazioni (Balkin 2018).

Si è, quindi, in presenza di un'inedita tipologia di dinamiche organizzative e relazionali costruite intorno alla dimensione algoritmica ormai prevalente, in cui le decisioni tendono a essere sempre più determinate dall'uso dei sistemi di IA e dai risultati che questi producono (Fasan 2024).

Questo mutato scenario, in cui la società contemporanea si dimostra sempre più strutturalmente condizionata e condizionabile dall'impiego delle tecnologie intelligenti, porta con sé una conseguenza ulteriore, cioè l'emergere di nuove declinazioni del potere sia con riferimento al rapporto Stato–cittadino sia in relazione alla classica distinzione tra potere pubblico e potere privato (Graziani 2021). L'IA, infatti, costituisce espressione di potere, sia come strumento che ne consente l'esercizio, sia come soggetto dello stesso. Da un lato, i sistemi intelligenti esprimono il potere dei soggetti privati attivi nello sviluppo dei sistemi di IA e dei decisori pubblici che vi fanno ricorso per migliorare il governo della cosa pubblica; dall'altro lato, l'IA manifesta una capacità di influenzare, indirizzare e definire i comportamenti delle persone che aumenta con l'ampliarsi della sua autonomia d'azione, tanto da renderla, in alcune circostanze, un soggetto decisionale autonomo (Sulmicelli 2024).

Il riconoscimento nell'IA di una nuova manifestazione di potere sovrano, in grado di scardinare anche le più classiche categorizzazioni[2] (Simoncini e Cremona 2021), influisce anche sulla dimensione giuridica

(2) Si fa qui riferimento al venire meno della classica distinzione giuridica tra dimensione privata e dimensione pubblica, da sempre considerate due sfere d'azione e di regole tendenzialmente separate.

e, in particolare, del diritto costituzionale. Se il diritto costituzionale conserva la sua funzione ontologica "[…] di "misura" del potere e "fondamento" della sovranità" (Simoncini 2017), risulta evidente che le tecnologie di IA, e così anche i risultati e gli effetti che producono, costituiscono una nuova sfida a cui fare fronte. Nell'esercizio del potere di cui è manifestazione, l'IA mostra la capacità di incidere in modo significativo sulla tutela dei diritti fondamentali delle persone, richiamando, in questi termini, l'originale vocazione del costituzionalismo contemporaneo, e cioè assicurare la necessaria limitazione dei poteri in funzione di garantire protezione ai diritti e alle libertà delle persone (Fioravanti 2009; Casonato 2025).

Tuttavia, le nuove esigenze che nascono dalla mutata realtà non sempre riescono a trovare soluzione nelle categorie e negli strumenti giuridici tradizionali che il diritto costituzionale ha a disposizione.

Per questo motivo occorre riflettere su quali possano essere le strade da intraprendere, dal punto di vista giuridico, per garantire piena attuazione e tutela agli elementi che fondano il costituzionalismo anche nel contesto della nuova conformazione attribuibile alla società algoritmica (Celeste 2022).

3. L'intelligenza artificiale alla prova dell'eguaglianza: la manifestazione dei bias secondo una prospettiva socio–tecnologica

La comprensione del fenomeno in esame può essere agevolata analizzando l'impatto prodotto dai sistemi di IA su una delle categorie cardine del costituzionalismo contemporaneo: il principio di eguaglianza.

Questo principio, che tradizionalmente assume un ruolo essenziale nella garanzia e nella tutela dei diritti fondamentali di fronte all'esercizio del potere (Caretti 2002; Baer 2012), risulta particolarmente sensibile ai cambiamenti dettati dalla diffusione dei sistemi di IA, che, per l'appunto, ne mettono in discussione l'accezione classica e la concreta implementazione. Da questo punto di vista, osservare il modo in cui l'IA incide sulla tenuta del principio di eguaglianza, e sull'attuazione delle garanzie che ne costituiscono un'esternazione, offre una dimostrazione emblematica di quali sfide il diritto costituzionale sia

chiamato ad affrontare per continuare ad assicurare tutela alle persone, anche di fronte ai rischi prospettati dalle tecnologie di IA (Sulmicelli 2024; Fasan 2022).

In particolare, il principio di eguaglianza viene chiamato in causa dalla necessità di predisporre soluzioni ai bias presenti nei sistemi di IA e alle conseguenze discriminatorie che ne derivano.

Quale frutto dell'azione umana connotato dal punto di vista sociale (Orlikowski 1992), l'IA porta con sé i pregiudizi e gli squilibri di potere presenti nella società contemporanea. Questi, che per l'appunto vengono inquadrati nella comune categoria di bias (Barocas e Selbst 2016), possono innestarsi e manifestarsi, anche inconsciamente, in varie fasi del ciclo di funzionamento e di vita dei sistemi di IA. In particolare, tre sono le circostanze in cui è possibile esaminare con maggiore efficacia l'emergere di tale fenomeno.

Il primo momento in cui i bias possono insorgere è la creazione del dataset di addestramento e di validazione del sistema di IA. Nel contesto di una *datafication* sempre più significativa della società umana (Lycett 2013) che risulta essenziale per lo sviluppo di sistemi di IA sempre più avanzati, anche i pregiudizi e le situazioni di squilibrio tra gruppi di persone entrano a far parte del flusso di informazioni utilizzati dai sistemi di IA per il loro funzionamento, condizionando i risultati prodotti. In questi termini, il bias presente nel dataset viene classificato come un *pattern* rilevante dall'IA, con la conseguenza di sistematizzare il pregiudizio di cui è espressione e di replicarne il contenuto nell'elaborazione della decisione finale (Barocas e Selbst 2016). Tale eventualità, che interessa sia le forme di c.d. "model–based AI" (Traverso 2022) sia i sistemi di IA più avanzati, è concretamente dimostrata da un caso che, seppur risalente nel tempo, illustra chiaramente le conseguenze di queste forme di *historical bias*. Il caso, del 1988, riguarda lo sviluppo da parte della St. George's Hospital Medical School di un sistema algoritmico con funzioni di supporto nella selezione dei propri futuri studenti. L'impiego del sistema, che avrebbe dovuto aiutare il personale responsabile delle procedure di selezione eliminando informazioni considerate irrilevanti, viene, tuttavia, giudicato illegittimo da parte della Commission for Racial Equality. In particolare, la Commissione dichiarò la St. George's Hospital Medical School responsabile di aver praticato condotte discriminatorie nelle sue politiche

di ammissione nei confronti delle donne e degli appartenenti a gruppi etnici minoritari, anche in ragione della tecnologia usata (Commission for Racial Equality 1988). Infatti, l'algoritmo, basandosi sui criteri di selezione precedentemente adottati dalla *Medical School*, aveva continuato a riprodurre i pregiudizi che da sempre avevano portato all'esclusione dei candidati e delle candidate in ragione del genere e dell'etnia di appartenenza (Hacker 2018).

La seconda circostanza in cui i bias si manifestano è, invece, quella della realizzazione dell'algoritmo, o meglio della definizione dei criteri di inferenza impiegati dall'IA. Anche in questa circostanza, infatti, i pregiudizi e i preconcetti umani possono entrare a far parte dei meccanismi di funzionamento tecnologico e definire, sulla base di ciò, il peso da attribuire ai diversi valori che contribuiscono a creare il modello di analisi ed elaborazione delle informazioni implementato dall'IA. Anche in questo caso, quindi, il bias diventa un elemento strutturale delle operazioni svolte dell'IA, con il rischio, per effetto di un meccanismo di *feedback loop* (Barocas, Hardt e Narayanan 2023), di acuire e rafforzare pratiche pregiudizievoli e discriminatorie a danno di specifiche categorie di persone. Ciò, infatti, è quanto accaduto con il sistema SyRI, utilizzato dalla Pubblica Amministrazione olandese per profilare indentificare il rischio di commissione di una frode pubblica da parte delle persone richiedenti sussidi statali. Il sistema algoritmico, oltre a presentare significativi problemi in termini di dovute garanzie di trasparenza (van Bekkum e Zuiderveen Borgesius 2021; Avanzini 2022), veniva impiegato solo a fronte di richieste provenienti da abitanti di zone e quartieri considerati problematici. Nell'opinione delle autorità pubbliche olandesi, in questi luoghi sarebbe stata, infatti, più probabile la realizzazione di illeciti di natura fiscale e previdenziale in quanto riconducibili a indirizzi di persone già indagate per la commissione di questi illeciti (Falletti 2022). Perciò, il sistema SyRI, correlando i dati esaminati, di fatto aveva il potere di escludere le persone dall'accesso ai sussidi statali anche solo in ragione del loro status economico e geografico, di fatto discriminandole rispetto alle altre persone interessate a richiedere simili prestazioni sociali (Rachovitsa e Johann 2022).

Il terzo momento in cui i bias umani emergono in relazione al funzionamento dell'IA è quello che concerne la produzione dei risultati.

Possono verificarsi, infatti, situazioni in cui, pur avendo operato nelle fasi operative precedenti per rimuovere la presenza di eventuali elementi pregiudizievoli e parziali dal sistema, questo arriva a produrre un risultato in cui si configurano dei bias. Ciò implica l'adozione di decisioni pregiudizievoli, non tanto a causa della riproduzione di bias o di elementi discriminatori nel corso del processo decisionale, ma in ragione di altri fattori che incidono sui risultati prodotti dai sistemi di IA, andando a generare un impatto negativo sulle persone interessate (Sulmicelli 2025). Così, recentemente si è constatato come la scarsa efficacia dimostrata dai sistemi di IA sviluppati per il riconoscimento, la produzione, l'analisi e la traduzione del linguaggio dei segni sia causata principalmente dal mancato coinvolgimento della comunità non udente nella loro realizzazione. Tale carenza, infatti, limita gli sviluppatori nel possedere reale contezza dei problemi posti dall'IA, delle circostanze in cui la tecnologia potrebbe offrire valide soluzioni ai problemi esistenti e del modo in cui la lingua dei segni viene usata per comunicare dalle persone non udenti. La mancanza di consapevolezza e di informazioni nei termini descritti compromette l'utilità effettiva di questi potenziali strumenti e produce l'effetto di discriminare ulteriormente proprio coloro che dovrebbero averne beneficio (Bragg *et al*. 2019). Effetti simili si sono registrati anche con riferimento alle persone appartenenti alla comunità LGBTQ+. Per esempio, alcuni studi hanno dimostrato le conseguenze discriminatorie, in termini di risultati, derivanti dall'uso di ImageNet, uno dei *training set* di immagini più importanti nel settore dell'IA. Questo dataset si fonda su un sistema di classificazione delle immagini in cui le persone rappresentate vengono qualificate in "oggetti naturali" e poi ulteriormente distinte in "corpi maschili adulti" e "corpi femminili adulti". In ragione di ciò, e come sostenuto da parte della dottrina, i sistemi di IA contribuiscono a operare un processo di naturalizzazione del genere come costrutto biologico da intendersi solo in termini binari e a rendere le persone trans e di genere non binario invisibili, e quindi discriminabili, all'interno della realtà algoritmica (Crawford 2021; Keyes 2018). Effetti simili si verificano anche in contesti più specifici di applicazione dei sistemi di IA, come accade nelle attività di *content–moderation*. È questo il caso del sistema *Perspective*, impiegato per rilevare il livello di tossicità dei contenuti presenti sui social

network. Nello specifico, si è dimostrato come il sistema di IA classifichi i contenuti inseriti dalle drag queen e dalle persone LGBTQ+ con un livello di tossicità maggiore rispetto a quelli elaborati dai suprematisti bianchi (Oliva, Antonialli e Gomes 2021)[3]. Le ragioni di ciò sono riconducibili principalmente a due fattori. Il primo si sostanzia nella mancata presa in considerazione, in fase di sviluppo tecnologico, del significato identitario che assumono determinate parole e affermazioni per le persone LGBTQ+, denunciando un vuoto di rappresentatività nei dataset utilizzati per l'addestramento e la validazione dell'algoritmo. Il secondo fattore, invece, è riconducibile all'incapacità del sistema di IA di comprendere le differenze di contesto e di finalità con cui possono essere utilizzate le parole, e ciò, ancora una volta, per una mancata valorizzazione delle istanze che provengono da gruppi di persone considerati minoritari (Fosch–Villaronga e Poulsen 2022). Ciò che emerge dai casi esaminati è, dunque, la presenza di bias significativi nei risultati generati dall'IA che hanno ripercussioni discriminatorie nei confronti di persone già "vulnerabilizzate" dalle strutture di potere che permeano la società (Fineman 2019), e che possono incidere ulteriormente in modo negativo sull'esercizio dei diritti e delle libertà fondamentali riconosciute alle persone (Sulmicelli 2023)[4].

Alle tre circostanze descritte ne va poi aggiunta una quarta in cui nel ciclo di vita di un sistema di IA possono emergere bias dalle conseguenze discriminatorie. Questo momento, caratterizzato dalla trasversalità con cui può manifestarsi nelle diverse fasi di sviluppo e di applicazione dei sistemi intelligenti, si verifica nei casi in cui i pregiudizi riprodotti dall'IA non siano frutto dell'impiego di informazioni ascrivibili a categorie protette, ma bensì derivino dal ricorso a dati sostitutivi (c.d. *proxy data*). Nello specifico, si fa riferimento all'ipotesi in cui il sistema di IA, pur non avendo a disposizione informazioni e dati che permetterebbero di classificare le persone secondo criteri da considerarsi discriminatori alla luce

(3) In particolare, *Perspective* ha classificato con un livello di tossicità compreso tra il 16,68% e il 37,81% i contenuti generati dagli appartenenti alla comunità queer, mentre quelli elaborati da account rappresentativi di istanze nazionaliste e di suprematismo bianco sono stati inseriti in un range di tossicità che va dal 19,68% al 33,46%.

(4) In particolare, Sulmicelli evidenzia come le conseguenze delle discriminazioni descritte siano tali da compromettere l'esercizio anche di altri diritti e libertà fondamentali tutelate dall'ordinamento costituzionale, come, ed è questo il caso delle attività di content–moderation, l'esercizio della libertà di manifestazione del pensiero.

dell'ordinamento costituzionale vigente, arriva comunque a generare situazioni di discriminazione sulla base di informazioni di per sé apparentemente neutre (Prince e Schwarcz 2020). Ciò significa che anche qualora venga eliminata dal *dataset* di riferimento la presenza di dati potenzialmente discriminatori, le tecniche e le capacità di inferenza impiegate dai sistemi di IA potrebbero comunque risalire indirettamente a tali informazioni e perpetrare implicitamente le disparità di trattamento che ne sono conseguenza (Kleinberg *et al.* 2018). Questa nuova modalità di discriminazione, definita per l'appunto *proxy discrimination*, può essere esemplificata da quanto accaduto nel Regno Unito a seguito dell'implementazione del sistema DCP (*Direct Center Performance Model*). L'algoritmo in esame, sviluppato e utilizzato nel 2020 per elaborare una previsione standardizzata del rendimento scolastico degli studenti inglesi per indirizzarne l'accesso agli studi universitari[5], nelle procedure di valutazione delle prestazioni scolastiche ha dimostrato di classificare come meno capaci gli studenti provenienti da scuole pubbliche e a maggior numero di iscritti a parità di rendimento personale rispetto ai coetanei frequentanti scuole private (Kelly 2021). In questo modo, l'uso del sistema DCP e dei suoi risultati ha impedito l'accesso alle università più note e prestigiose a quegli studenti che, pur meritevoli dal punto di vista scolastico, appartenevano a nuclei familiari economicamente svantaggiati e/o a gruppi etnici minoritari, rendendoli destinatari di decisioni dal carattere discriminatorio (Wachter, Mittelstadt e Russell 2021).

4. L'intelligenza artificiale alla prova dell'eguaglianza: soluzioni e limiti secondo la prospettiva delle categorie giuridiche tradizionali

Le modalità descritte con cui possono insorgere elementi pregiudizievoli nelle diverse fasi di sviluppo e di applicazione dell'IA portano, dunque, a interrogarsi su quali siano i rimedi azionabili per contrastare

(5) Nello specifico, il governo britannico (in particolare l'*Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulations*, Ofqual) ha scelto di utilizzare questo algoritmo per due ragioni: in primo luogo, per la necessità di avere uno strumento di valutazione che sostituisse i c.d. *A–Level examination*, sospesi nel 2020 a causa della pandemia da Covid–19; in secondo luogo, per avere un metodo di valutazione standardizzato ed evitare l'eccessiva generosità degli insegnanti nei giudizi espressi sui propri studenti.

e mitigare gli effetti discriminatori causati dall'uso delle tecnologie intelligenti, alla luce delle garanzie offerte dal principio di eguaglianza e non discriminazione secondo l'inquadramento offerto dal costituzionalismo contemporaneo. E a questo proposito, il dato da cui sembra più opportuno partire è l'individuazione della tipologia di discriminazione generata dai sistemi di IA.

Innanzitutto, va osservato come molte delle manifestazioni di bias che comportano l'insorgere di pratiche e di decisioni pregiudizievoli siano ascrivibili alle tradizionali categorie della discriminazione diretta e della discriminazione indiretta. Tali tipologie di disparità di trattamento, la prima caratterizzata dalla presenza di un intento discriminatorio e la seconda contraddistinta dal diverso impatto che possono generare decisioni e azioni apparentemente neutrali (Strazzari 2008), possono essere affrontate ricorrendo agli strumenti classici del diritto antidiscriminatorio, seppur ponendo la dovuta attenzione alla natura tecnologica delle discriminazioni in esame (Nardocci 2023). Sia che si tratti di discriminazioni dirette o indirette, le soluzioni giuridiche da implementare devono necessariamente prendere in considerazione non solo le operazioni tecniche di definizione e di preparazione del dataset da utilizzare, ma anche quelle caratteristiche di opacità e di potenziale autonomia operativa che contraddistinguono i sistemi di IA. L'incapacità di conoscere e comprendere i processi decisionali seguiti dall'IA, così come la sua capacità di modificare o di creare nuovi criteri inferenziali per l'elaborazione dei dati, possono, infatti, limitare l'efficacia degli strumenti tradizionali nell'individuazione sia dell'intento, sia dell'impatto discriminatorio espressi dal sistema, limitando fortemente le possibilità di agire in rimedio al danno subito (*ibidem*).

Da questo punto di vista, dunque, risultano particolarmente apprezzabili le soluzioni normative che consentono di implementare le garanzie offerte dal principio di eguaglianza tenendo conto di questi ulteriori elementi di complessità. In questo senso, due interventi normativi risultano interessanti, in prospettiva comparata, per le misure che hanno predisposto a tale scopo.

Il primo è senza dubbio il Regolamento (UE) 1689/2024 del Parlamento europeo e del Consiglio del 13 giugno 2024 che stabilisce regole armonizzate sull'intelligenza artificiale (noto anche come AI

Act). Il Regolamento europeo, infatti, prevede specifiche disposizioni in tema di data governance, trasparenza e sorveglianza umana che, almeno per i sistemi di IA classificati ad alto rischio (art. 6) possono porsi nella direzione di dare un'efficace implementazione alle misure tradizionali di contrasto alle discriminazioni. Infatti, la previsione di regole volte a garantire la completezza e la rappresentatività statistica e geografica dei dataset utilizzati anche in riferimento all'ambito di impiego prospettato per l'applicazione del sistema di IA (art. 10), unite ai requisiti di interpretabilità e di spiegabilità dello stesso (art. 13) e alla predisposizione di misure che assicurino il controllo della persona umana sulle operazioni svolte dall'IA (art. 14), sono strumenti che possono realizzare forme, da un lato, di mitigazione *ex ante* dei bias e delle conseguenti pratiche discriminatorie e, dall'altro lato, di rimedio *ex post* all'insorgere di disparità di trattamento determinate dall'uso dell'IA. In particolare, il requisito di spiegabilità può rappresentare una misura, anche di natura tecnica (Palmirani 2020), fondamentale nel fornire ai soggetti interessati possibili rimedi per contrastare le discriminazioni subite, come dimostra anche il riconoscimento del diritto alla spiegazione dei processi decisionali a opera dell'AI Act. Il Regolamento (UE), infatti, riconosce a coloro che siano destinatari di decisioni, basate sui risultati forniti da sistemi ad alto rischio, tali da incidere significativamente sulla tutela dei diritti fondamentali il diritto di ottenere spiegazioni chiare e significative sul ruolo avuto dall'IA nel processo decisionali e su quali siano gli elementi principali della decisione presa (art. 86).

Il secondo intervento, riconducibile all'ordinamento statunitense, è, invece, il *Colorado Act concerning consumer protections in interactions with artificial intelligence systems* del 2024. Tale atto normativo, che si pone appunto l'obiettivo esplicito di tutelare i consumatori anche dalle discriminazioni di matrice algoritmica, prevede a tale scopo la realizzazione di una valutazione di impatto prodotto dai sistemi di IA, rispetto al quale si stabilisce l'obbligo di analizzare i possibili rischi di discriminazione causati dall'IA (Nardocci 2024). L'introduzione di un simile strumento risulta, almeno dal punto di vista teorico, particolarmente apprezzabile in quanto consente di analizzare in concreto l'impatto che l'IA può produrre sulla tutela dell'eguaglianza, fornendo un ulteriore supporto alle misure tradizionali in questo senso predisposte dall'ordinamento statunitense. Anche

in questo caso, quindi, si assiste a un'implementazione delle garanzie di eguaglianza e non discriminazione che tiene conto della matrice tecnologica dei possibili effetti discriminatori, andando a rafforzare la tutela dei diritti fondamentali della persona.

Tuttavia, occorre anche osservare come altre tipologie di manifestazioni dei bias e le relative conseguenze discriminatorie risultino, invece, di più complessa soluzione dal punto di vista del diritto costituzionale e delle sue categorie tradizionali. Il riferimento è in questo caso alle forme di *proxy discrimination* e a quei risultati discriminanti che sono frutto del funzionamento specifico dei sistemi di IA. L'eventualità che si verifichino forme di disparità di trattamento a causa dell'impiego dell'IA ma senza che queste siano fondate sulle caratteristiche o sulle categorie tutelate dal principio di eguaglianza rischia, infatti, di lasciare le persone così discriminate prive di tutela e di rimedi rispetto al danno subito. In questi termini, l'IA, per le sue capacità di inferenza funzionali a individuare correlazioni anche nascoste tra le informazioni analizzate, potrebbe generare nuove caratteristiche discriminanti e persone discriminate che attualmente non trovano protezione alla luce delle categorie del costituzionalismo contemporaneo (Nardocci 2021). A ciò si aggiungano anche tutte le situazioni in cui l'IA opera intersezioni tra fattori considerati discriminanti nell'inquadramento fornito dal principio di eguaglianza e che, pur comportando un acuirsi della disparità di trattamento proprio a causa dell'unione di più fattori di vulnerabilità, non trovano rimedio alla luce degli strumenti giuridici tradizionali attualmente azionabili (Nardocci 2023).

In considerazione di tali ipotesi, occorre quindi chiedersi quali soluzioni possa offrire il diritto, nella dimensione costituzionale contemporanea, e se si renda necessario implementare nuovi approcci e strumenti per evitare ingiustificati e ingiustificabili vuoti di tutela per le persone destinatarie dei risultati e delle decisioni elaborate dall'IA.

5. Nuovi percorsi e prospettive per una *human–centered* e *right–based* IA

I limiti di tutela che presenta il principio di eguaglianza, rispetto alle situazioni e alle condotte discriminatorie descritte in chiusura del

precedente paragrafo, costituiscono il vero banco di prova per analizzare la capacità del diritto costituzionale contemporaneo di rispondere alle sfide poste dall'IA e dalle dinamiche di potere di cui è espressione. Le ipotesi considerate, infatti, permettono di riflettere sulla necessità che il diritto, e in particolare il diritto costituzionale, elabori nuovi strumenti e soluzioni per garantire una piena tutela della persona nella nuova società algoritmica e, di conseguenza, realizzare sistemi di IA che possano definirsi *human–centered* e *right–based* (Casonato 2023).

In questo processo di evoluzione giuridica, in cui il ricorso a un approccio metodologico interdisciplinare e comparato risulta essenziale per comprendere quali percorsi normativi e di tutela possano risultare più opportuni (Vedaschi 2024; Penasa 2024; Guerra 2018), risulta però già possibile svolgere alcune considerazioni circa le soluzioni implementabili per declinare algoritmicamente il principio di eguaglianza, tenuto conto dei limiti del suo approccio classificatorio tradizionale di fronte alle funzionalità dell'IA (Siegel 2004).

Una prima direzione auspicabile potrebbe essere l'aumento delle politiche di diversità e inclusione nel settore dell'IA. Questo approccio normativo, già presente in alcuni atti che si pongono l'obiettivo di regolare l'IA, garantirebbe la possibilità di minimizzare i risultati discriminatori prodotti dall'IA intervenendo in termini di rappresentatività anche dei *team* di persone esperte che sviluppano questi sistemi tecnologici. Come già osservato in dottrina soprattutto con riferimento alle discriminazioni etniche e di genere (Fosch–Villaronga e Poulsen 2022; D'Amico 2020), l'implementazione di tali politiche consentirebbe non solo di limitare l'impatto discriminatorio generato dall'IA, ma anche di impiegare l'IA per valorizzare gli elementi di differenza laddove ciò si renda necessario per tutelare i diritti delle persone. È questo il caso, per esempio, della medicina di genere, in cui l'impiego di sistemi di IA per identificare *pattern* diagnostici e di trattamento in prospettiva di genere risulterebbe fondamentale per promuovere un'eguaglianza effettiva delle persone nel godimento del diritto alla salute (Fosch–Villaronga e Poulsen 2022). Da questa prospettiva, l'IA potrebbe anche diventare strumento per l'implementazione di azioni positive volte ad assicurare l'applicazione del principio di eguaglianza anche nella sua accezione sostanziale (Stradella 2020). Sono da considerarsi, quindi, apprezzabili

le disposizioni in questo senso previste sia dell'AI Act, con riferimento all'elaborazione di politiche di diversità e inclusione per lo sviluppo dei sistemi di IA c.d. a rischio minimo (art. 95), sia dal *Projeto de Lei nº 2.338, de 2023* brasiliano, che riconosce nei principi di eguaglianza, diversità, inclusione e pluralismo gli elementi cardine per lo sviluppo e l'uso dell'IA (artt. 2 e 3).

Una seconda prospettiva da considerare nel tentativo di definire il processo di evoluzione del principio di eguaglianza potrebbe consistere nella valorizzazione dell'approccio intersezionale quale possibile chiave di lettura e di soluzione delle discriminazioni causate dall'IA. Gli strumenti e gli assunti teorici e metodologici di questa teoria critica (Crenshaw 1989; Marini 2021; Bello 2022) offrirebbero, infatti, validi rimedi ai rischi discriminatori prospettati dall'IA dal punto di vista dell'intersezione tra categorie e elementi che possono portare diseguaglianza nel trattamento delle persone anche rispetto alla combinazione di caratteristiche di per sé non discriminanti operata da questa tecnologia. Da questa prospettiva, risulta degna di nota la scelta operata dal legislatore canadese di utilizzare meccanismi di analisi intersezionale per valutare l'impatto prodotto dall'IA sui diritti e le libertà delle persone. Infatti, la *Directive on automated decision–making* del 2019 stabilisce l'impiego dello strumento di *Gender–based Analysis Plus* per identificare l'impatto prodotto dall'IA sui profili di genere e su altri fattori identitari e per predisporre le misure a tal fine necessarie (Appendix C). In questo modo, dunque, risulta possibile esaminare l'impatto discriminatorio generato dall'IA più ad ampio spettro, tenendo conto delle conseguenze subite dai soggetti discriminati secondo le modalità descritte.

Le considerazioni illustrate rappresentano, ovviamente, solo alcune tra le proposte di percorso che il diritto costituzionale potrebbe intraprendere per assicurare tutela ai diritti delle persone a fronte dei mutamenti e delle problematicità dettate dall'uso dei sistemi di IA. Tuttavia, l'attesa per un intervento giuridico che tenga conto delle istanze descritte non può essere ulteriormente tollerata alla luce di una diffusione dell'IA che sembra, per certi versi, realizzarsi in modo incontrollato. La realizzazione di un'IA realmente *human–centered* e *right–based*, anche dalla prospettiva dell'implementazione del principio di eguaglianza, dovrà rientrare tra i principali obiettivi dei prossimi interventi normativi

in materia per evitare che si crei un vuoto di tutela verso quelle persone che si trovano maggiormente esposte a fattori di vulnerabilizzazione nel contesto della società algoritmica.

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INTELLIGENZA ARTIFICIALE E INGIUSTIZIA EPISTEMICA NELLA CURA E NELLA RICERCA DELLA MALATTIA MENTALE: UNO STATO DELL'ARTE

Eugenia Lancellotta

Abstract: Artificial Intelligence (AI) is becoming the focus of media attention and economic investments in many of the world's economies. However, the ethical and social issues raised by these new technologies are still in the early stages of exploration. In this article, I provide a critical overview of the scientific and philosophical literature on one of these issues: the relationship between AI and epistemic injustice in the field of mental health research and care. In psychiatry, epistemic injustice occurs when the epistemic contributions of individuals suffering from mental illnesses are unfairly discredited by doctors and researchers due to biases related to the identity of the patients, who are considered irrational and unreliable witnesses. While most of the scientific literature on this topic argues that the use of AI in psychiatry could exacerbate and reinforce the existing epistemic injustice, some voices highlight the potential opportunities offered by new technologies in the fight against this insidious form of oppression.

L'Intelligenza Artificiale (IA) si sta ponendo al centro dell'attenzione mediatica e degli investimenti economici di gran parte delle economie mondiali. Tuttavia, le questioni etiche e sociali che queste nuove tecnologie sollevano sono ancora in una fase primitiva di esplorazione. In questo articolo, fornisco una panoramica critica della letteratura scientifica e filosofica su una di queste questioni, ovvero il rapporto tra IA e ingiustizia epistemica nell'ambito della ricerca e della cura psichiatrica. In campo psichiatrico, l'ingiustizia epistemica si manifesta quando i contributi epistemici delle persone che soffrono di malattie mentali vengono ingiustamente screditati da parte di medici e ricercatori a causa di pregiudizi legati all'identità dei malati, ritenuti testimoni irrazionali e poco affidabili. Mentre la maggior parte della letteratura scientifica in merito sostiene che l'uso dell'IA in psichiatria potrebbe aggravare e rinforzare l'ingiustizia epistemica già esistente, alcune voci sottolineano le possibili opportunità aperte dalle nuove tecnologie nella lotta contro questa subdola forma di oppressione.

Keywords. Artificial Intelligence, Epistemic injustice, Psychiatry, Epistemic conformism, ADHD

Parole chiave: Intelligenza Artificiale, Ingiustizia epistemica, Psichiatria, Conformismo epistemico, ADHD

1. Introduzione

Il termine Intelligenza Artificiale (IA) fu coniato da John McCarthy nel 1956, che la definì come la scienza e la progettazione di macchine intelligenti (Frana e Klein 2021, p. 105). Nonostante si stia assistendo a un boom mediatico e di investimenti in tale tecnologia, il suo utilizzo nella pratica medica è ancora fortemente limitato (Monteith, Glenn, Geddes *et al.* 2022). Ciò si deve a diversi fattori, il primo dei quali è riconducibile al cosiddetto *paradosso produttivo*, concetto teorizzato dal premio Nobel per l'economia Robert Solow nel 1987 (Solow 1987). Secondo il paradosso, esisterebbe un *gap* di decenni tra la creazione e l'implementazione produttiva di una nuova tecnologia. La pratica medica non farebbe eccezione, anzi: un'applicazione dell'IA in quest'ambito risulta ulteriormente complicata dall'entità dei rischi che il funzionamento subottimale di queste nuove tecnologie potrebbe comportare.

Per apprezzare lo stato di (im)maturità attuale dell'IA nella pratica medica, è importante far riferimento alla *technology readiness level (TRL) scale*, una scala a 9 livelli inventata dalla NASA negli anni Settanta e tuttora in uso per misurare il livello di maturità di una tecnologia (Mankins 1995). Recentemente adattata per la valutazione dell'IA in ambito clinico (Fleuren, Thoral, Shillan *et al.* 2020), i livelli fino al 4 si riferiscono all'uso di prototipi di IA in ambito sperimentale, mentre i restanti livelli indicano che la tecnologia in questione ha superato lo stadio del prototipo, e che è stata anche impiegata su una popolazione più ampia di quella con cui è stato testato il prototipo. In recenti studi condotti sull'uso dell'IA in medicina intensiva (Fleuren, Thoral, Shillan *et al.* 2020; Van de Sande, van Genderen, Huiskens *et al.* 2021), il 90% circa di queste tecnologie si fermava al livello 5 della scala TRL, con la maggior parte di esse attestantesi al livello 4 o inferiori: nessuna tecnologia raggiungeva il livello 9 o era routinariamente inclusa nella pratica

medica. Inoltre, in un recente sondaggio condotto tra alcuni radiologi dell'American College of Radiologists (Allen, Agarwal, Coombs *et al.* 2021) — la radiologia è l'ambito medico in cui l'uso dell'IA è maggiormente diffuso — il 94% degli intervistati ha valutato la performance dell'IA come scarsamente affidabile.

L'IA si trova a uno stadio di maturazione bivalente nell'ambito della salute mentale. Da un lato, i chatbots psicoterapeutici hanno conosciuto un'esplosione nell'industria del benessere degli ultimi anni, complici i costi esorbitanti dei professionisti per la salute mentale nei paesi a sistema sanitario privato e le lunghissime liste d'attesa nei paesi a sistema sanitario pubblico o semi–pubblico (McAllen 2024). Nonostante i chatbots per il benessere psicologico presentino diversi benefici in termini di costi e accessibilità, non essendo controllati da un'autorità riconosciuta che ne garantisca la sicurezza e l'efficacia, essi presentano diversi rischi, tra cui, ad esempio, misinformazione e violazione della privacy dei dati degli utenti. Dall'altro, l'IA è ancora scarsamente usata in ambito clinico-psichiatrico. Il sistema sanitario nazionale inglese, NHS, ha solo di recente introdotto una app di IA, *Limbic* (Khaku 2023), per fare uno screening iniziale di chi richiede assistenza per la salute mentale; così la FDA, l'agenzia regolatrice del sistema sanitario nazionale americano, ha da poco approvato l'utilizzo su prescrizione medica di un chatbot per la depressione maggiore, *Rejoyn* (Cheng 2024).

Questo dato può risultare sorprendente se si pensa che è da più di mezzo secolo che i ricercatori tentano di utilizzare l'IA nell'ambito della salute mentale. Nel 1966 Joseph Weizenbaum creò Eliza, il primo prototipo di chatbot psicoterapeuta: molte delle idee alla base di questo programma sono ancora utilizzate nelle applicazioni di IA per la salute mentale di oggi (Berry 2018; Weizenbaum 1966). Tuttavia, la scarsa diffusione dell'IA in ambito psichiatrico può essere spiegata dalle seguenti limitazioni (Monteith, Glenn, Geddes *et al.* 2022). Innanzitutto, l'IA necessita di tanti dati di qualità per diagnosticare, distinguere e curare correttamente i disturbi mentali. Tuttavia, vi è una grande carenza di tali dati in ambito psichiatrico. I registri elettronici, da cui questi dati vengono in buona parte tratti, presentano diverse anomalie, perché non sono stati inizialmente pensati per scopi diagnostici o di ricerca. Per questo motivo, si registrano, tra le varie anomalie, discrepanze e diagnosi mancate

del Disturbo Post Traumatico da Stress; una mancata documentazione di idee o tentativi suicidali; una stima al ribasso di sintomi a cui è associato un forte stigma sociale; la mancata esplicitazione di una diagnosi per diversi pazienti a cui sono stati prescritti farmaci psicotropi; cambiamenti di codici linguistici nel corso del tempo. Alla scarsità di dati di qualità con cui alimentare i sistemi di IA, si aggiungono le complessità legate all'utilizzo degli algoritmi. Ad esempio, un aumento della diversità della popolazione in termini di età, sesso e immagini cerebrali ha contribuito alla riduzione della precisione predittiva di modelli di IA per il neuroimaging, con effetti sulla diagnosi di disturbi dello spettro autistico. La scarsa educazione tecnologica dei medici, che li porterebbe a un atteggiamento di deferenza eccessiva nei confronti dell'IA al cospetto di una decisione clinica da prendere, è un'altra importante limitazione nell'applicazione dell'IA in ambito psichiatrico, come lo è il rischio che i clinici e i lavoratori nel settore della salute mentale subiscano un processo di dequalificazione a causa dell'eccessiva dipendenza da tali sistemi. Infine, non va dimenticata l'attuale scarsità di misure di validazione per l'IA in ambito clinico, dovuta in parte alle precedenti limitazioni di questi sistemi e in parte al fatto che le regolamentazioni di tecnologie mediche tradizionali non sono state pensate per essere applicate all'IA.

In questo articolo, condurrò un breve stato dell'arte su un aspetto particolare e ancora poco studiato dell'IA nella ricerca e nella cura della malattia mentale, ovvero la relazione tra IA e ingiustizia epistemica. L'ingiustizia epistemica è una forma di danno epistemico particolarmente diffuso nella ricerca e soprattutto nella cura della malattia mentale, e la ricerca filosofica sul tema si è fatta particolarmente vivace negli ultimi anni (Crichton, Carel e Kidd 2017; Kidd, Spencer e Carel 2025). La nozione di ingiustizia epistemica più usata nelle discussioni accademiche contemporanee è quella elaborata dalla filosofa Miranda Fricker. Fricker (2007) teorizza che esistano diversi tipi di ingiustizie epistemiche, che hanno come comune denominatore un danno epistemico a carico di soggetti, siano essi singoli o gruppi, appartenenti a categorie sociali storicamente oppresse quali donne, persone di etnia non bianca o persone con malattie mentali. Il termine ingiustizia mette in rilievo come il danno non sia epistemicamente giustificato ma il frutto di pregiudizi inconsci contro l'identità razziale, sessuale, psicologica o

socioeconomica del soggetto che li subisce. I perpetratori, in genere inconsapevoli, di ingiustizia epistemica appartengono invece a gruppi sociali dominanti, quali uomini, eterosessuali, persone di etnia bianca o, in ambito psichiatrico, medici o ricercatori.

Analisi sistematiche di come l'IA applicata alla ricerca e alla cura psichiatriche possa impattare l'ingiustizia epistemica sono ancora allo stadio primordiale. In quel che segue, cercherò di cominciare a colmare questa lacuna. Innanzitutto, offrirò una breve panoramica dei tipi di IA esistenti (§2.1) e del loro funzionamento (§2.2). Spiegherò quindi che cosa si intende quando si parla di ingiustizia epistemica (§3), e in particolare di ingiustizia epistemica in psichiatria (§3.2), per poi restringere il focus al rapporto tra ingiustizia epistemica e IA (§4). Infine, cercherò di meglio delineare la relazione che intercorre tra ingiustizia epistemica e IA nella ricerca e nella cura della malattia mentale, delineando i rischi e le potenzialità offerti da questa tecnologia (§5).

2. Intelligenza Artificiale

2.1. *Tipi di Intelligenza Artificiale*

Esistono tre categorie di IA, che si distinguono in base alle loro abilità cognitive (IBM Data and AI team 2023):

- La *Narrow Artificial Intelligence*, anche nota come *Weak AI*, è una categoria di IA che possiede solo un tipo specifico di abilità cognitive. Previo addestramento da parte dell'uomo, essa è in grado di assolvere compiti che richiedono l'esercizio esclusivo di tali abilità. Al momento, è l'unico tipo di IA esistente.
- La *General Artificial Intelligence*, nota anche come *Strong AI*, è per il momento non più di un'idea. È un tipo di Intelligenza Artificiale paragonabile a quella umana, in grado di assolvere compiti intellettuali in contesti diversi senza la supervisione dell'uomo.
- La *Super Artificial Intelligence* è, al pari della General Artificial Intelligence, puramente teorica. È un tipo di IA le cui abilità cognitive sono superiori a quelle umane.

2.2. *Come funziona la (Weak) AI?*

Da ora in avanti, ogni volta che utilizzerò il termine IA farò riferimento alla Weak AI, che, come detto, è l'unico tipo di IA esistente al momento. In quel che segue, ne illustrerò alcune caratteristiche, pertinenti all'applicazione presente e futura di questi sistemi nella cura e nella ricerca sulla malattia mentale.

Per assolvere i compiti che le vengono assegnati, la IA sfrutta in genere tecniche di *machine learning* (ML). Lo scopo delle tecniche di ML è quello di addestrare programmi in grado di trovare delle leggi o funzioni che leghino determinati input a determinati output (UC Berkeley School of Information 2020). Uno dei modelli più diffusi di ML è il *deep learning* (DL). Il DL utilizza reti neurali artificiali la cui struttura rassomiglia a quella delle connessioni neuronali umane (Google Cloud, n.d.*).* Più specificamente, tali reti sono organizzate in livelli: i nodi di ciascun livello hanno il compito di apprendere una caratteristica specifica dei dati, in un crescendo di complessità e astrazione. Ad esempio, in una rete neurale di tre livelli per il riconoscimento delle immagini, il primo livello di nodi potrebbe essere dedicato all'identificazione dei bordi, il secondo a quella delle figure e il terzo a quella degli oggetti. Nel processo di addestramento della rete, affinché i dati possano essere meglio classificati e la rete possa performare al meglio, i pesi delle connessioni tra i nodi vengono modificati tramite una serie di tecniche quali *supervised*, *unsupervised* e *reinforcement* learning. Nel supervised learning, i programmatori dividono i dati in input e output e addestrano il programma a trovare le funzioni che legano i primi ai secondi, di modo che esso sia poi in grado di predire automaticamente output a partire da nuovi input. Nel reinforcement learning, in aggiunta alle fasi del supervised learning, il programma riceve un incentivo ogni volta che predice correttamente un output a partire da un nuovo input. Infine, nell'unsupervised learning i dati non sono previamente classificati in input e output: il programma tenta quindi di distinguere autonomamente i primi dai secondi e di trovare una funzione che li leghi, utilizzando criteri di prossimità e di raggruppamento quali il *clustering*.

Indipendentemente dai dettagli più tecnici, due aspetti essenziali del funzionamento dei metodi di ML sono la *natura statistica* di tali metodi

e la *qualità dei dati* con cui l'IA viene allenata. Tali caratteristiche saranno fondamentali per spiegare alcuni aspetti della relazione tra IA e ingiustizia epistemica — anche in ambito psichiatrico — che sarà l'oggetto dei prossimi capitoli.

3. Ingiustizia epistemica

3.1. *Tipi di ingiustizia epistemica*

Tra i tipi di ingiustizie epistemiche evidenziate da Fricker, di particolare rilevanza sono l'ingiustizia testimoniale e quella ermeneutica.

L'ingiustizia testimoniale è definibile come l'ingiustificato discredito del contributo o della testimonianza epistemica di una persona non in virtù della violazione di regole epistemiche da parte di quest'ultima, ma a causa di pregiudizi contro la sua identità. Tali sono i casi delle donne che a pari o superiori qualificazioni e competenze dei colleghi maschi, non vengono promosse, o delle persone che soffrono di malattie mentali, ritenute testimoni inaffidabili e irrazionali.

L'ingiustizia ermeneutica riguarda invece il silenziamento o la misinterpretazione del vissuto di categorie sociali non dominanti, le cui esperienze non rientrano nell'orizzonte concettuale ed emotivo dei gruppi sociali dominanti. Tra i danni primari delle ingiustizie ermeneutiche figurano il mancato riconoscimento delle esperienze di determinati gruppi sociali e la privazione, ai danni di tali gruppi, delle risorse intellettuali per poter meglio comprendere, elaborare ed esprimere queste esperienze. Fricker adduce a tal proposito il concetto di molestia sessuale, che non esisteva prima degli anni Settanta del Novecento, perché la testimonianza femminile veniva considerata irrilevante o distorta da categorie di giudizio prettamente maschili.

È interessante notare che le ingiustizie epistemiche sono spesso intersezionali, ovvero che arrecano un danno epistemico a soggetti appartenenti contemporaneamente a più di un gruppo sociale oppresso. Ad esempio, la testimonianza e le esperienze di una donna di colore affetta da una malattia mentale possono essere oggetto di ingiustizia epistemica a causa della sua identità sessuale, etnica e sociale contemporaneamente.

3.2. *Ingiustizia epistemica nella ricerca e nella cura della malattia mentale*

È noto come nell'immaginario comune le persone che soffrono di malattie mentali siano spesso ingiustamente associate a irrazionalità e inaffidabilità (Parcesepe e Cabassa 2013; Rössler 2016). Meno noto invece è che esse siano vittime di frequenti ingiustizie epistemiche per mano di chi meglio dovrebbe comprenderle e sostenerle, ovvero medici, psichiatri e ricercatori in campo psichiatrico. Secondo Crichton, Carel e Kidd (2017), uno dei primi studi specifici sul tema, le persone che soffrono di malattie mentali sarebbero particolarmente a rischio di subire un'ingiustizia epistemica in ambito psichiatrico a causa di tre fattori: 1) gli effetti dei disturbi mentali sulle capacità cognitive e interpersonali; 2) la preferenza data a concetti e linguaggi medici nel contesto dei discorsi sulla malattia e la salute mentale a discapito del linguaggio adottato dai pazienti; 3) stereotipi negativi sulle persone che soffrono di malattie mentali, diffusi anche in ambito medico. Le ingiustizie epistemiche a danno delle persone affette da disturbi mentali si declinerebbero nell'ambito medico sia nella variante testimoniale che in quella ermeneutica. Il contributo epistemico di tali persone sarebbe infatti ingiustamente screditato anche quando si tratta di meglio comprendere e curare la malattia mentale, rendendoli vittime di ingiustizia testimoniale. Similmente, poiché il linguaggio medico e scientifico viene epistemicamente privilegiato nella descrizione dei disturbi delle malattie mentali a discapito dell'esperienza soggettiva dei pazienti, questi sono molto spesso oggetto di ingiustizia ermeneutica. Il grado di ingiustizia epistemica subito dai pazienti psichiatrici varia in base a diversi fattori, quali la diagnosi, con un maggior grado di ingiustizia epistemica perpetuato ai danni di chi soffre di deliri cognitivi o di condizioni che hanno una forte componente cognitiva. Al capo opposto dello spettro, invece, si colloca chi è vittima di ingiusta depatologizzazione, che si verifica quando la severità di un disturbo viene sottovalutata e ridotta a caratteristiche o stranezze della personalità: il disturbo ossessivo–compulsivo è in questo senso emblematico.

Secondo Anastasia Scrutton (2017), una via per mitigare l'ingiustizia epistemica subita dai pazienti psichiatrici in ambito medico è quella di dare spazio alle loro esperienze e al loro vissuto di malattia mentale, a cui, è bene ricordare, essi hanno un accesso epistemico privilegiato

(*first-person authority*). Questo non significa accettare acriticamente qualsiasi contributo epistemico del paziente, ma renderlo parte attiva del processo di diagnosi e di cura insieme al medico. Il risultato di prendere sul serio le esperienze di chi vive la malattia mentale avrebbe ripercussioni positive non solo sul paziente, ma anche sulla ricerca e la cura psichiatrica, permettendo una comprensione più approfondita dei disturbi psichiatrici e una migliore personalizzazione del percorso di cura. Particolare attenzione va infine prestata al linguaggio del paziente, che, come accennato prima, è spesso screditato perché non conforme ai canoni del linguaggio medico–scientifico prevalente nella descrizione e concettualizzazione dei disturbi mentali, ma che è invece fondamentale per meglio capirli e curarli.

Altre proposte di soluzioni che sono state avanzate al problema dell'ingiustizia epistemica in ambito psichiatrico (Kidd, Spencer e Carel 2025) esortano a una definizione più precisa della nozione di *giustizia* epistemica, che non può essere ridotta alla mera assenza di ingiustizie; al coinvolgimento nel processo di ricerca e cura delle malattie mentali di tutti gli attori appartenenti alla sfera sociale del paziente, inclusi il paziente stesso, membri familiari, amici, assistenti sociali e attivisti; all'adozione di una visione strutturale delle soluzioni migliorative, supportate da una progettazione realistica; alla promozione di un cambiamento di paradigma culturale circa la malattia mentale, senza il quale cambiamenti più locali rimarrebbero vani.

4. Ingiustizia epistemica e IA

Qual è dunque il rapporto che intercorre tra ingiustizia epistemica e IA? Essendo l'IA uno strumento, la risposta più ovvia a questa domanda sembrerebbe essere che essa è neutrale in relazione all'ingiustizia epistemica, e che il suo maggiore o minor grado di ingiustizia dipenderebbe da come la si usa o la si programma.

A ben vedere, però, la situazione è più complicata di quel che potrebbe sembrare. Secondo Kay, Kasirzadeh e Mohamed (2024), dalla letteratura sul tema si possono delineare quattro diverse forme di ingiustizia epistemica specificamente collegate all'IA:

Amplificazione di ingiustizia testimoniale. I programmi di ML sono essenzialmente strumenti statistici, che predicono l'output più probabile a partire da determinati input. Naturalmente, più il campione di dati sarà ampio, maggiore sarà l'accuratezza e la rilevanza epistemica dell'output. Tuttavia, come giustamente notato da alcuni autori (Miragoli 2024; Bender *et al.* 2021), questo implica che i sistemi di IA basati sul ML (ovvero, una grandissima parte dei sistemi di IA) saranno soggetti a *conformismo epistemico*. Il conformismo epistemico consiste nel "trattare una data informazione come epistemicamente rilevante solamente perché essa è statisticamente dominante" (Miragoli 2024, p.10). Come si può facilmente intuire, il conformismo epistemico dell'IA favorisce la diffusione delle informazioni virtuali statisticamente dominanti, che in tal caso coincidono con quelle prodotte dai gruppi sociali dominanti, in genere maschi bianchi sufficientemente ricchi da avere accesso a internet. Basti pensare che più del 60% degli utenti di Reddit negli Stati Uniti sono uomini di un'età compresa tra i 18 e i 29 anni, e che solamente il 15% circa degli autori di Wikipedia sono donne. Non è necessariamente un male, dal punto di vista epistemico, che le informazioni statisticamente dominanti siano quelle che vengono diffuse dall'IA, poiché questo potrebbe portare, per esempio, all'esclusione di ideologie violente di carattere minoritario. Tuttavia, il principio statistico su cui si basa l'IA potrebbe anche intossicare l'ambiente epistemico, non solo favorendo la diffusione di disinformazione, qualora essa dovesse diventare statisticamente dominante online, ma anche promuovendo il patrimonio epistemico dei gruppi sociali dominanti a discapito di quello dei gruppi sociali minoritari, in un processo di *calcificazione epistemica* (Hardalupas 2024). Un nodo centrale della questione è inoltre che conformismo e calcificazione epistemiche sembrano essere caratteristiche non accidentali ma congenite dell'IA, che, operando secondo logiche statistiche, è strutturalmente disegnata per amplificare i patrimoni epistemici dominanti. Tale fenomeno è ulteriormente esacerbato dal fatto che alcune esperienze non sono facilmente quantificabili dal punto di vista algoritmico, e quindi a rischio di essere escluse dal patrimonio epistemico "artificiale".

1. *Manipolazione di ingiustizia testimoniale*. La propagazione di forme di ingiustizia testimoniale può essere non solo accidentale, perché già

presente nei dati e nella visione del mondo con cui la macchina viene allenata, ma anche intenzionale, promossa da attori malevoli per silenziare e opprimere il contributo epistemico di gruppi sociali non dominanti. È questo, ad esempio, il caso in cui attori malintenzionati sfruttano l'incerta distinzione tra testimonianze reali e testimonianze fabbricate dall'IA per screditare individui o intere comunità. In quest'ottica si spiegano l'intervento di un candidato americano al Congresso che proclamava la falsità dei video online documentanti la morte di George Floyd per mano della polizia, e la guida per creare meme suprematisti aggirando i filtri di sicurezza che circolava sulla piattaforma 4chan.

2. *Ignoranza ermeneutica di tipo generativo*. Diversamente dagli esseri umani, l'IA manca di conoscenza derivante dall'esperienza vissuta e di consapevolezza culturale. Questo porta inevitabilmente tali sistemi a dare una rappresentazione falsata del patrimonio esperienziale e concettuale delle minoranze. A differenza delle ingiustizie e dell'ignoranza ermeneutiche perpetrate dagli esseri umani, che possono essere corrette attraverso l'educazione e lo scambio di idee, quelle causate dall'IA sono congenite alla macchina stessa. È a causa di ignoranza ermeneutica congenita che un programma generatore di immagini come *Midjourney* può creare un'immagine di personaggi storici come nativi americani e guerrieri feudali giapponesi in posa per una foto che sorridono da un orecchio all'altro, un'attitudine chiaramente americana ma estranea alle popolazioni rappresentate.
3. *Ingiustizia ermeneutica di accessibilità*. I bias di tipo identitario insiti nell'IA possono anche ostacolare l'accesso di gruppi minoritari alle nuove tecnologie, generando forme di ingiustizia ermeneutica. Ad esempio, i programmi di riconoscimento vocale automatico faticano a riconoscere la parlata inglese di persone afroamericane, con il risultato che tali utenti devono adattare i loro pattern enunciativi o rinunciare all'uso di queste tecnologie. Similmente, poiché l'IA è sostanzialmente anglocentrica, i non anglofoni hanno difficoltà ad accedere ad informazioni di qualità nella loro lingua madre.

Altri rischi epistemici legati all'IA, che possono contribuire ad alimentare le suddette ingiustizie, sono *l'inondamento epistemico*, quando l'utente non è più in grado di distinguere le informazioni veritiere da quelle false a

causa dell'eccessiva quantità di informazioni; la *frammentazione epistemica*, quando le persone con esperienze e vissuti non dominanti non riescono a unirsi in una comunità epistemica a causa della marginalizzazione di questi vissuti da parte dell'IA; il *soffocamento testimoniale*, qualora un agente epistemico reprima il proprio contributo perché sente che l'ambiente epistemico in cui si trova non lo valorizzerebbe sufficientemente.

5. IA e ingiustizia epistemica nella ricerca e nella cura della malattia mentale: rischi e opportunità

È giunto il momento di affrontare la questione centrale di questa riflessione, ovvero come l'uso dell'IA in ambito psichiatrico potrebbe influenzare l'ingiustizia epistemica, nel bene e nel male.

5.1. *Rischi*

5.1.1. IA come massima autorità epistemica

Si è già trattato di come l'IA potrebbe essere indebitamente considerata la massima autorità epistemica nei processi decisionali riguardanti la cura dei pazienti, e di come questo rischio sia alimentato da una eccessiva deferenza di alcuni clinici nei confronti dell'IA. Questo atteggiamento potrebbe andare a detrimento del contributo epistemico sia dei clinici stessi che dei pazienti: in particolare, il contributo epistemico dei pazienti psichiatrici nel percorso di cura potrebbe rimanere ancor più inascoltato qualora si credesse che le informazioni derivanti dagli algoritmi rappresentino una forma di conoscenza superiore rispetto a tutte le altre. Questa eventualità potrebbe verificarsi, per esempio, qualora si privilegiassero le informazioni derivanti da fenotipizzazione digitale e *sentiment analysis* a discapito delle esperienze soggettive di malattia mentale.

5.1.2. Biased datasets

Similmente, forme di ingiustizia testimoniale si potrebbero verificare qualora i datasets utilizzati per allenare i programmi di IA fossero

inquinati da fattori quali etichette stigmatizzanti utilizzate per classificare dati collegati alla malattia mentale e una indebita correlazione della severità della malattia con l'etnia[1]. Anche in questi casi, l'apporto epistemico del paziente potrebbe essere sottovalutato a favore degli output generati dall'IA a partire da dati epistemicamente controversi.

5.1.3. Marginalizzazione di esperienze non quantificabili

Alcune esperienze di malattia mentale non facilmente quantificabili potrebbero essere escluse dal patrimonio epistemico artificiale, con una conseguente marginalizzazione del contributo epistemico di alcuni pazienti.

5.1.4. Marginalizzazione del patrimonio linguistico ed esperienziale dei pazienti

La diffusione dell'IA nella cura della malattia mentale potrebbe anche dare origine a ingiustizie di tipo ermeneutico, qualora il programma privilegiasse linguaggi e concettualizzazioni di tipo medico–scientifico a discapito del bagaglio linguistico e concettuale dei pazienti. Essendo l'IA strutturalmente improntata al conformismo epistemico, è molto probabile che questo rischio si concretizzi, dato che i linguaggi e la concettualizzazione medico–scientifica della malattia mentale sono nettamente prevalenti rispetto a quelli soggettivi dei pazienti. Per esempio, i sistemi di IA potrebbero generare ingiustizia ermeneutica tramite la classificazione algoritmica di diagnosi psichiatriche e previsioni di probabilità circa i benefici di una determinata cura, che potrebbero ulteriormente sopraffare le voci dei pazienti che non si conformano ai linguaggi e agli approcci terapeutici prevalenti in ambito medico.

(1) Storicamente, si registra un grado di severità di alcune malattie mentali più elevato tra le persone di etnia non bianca. Tuttavia, questo dato è principalmente dovuto al fatto che le minoranze incontrano più frequentemente delle barriere che ne riducono l'accesso ai servizi di salute mentale, e vengono intercettati quando la malattia è ormai a uno stadio avanzato.

5.1.5. Ingiustizia partecipativa

L'ingiustizia partecipativa è una forma di ingiustizia testimoniale in cui una persona viene considerata una fonte attendibile di informazioni, ma non di contributi epistemici che possano avanzare la conoscenza, quali opinioni, ipotesi o riflessioni critiche. Secondo Pozzi e De Proost (2024) una mancata partecipazione di persone che soffrono di malattie mentali al design e alla revisione di programmi di IA per la salute mentale quali chatbots, esporrebbe i malati mentali a un'ingiustizia partecipativa. Essi si ridurrebbero infatti a meri oggetti di studio e non sarebbero partecipanti attivi nel processo di sviluppo epistemico dei programmi.

Emblematico in questo senso sembra essere il caso, descritto dagli autori, del chatbot Karim, creato per offrire supporto psicologico ai profughi siriani, ma disegnato e implementato senza la partecipazione di alcun profugo. A questo dato si aggiunge la considerazione che Karim è l'adattamento di Tessa, chatbot disegnato per supportare persone che soffrono di ansia e depressione moderata negli Stati Uniti, quindi con un'esperienza e un background culturale molto diversi da quello dei profughi. I profughi siriani sarebbero dunque stati vittima di ingiustizia partecipativa, poiché trattati come oggetti piuttosto che come produttori di conoscenza.

5.2. *Opportunità*

L'IA potrebbe tuttavia anche rappresentare un'opportunità per contrastare con maggiore efficacia l'ingiustizia epistemica già presente in ambito psichiatrico.

5.2.1. Individuazione di ingiustizia testimoniale nei dati virtuali

Con l'aiuto delle persone che soffrono di malattie mentali, l'IA può essere usata per individuare su larga scala i contesti, i perpetratori e la prevalenza dell'ingiustizia testimoniale online. In particolare, essa potrebbe servire a rilevare quelle narratizioni che chi soffre di malattia mentale considera epistemicamente ingiuste in un *corpus* più o meno ampio di dati.

5.2.2. Generazione di risorse ermeneutiche

L'IA può anche essere usata per l'espressione di esperienze lontane da quelle comuni. Ad esempio, un paziente affetto da schizofrenia potrebbe trovare utile comunicare le proprie allucinazioni ai medici o ai familiari attraverso un programma di generazione di immagini. Similmente, come recentemente notato da Elisabetta Lalumera (2024), la fenotipizzazione digitale (i.e., l'identificazione di pattern comportamentali osservabili quali risposte emotive, processi cognitivi, movimenti, a partire da dati virtuali, quali frequenza cardiaca, risposte a questionari sul benessere psicologico, raccolti tramite l'interazione passiva o attiva del paziente con strumenti tecnologici), un particolare tipo di IA, potrebbe servire a combattere ingiustizie testimoniali ed ermeneutiche in ambito psichiatrico. L'esempio fittizio creato da Lalumera ha al centro A, una professoressa universitaria di quarant'anni, divorziata con due figli, che per tutta la sua vita ha sofferto di disturbi di attenzione, episodi depressivi, fatica nel regolare le proprie emozioni e impulsività nella gestione dei soldi. Leggendo, A viene a conoscenza dell'esistenza di ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), un disturbo psichiatrico nei cui sintomi riconosce molti dei suoi meccanismi emotivi e cognitivi. A prende quindi appuntamento da uno psicologo, ma quest'ultimo dismette l'ipotesi della donna perché ella ha una vita professionale e privata soddisfacente, e a prima vista non sembra mostrare segni di sofferenza psichica. Passano gli anni, e nascono degli strumenti di fenotipizzazione digitale in grado di rilevare i sintomi di ADHD negli adulti. A si sottopone ai nuovi test e risulta positiva a ADHD, confermando i sospetti che aveva avuto in passato. In questo caso, secondo Lalumera, la fenotipizzazione digitale contribuisce a mitigare sia l'ingiustizia testimoniale di cui A era stata vittima per mano dello psicologo (che aveva dismesso il contributo epistemico di A in base allo stereotipo che i pazienti non posseggono autorità epistemica sulle loro malattie e a quello che una persona malata non può avere successo nella vita professionale e privata), sia l'ingiustizia ermeneutica, validando la narrativa e i sentimenti di A sulla propria malattia. Lalumera risponde anche all'obiezione che la fenotipizzazione digitale sia sostanzialmente neutrale nei confronti dell'ingiustizia epistemica, mitigandola quando conferma il

racconto del paziente e amplificandola quando lo smentisce. Secondo Lalumera, l'IA può diventare uno strumento di oppressione epistemica solamente qualora a essa sia attribuita una priorità epistemica non giustificata, ovvero indipendentemente dal suo livello di accuratezza. Se a un test di gravidanza, la cui accuratezza è del 99%, è razionale attribuire priorità epistemica rispetto alle sensazioni del paziente, non è invece ragionevole ascriverla agli attuali strumenti di IA impiegati in ambito psichiatrico, la cui accuratezza è molto difficile da stimare. In secondo luogo, anche qualora l'IA per la ricerca e la cura della malattia mentale raggiungesse una accuratezza maggiore, essa non potrebbe comunque essere considerata l'ultima autorità epistemica nella scelta del piano terapeutico, che deve sempre nascere da un dialogo tra medico e paziente, e tenere in conto dei desideri, valori e necessità di quest'ultimo. In conclusione, secondo Lalumera, l'ingiustizia epistemica non sarebbe connaturata alla fenotipizzazione digitale, ma dipenderebbe dalla mancata comprensione del funzionamento di queste nuove tecnologie e dei loro output.

6. Conclusione

L'applicazione dell'IA alla ricerca e alla cura della malattia mentale è ancora agli esordi, ma emergono già alcune caratteristiche di questi sistemi che potrebbero esacerbare preesistenti ingiustizie epistemiche di tipo testimoniale, ermeneutico e partecipativo. In particolare, l'IA sembra presentarsi come una forza conservatrice e amplificatrice del patrimonio epistemico dei gruppi sociali dominanti, a discapito dei patrimoni epistemici dei gruppi sociali svantaggiati. Per quanto riguarda la ricerca e la cura della malattia mentale, questo si traduce in un'amplificazione del patrimonio epistemico medico–clinico a discapito di quello esperienziale dei pazienti, con importanti ripercussioni di tipo morale ed epistemico, culminanti in forme di ingiustizia testimoniale, ermeneutica e partecipativa.

Parallelamente, l'IA potrebbe anche rivelarsi un utile strumento per combattere l'ingiustizia testimoniale ed ermeneutica che già affligge chi soffre di malattie mentali, generando nuove risorse ermeneutiche

e contribuendo a individuare narrazioni epistemicamente distorte sulla malattia mentale nei dati online.

La via più promettente per limitare i rischi e massimizzare le potenzialità epistemiche dei sistemi di IA in ambito psichiatrico sembra essere quella di suscitare nei clinici che li utilizzano e nei tecnici che li programmano una maggiore consapevolezza dei meccanismi e dei pericoli dell'ingiustizia epistemica legati alle nuove tecnologie, insieme a un serio coinvolgimento dei malati nella fase di design di tali strumenti.

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QUESTIONI ETICO–SOCIALI LEGATE ALL'INTELLIGENZA ARTIFICIALE
VERSO UNA COLONIZZAZIONE DELLA SFERA PERSONALE?

Daniel Toscano Lopez

Abstract: This article aims to analyze some of the challenges and ethical–social implications of Artificial Intelligence (AI). To achieve this, we propose as a starting point the ambivalent nature of AI, which seduces us with its siren song because it is a formidable tool for solving countless problems and supporting decision–making. But it's also frightening because of the potential risks that technological systems, machines, artifacts or robots that operate on the basis of algorithms pose to our way of life. Second, we take a brief historical tour of AI, highlighting some of the milestones and historical–scientific conditions that have made it possible, such as cybernetics, the Turing Test, and the Dartmouth Conference. Third, we examine two scenarios based on the notion of "rarity," one educational and the other legal, in order to raise, fourth, how "rarity" awakens two dispositions of the mind that are ultimately complementary ways of positioning oneself and preparing oneself internally to assimilate something "too big" like AI systems. Finally, we raise some ethical considerations regarding AI as a tool or "co–pilot" serving not only human interests but also the natural environment. Given the immense power of AI and algorithms, shared responsibility is required, along with the promotion of transparent practices, education and pedagogy for technological literacy, and "inclusive global justice".

L'articolo si propone di analizzare alcune questioni etiche e sociali sollevate dall'introduzione e dall'utilizzo dell'Intelligenza Artificiale (IA). A tal fine, in primo luogo, considereremo la natura ambivalente dell'IA che, da un lato ci seduce con il suo canto da sirena ma, dall'altro lato, rappresenta uno strumento formidabile per risolvere innumerevoli problemi e supportare il processo decisionale. Tuttavia, essa presenta anche aspetti inquietanti per i potenziali rischi che i sistemi tecnologici, le macchine, gli artefatti o i robot che operano in base ad algoritmi potrebbero comportare rispetto al nostro stile di vita. In secondo luogo, faremo un breve *excursus* storico sull'IA, evidenziando alcune tappe fondamentali e le condizioni storico–scientifiche che hanno reso possibile l'avvento dell'IA, come ad

esempio la cibernetica, il Test di Turing e la Conferenza di Dartmouth. In terzo luogo, esamineremo due scenari basati sulla nozione di "eccezionalità", in ambito educativo e in ambito legale, per poi, in quarto luogo, sollevare la questione dello "straniamento" che risveglia due disposizioni della mente che sono, in ultima istanza, modi complementari di prepararsi internamente ad assimilare qualcosa di "troppo grande", come i sistemi di IA. Infine, vengono sollevate alcune considerazioni etiche riguardo all'IA, in quanto si tratta di uno strumento al servizio non solo degli interessi umani, ma anche dell'ambiente naturale. Dato il grande potere dell'IA e degli algoritmi, è necessaria una responsabilità condivisa, la promozione di pratiche di trasparenza, di educazione e pedagogia della conoscenza della tecnologia e infine, ma non da ultimo, di una forma di "giustizia globale".

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Rarity, Ethics, Emotional Illiteracy, Moral vertigo

Parole chiave: Intelligenza Artificiale, Eccezionalità, Etica, Analfabetismo emotivo, Vertigine morale

1. Introduzione

Si assiste oggi all'esplosione e all'espansione dell'IA in ambiti diversi dell'agire umano. La troviamo presente e applicata, infatti, nell'e–commerce, nel marketing, nei dispositivi mobili e domestici, nelle piattaforme dei social media, nei motori di ricerca, nell'industria, nell'agricoltura, nella gestione del traffico, nelle applicazioni GPS e in ambito medico, per citare solo alcuni esempi (Coeckelberg 2020). Inoltre, si discute di IA ai convegni e negli incontri accademici e scientifici, nei media, nei nuovi programmi di formazione post–laurea, nelle leggi e nei regolamenti e persino nell'arte dove viene utilizzata come strumento per la creazione di opere artistiche.

Il potere dell'IA si manifesta in maniere diverse e in ambiti distinti ed essa ha un forte impatto sia sui singoli individui che sulla società nel suo insieme. In meteorologia, per esempio, l'IA supporta le stazioni nella produzione di bollettini meteorologici che avvisano gli utenti sulla qualità dell'aria, emettendo previsioni sempre più precise con l'ausilio di supercomputer (Bettini 2024). Inoltre, offre un'importante capacità predittiva grazie alla gestione di grandi quantità di dati e alla velocità con cui elabora le informazioni (Gastaldo, Caciamani e De Savino 2024, p. 31).

Dal punto di vista finanziario, l'IA utilizza l'apprendimento automatico per rilevare precocemente le crisi finanziarie (Bartel, Hanke e Petric 2024), anticipando potenziali turbolenze nei mercati finanziari e analizzando in maniera combinata notizie economiche e grandi volumi di dati.

La medicina predittiva e personalizzata del ventunesimo secolo, che utilizza algoritmi di IA, ha il potenziale per ottimizzare in modo efficiente le risorse mediche ed eseguire interventi chirurgici robotici assistiti dall'IA, operando in presenza o da remoto su spazi anatomici di difficile accesso e ottenendo movimenti impossibili per le mani di un chirurgo umano (Knudsen e Ghaffar 2024). Inoltre, potrebbe essere utilizzata per la diagnosi precoce delle malattie nelle fasi iniziali attraverso l'analisi delle immagini in vari campi, quali la radiologia, l'oftalmologia, la dermatologia e la cardiologia. Di conseguenza, "un potenziale vantaggio dell'IA consisterebbe nella capacità di identificare nel tempo lievi alterazioni dello stato di salute di un individuo, indicative di una patologia sottostante e nella sua diagnosi precoce" (Vidali 2024, p. 134).

Infine, nel contesto di uno scenario futuro in cui i cambiamenti climatici, le inondazioni e gli insetti nocivi inducono a riflettere sull'importanza di raddoppiare la produzione di colture (Kiran, Narayana e Talamar, 2020), i governi, le istituzioni preposte, gli scienziati e gli agricoltori stanno lavorando per costruire soluzioni sostenibili, a partire dall'utilizzo, ad esempio, del machine learning per provare a fronteggiare il compito titanico di fornire cibo a 2 miliardi di persone in più entro il 2050.

L'IA ci seduce con il suo canto di sirena, perché è uno strumento formidabile per risolvere una molteplicità di problemi e perché può fornire un supporto notevole nei processi decisionali. Essa spaventa però anche per i rischi potenziali con cui i sistemi tecnologici, le macchine, gli artefatti, i dispositivi o i robot che funzionano sulla base di algoritmi possono avere, considerando il loro impatto sull'ambiente sociale, sulle nostre pratiche e abitudini e sui nostri stili di vita.

2. Il punto di partenza

Nel suo testo *La società del rischio*, Ulrich Beck parla, da un lato, dei pericoli naturali che minacciavano la vita dell'uomo premoderno, come

terremoti, tsunami, epidemie, siccità e inondazioni, nonché eruzioni vulcaniche. Inoltre, questo tipo di rischio era legato alla "violenza imprevedibile, praticata da altri esseri umani (ladri, pirati, mercenari, invasori, ecc.)" (Vázquez 2005, p. 97). D'altra parte, il sociologo tedesco sottolinea un altro insieme di rischi tipici della società globalizzata di oggi: la contaminazione nucleare o chimica, le sostanze nocive e tossiche presenti nell'aria, nel suolo e negli alimenti che attaccano piante e animali, nonché le malattie legate alla civiltà. La peculiarità di questo tipo di rischio risiede nel fatto che esso deriva dallo sviluppo tecno–scientifico che provoca danni sistematici, irreversibili e impercettibili alla percezione umana.

L'IA viene presentata come uno strumento formidabile per prevedere e gestire tali rischi. Tuttavia, oltre alle opportunità offerte all'umanità, questa tecnologia comporta anche altri rischi e sfide legati alla sicurezza, alla salute, alla manipolazione, alla fallibilità, alla discriminazione, all'uso improprio, alle violazioni della privacy e della dignità e all'elaborazione illecita dei dati, per citarne alcuni.

Stiamo subendo una trasformazione a opera di sistemi algoritmici, tecno–sociali e radicati nei processi di digitalizzazione globale e nell'emergere del capitalismo digitale, senza riuscire a tenere il passo e, in molti casi, senza riuscire a comprenderne il funzionamento. Per questo motivo, quando ci troviamo di fronte a questi dispositivi e sistemi tecnologici, abbiamo spesso una doppia sensazione: da un lato, di familiarità, dovuta alla loro vicinanza, ma dall'altro, di "estraneità", per la loro natura insolita.

Tra il fascino e la paura suscitati dall'IA, i cittadini di oggi provano una sorta di "vertigine morale" (Sandel 2007), un'inquietudine che li porta a rapportarsi a questi sistemi tecnologici come se fossero emotivamente analfabeti (Anders 1988). Se la vertigine morale è una preoccupazione irrisolta, conseguenza del fatto che gli esseri umani oscillano tra fascino e paura nei confronti dei sistemi di IA, a causa della loro ampia gamma di opzioni e della velocità con cui stanno trasformando la società e gli individui, d'altra parte si rileva una sorta di analfabetismo emotivo, risultato dell'incapacità di interpretare i processi e le pratiche introdotti dall'IA nella nostra vita quotidiana senza essere in grado di riflettere su come questi influenzino le nostre questioni personali e intime.

Dobbiamo quindi riflettere criticamente su ciò che stiamo facendo con l'IA e su cosa questa tecnologia farà a noi. Dobbiamo chiederci: in che modo l'ipertrofia dei sistemi di IA potrebbe influire sulle persone? Da cosa nasce la sensazione di "straniamento" nei confronti dei sistemi e degli algoritmi di Intelligenza Artificiale? Dal momento che non li comprendiamo appieno, restano avvolti da un'aura di mistero e finiscono per prendere decisioni al posto nostro.

3. Radici storiche e scientifiche dell'IA

In generale, l'IA può essere collocata all'interno delle tecnologie emergenti, come le nanotecnologie, le biotecnologie, le scienze informatiche e cognitive, in particolare è legata a queste ultime ed è caratterizzata da uno stretto rapporto con la robotica e le interfacce cervello–macchina. Sebbene non esista una definizione standard di IA, poiché il suo concetto si è evoluto nel tempo, essa può essere intesa in vari sensi, sempre limitati. Ad esempio, può essere intesa come un sistema automatizzato, come la capacità di una macchina di eseguire compiti che richiedono l'apprendimento, il ragionamento e la percezione umana o anche come una disciplina che fa parte dell'informatica. Il termine si riferisce anche a una serie di tecnologie diverse che vanno dall'apprendimento automatico all'elaborazione del linguaggio naturale.

Senza l'intenzione di ridurla agli schemi angusti di una definizione, l'IA può essere intesa come "la capacità di una macchina di svolgere funzioni cognitive che associamo alla mente umana, come percepire, ragionare, apprendere, interagire con un ambiente, risolvere problemi e perfino esercitare la creatività" (McKinsey & Company 2023). Da parte sua, il regolamento della Commissione Europea definisce l'IA in termini di:

> Un sistema automatizzato progettato per funzionare con livelli di autonomia variabili e che può presentare adattabilità dopo la diffusione e che, per obiettivi espliciti o impliciti, deduce dall'input che riceve come generare output quali previsioni, contenuti, raccomandazioni o decisioni che possono influenzare ambienti fisici o virtuali" (Regulation EU 2024).

Negli anni ’40 e ’50 diverse tappe fondamentali hanno rappresentato il punto di partenza dell’IA.

Il primo è la cibernetica di Norbert Wiener. Nel libro *Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*, pubblicato nel 1948, il matematico americano, cercando di rispondere al problema del controllo della comunicazione tra animali e macchine, concepisce la cibernetica come “la scienza che studia la progettazione e la realizzazione di sistemi artificiali in grado di autoprogrammarsi” (Dedicated 2020).

Allo stesso modo, Wiener riteneva che queste macchine avrebbero sostituito l’uomo nel suo ruolo di agente e che sarebbero state utilizzate per studiare l’intelligenza. Durante la Seconda guerra mondiale, Wiener stava cercando di risolvere il problema pratico di inventare una macchina in grado di registrare il movimento degli aerei nemici e di inviare queste informazioni per permettere il posizionamento strategico dei cannoni. Oltre a Wiener, John von Neumann contribuì allo sviluppo della cibernetica indagandone i fondamenti matematici e logici e dando origine alla Teoria generale degli automi, mentre Claude Shannon lo fece sviluppando la Teoria dell’informazione.

La seconda pietra angolare è stata il cosiddetto Test di Turing, ideato per verificare non se le macchine in generale siano in grado di pensare, ma se una determinata macchina sia intelligente o meno. Nel 1950, nell’articolo *Computing Machinery and Intelligence*, il matematico britannico Alan Turing avanzò l’ipotesi che una macchina potesse imitare il comportamento della mente umana. Questa volta la motivazione era la necessità di decifrare i messaggi nazisti e, per questo, Turing lavorò per gli inglesi, decifrando le posizioni e le rotte dei sottomarini tedeschi, nel tentativo di garantire che i convogli di rifornimento provenienti dagli Stati Uniti e dal Canada non venissero compromessi nel corso dei combattimenti.

Il terzo evento fu la “Dartmouth Summer Research Conference on Artificial Intelligence”, organizzata nel 1956 da John McCarthy, Marvin L. Minsky e Claude E. Shannon, dove fu sollevato il problema delle “macchine intelligenti”. Lì, personaggi come Herbert Simon e Allen Newell si incontrarono per affrontare la questione dell’IA rispetto alla possibilità di “rendere una macchina in grado di esibire

comportamenti che sarebbero chiamati intelligenti se fossero prodotti da un essere umano" (McCarthy *et al.* 2006). La conferenza promosse la ricerca sullo sviluppo e l'uso di macchine in grado di svolgere compiti considerati come tipici dell'intelletto umano e del comportamento intelligente.

Da allora, il progresso della ricerca nel campo dell'IA è stato inarrestabile, grazie alla convergenza tra cibernetica, teoria dell'informazione, informatica, ragionamento formale, ricerca e sviluppo di reti neurali, nonché al contributo di discipline come la filosofia, la linguistica e le neuroscienze. Tuttavia, il percorso dell'IA non è stato privo di insidie: si pensi agli anni '80, quando i sistemi esperti erano costosi da mantenere, incapaci di apprendere e con la possibilità di commettere errori, o al progetto informatico di "quinta generazione" fallito in Giappone, che mirava a sviluppare computer che utilizzassero l'IA.

Recentemente, i sistemi di IA sono stati progettati con diversi livelli di complessità. Alcuni sono progettati e calibrati per svolgere compiti specifici e limitati (IA stretta, indicata in inglese con l'espressione *narrow AI*), come la traduzione da una lingua in un'altra o la classificazione delle immagini. Altri sistemi utilizzano l'apprendimento automatico basato principalmente sull'inferenza statistica anziché sulla deduzione logica. Si tratta comunque di sistemi di IA che si limitano a eseguire le istruzioni fornite dal programmatore. In un contesto più ipotetico, alcuni ricercatori hanno voluto sviluppare un'Intelligenza Artificiale Generale, ovvero un sistema unico in grado di svolgere qualsiasi compito alla portata della mente umana. Anche per alcuni transumanisti, questo tipo di tecnologia potrebbe superare la capacità intellettuale umana fino a diventare una "superintelligenza", una macchina più intelligente di noi. Nick Bostrom, nel suo libro *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies*, evidenzia i possibili rischi e pericoli che comporterebbe l'invenzione della superintelligenza, ma riflette anche sulla necessità di introdurre valori nell'IA. Per raggiungere questo obiettivo, propone una "normatività indiretta" che non specifica un particolare contenuto morale, ma piuttosto stabilisce criteri astratti forniti in anticipo dall'essere umano affinché l'IA possa aderirvi.

La proliferazione e l'implementazione delle cosiddette "macchine intelligenti" nella vita di tutti i giorni sono avvenute a ritmo sostenuto nel

XXI secolo e sono considerate come uno dei risultati più emblematici della "quarta rivoluzione industriale". In questo senso, la digitalizzazione del mondo, i Big Data, l'informazione, gli algoritmi, l'automazione e *l'Internet of Things* contribuiscono a definire progressivamente un'atmosfera di artificializzazione della vita umana, che trasforma i modi in cui gli esseri umani si relazionano con sé stessi, con gli altri esseri umani e animali non umani e con le cose.

4. Alcune esperienze inquietanti

Esaminiamo due scenari adottando il concetto di "eccezionalità" come risorsa analitica, poiché l' "eccezionalità" metterà in luce come sia la vertigine morale sia l'analfabetismo emotivo possano rappresentare due disposizioni mentali diverse, ma complementari a fronte della proliferazione e dell'emergere di algoritmi e sistemi di IA.

Il primo scenario è una scuola in Cina che ha utilizzato telecamere, chip di tracciamento e fasce per la lettura delle onde cerebrali (fasce per la testa con un sistema di colori che permettono di decifrare il livello di attenzione dei bambini), non tanto per valutare i contenuti o le abilità apprese dagli studenti in una determinata materia, ma per studiare direttamente il loro comportamento, ovvero il loro grado di attenzione e concentrazione. Attraverso telecamere che catturano i movimenti facciali e i cui risultati vengono inviati a genitori e insegnanti, viene stabilita una meticolosa sorveglianza e un controllo dei movimenti del corpo al fine di migliorare le loro prestazioni di apprendimento(Liu 2019).

Il secondo scenario è rappresentato dal sistema legale americano, dove tribunali e polizia hanno fatto ampio uso dell'IA nell'amministrazione della giustizia per prevedere i crimini, in uno sforzo massiccio per combattere e prevenire la criminalità, nonché per migliorare l'efficacia e l'efficienza del processo decisionale giudiziario. Un esempio è rappresentato dal caso di Eric Loomis, nel 2016, per il quale il sistema di giustizia penale nordamericano ha utilizzato il software Compas per elaborare un rapporto con l'assistenza dell'IA, classificando Loomis come "ad alto rischio per la comunità". La pena inflittagli è stata più alta del previsto, dato che è stato condannato a 5 anni di carcere e a 6 anni di

libertà vigilata. Nonostante la sentenza sia stata impugnata, la Corte Suprema del Wisconsin non ha ammesso alcuna replica: ha concluso infatti che nel processo di predisposizione del verbale che ha portato alla sentenza sono stati utilizzati "solo dati pubblicamente disponibili e dati forniti dall'imputato che egli stesso avrebbe potuto negare, spiegare o verificare" (Criminal Law 2017).

Questi due scenari, che possono sembrare fittizi ma non lo sono, hanno come caratteristica principale l'uso dell'intelligenza artificiale e come denominatore comune il potere di trasformare la realtà che essa comporta. Gli esempi delineati condividono la caratteristica dell'esperienza della "eccezionalità" o dello "straniamento". Con il termine "eccezionalità" o "straniamento" ci riferiamo a fenomeni, pratiche o oggetti che si presentano alla nostra percezione rappresentando una sorta di sfida, perché resistono a essere compresi secondo i più tradizionali schemi cognitivi.

Entrambi gli esempi menzionati implicano un livello significativo di artificialità, in cui oggetti intelligenti, algoritmi e dati proliferano nella vita di tutti i giorni, assumendo il controllo della situazione. Ogni scena non è un a priori o qualcosa di già dato nella realtà, ma il risultato di un dispositivo tecnologico che dispone la scena in un certo modo fino a farla diventare un mezzo meccanico e artificiale.

La sensazione di straniamento suscitata dal caso della scuola in Cina deriva, tra l'altro, dall'utilizzo di un oggetto quotidiano come la "fascia" in un contesto che è, per l'appunto, un centro didattico, ma che, proprio per questo, la fa risultare inquietante. La "fascia intelligente", collegata a telecamere, computer e chip, non ha lo scopo di abbellire, ma piuttosto di monitorare e fornire dati sull'attenzione e sulla concentrazione degli studenti. La dimensione inquietante è legata al fatto che un oggetto di uso quotidiano venga utilizzato per monitorare e controllare il comportamento umano e che questo venga giustificato con fini educativi. Quando gli oggetti intelligenti o "non cose" vengono collegati all'IA e a Internet, diventano sistemi informativi con cui comunichiamo e interagiamo (Han 2021a). In questo caso, il rapporto con le persone, gli oggetti e l'ambiente è mediato dal calcolo e dalla precisione degli algoritmi.

Nell'esempio giuridico, la cosa strana consiste nel dare risalto ai dati personali e privati più che a quelli dei giudici e degli imputati, perché

l'informazione estratta, affinata e analizzata da un algoritmo è la chiave che permette di emettere la sentenza penale: "Come individui, non agiamo come semplici destinatari dei frutti di queste analisi di dati: al contrario, siamo i dati che vengono utilizzati per prendere decisioni su di noi, a volte con profonde conseguenze" (Kearns e Roth 2019, p. 12). È sempre più comune che la comunicazione avvenga da macchina a macchina senza la partecipazione umana (Floridi 2022, p. 25).

I due esempi precedenti mostrano come gli esseri umani siano subordinati alle decisioni algoritmiche, al punto da essere considerati una sorta di esperimento tecnologico. Si può parlare di "sperimentare" perché l'algoritmo agisce attraverso un potere che plasma il comportamento degli individui, in particolare di quelli presi di mira dall'intervento. Gli esseri umani non sono solo soggetti che producono oggetti tecnici, ma anche oggetti e bersagli di interventi tecnologici, poiché l'intelligenza artificiale e gli algoritmi diventano macchine che estraggono dati da noi.

I contesti degli "algoritmi educativi" e della "giustizia algoritmica" non solo stabiliscono nuove pratiche – come la sorveglianza, il controllo, la gestione e la previsione –, ma trasformano anche la realtà, creano nuovi ambienti, hanno un impatto sulla vita delle persone, rimodellano il modo in cui ci relazioniamo con le cose e le persone, ristrutturano le istituzioni e ridefiniscono gli obiettivi. Gli esempi presentati non sono solo familiari, dato che si verificano nella vita quotidiana delle relazioni umane e sociali, ma comportano anche l'"eccezionalità" di porre le relazioni con le non–cose, le informazioni, gli algoritmi e Internet su un piano diverso. Ora, cosa succede quando il modo in cui ci relazioniamo con noi stessi è mediato da oggetti tecnologici guidati dall'intelligenza artificiale e da algoritmi, anche in questioni vitali come la cura di sé? Come vedremo presto, l'IA si sta ormai introducendo in spazi personali e intimi come, ad esempio, la solitudine, mettendoci di fronte agli oggetti tecnici in una posizione di vertigine morale e di analfabetismo emotivo.

5. Vertigine morale e analfabetismo emotivo di fronte all'IA

Lo scenario seguente è il risultato dell'applicazione dell'IA alla vita e alle esigenze sociali e private delle persone. Realbotix© offre umanoidi

dotati di un "tocco umano", sia di sesso maschile che femminile, e può metterli in connessione con varie piattaforme di IA. I clienti possono creare un design personalizzato per ciascuno di essi. Sebbene i robot siano programmabili per scopi commerciali, come consulenze mediche o assistenza accademica, un'IA degna di nota per le persone single è chiamata Aria ed è stata sviluppata per interagire con gli esseri umani che soffrono di solitudine (Kalil 2024). Questa applicazione solleva importanti interrogativi su come la tecnologia influenzi le nostre emozioni e le relazioni sociali e umane. Questo utilizzo dell'IA come compagna per alleviare la solitudine ci riporta all'ambientazione futuristica e immaginaria creata da Kazuo Ishiguro nel romanzo *Klara e il sole*, in cui viene presentata la storia di Klara, un androide che è anche la protagonista e la voce narrante della storia. Nel romanzo, l'androide ha il compito di prendersi cura di una giovane donna, aiutandola a liberarsi dalla tristezza e dalla malattia che la affliggono (Ishiguro 2021).

In questo caso, che potremmo definire come "cura algoritmica", l'"eccezionalità" è legata ad alcuni aspetti particolari: in primo luogo, nel tipo di relazione che si instaura tra un essere umano e un oggetto tecnologico che non ha lo *status* di persona e che opera secondo la logica del calcolo algoritmico. È curioso che dall'interazione tra un essere umano e un androide possa nascere una relazione emotiva, in cui gli esseri umani vengono sostituiti da ruoli di cura, compassione, amore ed empatia. L'androide si relaziona con l'umano come se fosse una persona o un animale domestico, in un tipo di legame che non è, in senso stretto, affettivo, ma piuttosto di sostituzione o simulazione. In secondo luogo, la pratica assistiva che si sta affermando nella vita di tutti i giorni è strana, ma l'androide ha lo scopo di impedire alle persone di sentirsi sole. Tuttavia, per tutto questo tempo, il futuro dipende sempre dalla tecnologia. Per aumentare la sensazione di benessere, le persone trovano supporto emotivo in un compagno virtuale che offre consigli personalizzati su richiesta.

Sebbene sia vero che l'IA può aiutare gli utenti a gestire le proprie emozioni, modificando i modelli di pensiero negativi, resta da chiedersi se, in senso stretto, queste applicazioni possano essere considerate empatiche, in quanto si tratta di strumenti complementari che non potranno mai sostituire l'intervento umano. Con i sistemi di IA stiamo

assistendo a una colonizzazione di tutte le attività umane da parte di algoritmi e a un'implementazione sempre più ampia della pratica di delega del processo decisionale alla tecnologia? In che misura la nostra società, sempre più cablata e wireless, è tecnologicamente interconnessa, ma al contempo disconnessa dagli altri e dalla natura? In che misura l'IA può erodere la nostra capacità decisionale?

L'eccezionalità dello scenario della "cura algoritmica" fa emergere una predisposizione riguardo al posizionamento degli esseri umani nei confronti dell'IA. Si tratta di un modo per prepararsi internamente ad assimilare qualcosa di "troppo grande", come l'IA, e che adotta due esperienze: la vertigine morale e l'analfabetismo emotivo.

La società odierna è un sistema socio–tecnologico complesso, costituito da interazioni tra persone, cose, dispositivi, dati, algoritmi e robot. Ecco perché noi cittadini ci troviamo di fronte alla crescente esplosione di artefatti altamente interconnessi e di "dispositivi intelligenti", situazione che ci fa sentire sopraffatti dal punto di vista morale e ci rende analfabeti dal punto di vista emotivo. Inoltre, viviamo quotidianamente immersi nel fenomeno della digitalizzazione del mondo e in un regime informativo in cui l'accesso alle informazioni è sinonimo di potere (Han 2021b).

La vertigine morale è provocata dal disagio e dal senso di instabilità che proviamo quando siamo combattuti tra il fascino di un oggetto tecnologico programmato per prendersi cura delle persone e la paura che l'empatia, l'amore e la compassione vengano completamente sostituiti. Questo è dovuto all'ansia generata dalla tecnologia e dalla sua funzione assistenziale, nonché al fatto che la tecnologia sta sostituendo la realtà. La vertigine morale consiste nel non sapere quale strada prendere. Se si sceglie di accettare la tecnologia nel suo ruolo assistenziale, allora si è sulla strada della neofilia, ovvero dell'accettazione della novità e dell'innovazione. Tuttavia, se si sceglie di negarlo, si intraprende la strada della neofobia, ovvero della paura e dello scetticismo nei confronti della tecnologia.

L'analfabetismo emotivo è il risultato dell'incapacità di interpretare i processi e le pratiche che l'IA instaura nella nostra vita quotidiana e che influenzano le nostre questioni personali e intime. Utilizzando l'assistente virtuale con indifferenza e senza riflettere sulle conseguenze

dell'umanizzazione dell'androide, l'utente rischia di perdere la capacità di riflettere. D'altra parte, potrebbe perdere la capacità di prendere decisioni e di articolare il proprio spazio di solitudine, dovendo ricorrere a un artifizio. L'analfabetismo emotivo è causato da due fattori. Il primo è dovuto all'ipertrofia dell'IA, perché gli algoritmi potrebbero diventare così invasivi da sovrastarci completamente, offuscando anche la nostra capacità di comprensione. La seconda ragione è dovuta all'atrofia del desiderio, che ci rende incapaci di prendere decisioni e ci lascia in una posizione di ricezione passiva e acritica della tecnologia.

Pertanto, una prima sfida che l'affermarsi dell'IA nel contesto degli affari privati e intimi, legati alla sfera dei bisogni e delle relazioni personali, comporta è quella di imparare a porre dei limiti all'interferenza arbitraria nella vita privata, perché i sistemi di IA sono emersi nel cuore degli affari umani, sia privati che pubblici, e nel contesto di un "regime informativo" il cui potere non è coercitivo, ma "intelligente" e sottile nel controllare il comportamento (Han 2021b). I personal computer, i cellulari, Internet e i social media non sono solo strumenti che ci aiutano nelle attività quotidiane, ma dispositivi che ci usano come fonti di informazione. Ad esempio, lo smartwatch che misura la frequenza cardiaca, monitora il polso e misura la pressione sanguigna; la casa intelligente che registra meticolosamente la vita di tutti i giorni; l'"aspirapolvere intelligente" che mappa la casa mentre la pulisce e il letto intelligente che monitora i pensieri durante il sonno (Han 2021b).

Un secondo rischio è rappresentato dall'accentuarsi del divario tra la mancanza di conoscenza da parte degli utenti su come funziona l'IA e la crescente complessità che caratterizza i sistemi di IA. In *L'uomo è antiquato*, Günther Anders ipotizza l'esistenza di un divario prometeico tra l'uomo e il mondo tecnico, ovvero di un'impossibile articolazione o a–sincronia tra uomo e macchina, in quanto l'uomo non riesce a tenere il passo delle macchine, generando un divario tra agire e sentire, fare e rappresentare; l'apparato prodotto e il corpo dell'uomo (Anders 2007). Ecco perché è essenziale sviluppare metodologie e pedagogie che educano le persone riguardo al potere, alla responsabilità e all'importanza di prendere decisioni informate sull'IA.

Un terzo rischio è che la potenza di questa tecnologia raggiunga gli stati emotivi delle persone, influenzando le nostre abitudini di consumo

e i nostri stili di vita fino a renderli troppo dipendenti e influenzati psicologicamente dalle informazioni consumate in rete. Attraverso le piattaforme digitali, i social network e l'Internet delle cose, da un lato vengono elaborati dati sui gusti, le preferenze e gli stati d'animo delle persone e, dall'altro, vengono fornite agli utenti informazioni su richiesta che si adattano alle loro esigenze. Il potere algoritmico agisce nella nostra vita privata, non in modo repressivo o negativo, ma stimolando le nostre emozioni, desideri, gusti e abitudini, utilizzando incentivi positivi e schermi lucidi e accattivanti, riuscendo così a invadere la nostra intimità e privacy senza che ce ne accorgiamo.

6. IA ed etica

L'avanzamento dei sistemi di IA, la loro applicazione in diversi ambiti e il loro impatto sulla vita pubblica e privata delle persone continuerà a verificarsi, il che ci porta a chiederci se si tratti di un destino che ci toccherà inesorabilmente e, se così fosse, come potremmo e dovremmo gestirlo. Poiché l'IA non esiste in un contesto isolato, ma è applicata in un ambiente unico, è essenziale considerare i quadri etico–giuridici o gli strumenti che ci possono aiutare a esaminare in modo permanente il potere che tale tecnologia comporta. Non si tratta di fermare l'innovazione, ma di indirizzare tale rivoluzione tecnologica, cercando di bilanciare competitività e innovazione con responsabilità, impegno etico e sostenibilità ambientale e sociale.

Goethe, ne *L'apprendista stregone*, racconta la storia di un discepolo che, per evitare le faccende domestiche, ripete le parole magiche che ha sentito dal suo maestro per far sì che sia la scopa a svolgere i lavori domestici. Tuttavia, dimenticando le parole precise per fermarla, le cose sfuggono di mano. Cosa possiamo fare per evitare di ritrovarci in una situazione simile a quella dell'apprendista, ma questa volta con un'IA che sfugge al nostro controllo?

L'algoritmo non può diventare una sorta di "feticcio" avvolto da un'aura di mistero e di carattere enigmatico. In astratto, è una "serie di istruzioni specificamente progettate con grande precisione per affrontare un argomento specifico" (Kearns e Roth 2019, pp. 13–14). In sé, è

qualcosa di ovvio e banale, ma quando comincia a funzionare in modo autonomo e automatico, intrecciandosi con la vita intima e quotidiana delle persone, allora diventa qualcosa di più complesso e per nulla innocuo.

In primo luogo, quando si affrontano i temi dei pericoli e dei rischi legati all'IA, è fondamentale considerare che gli algoritmi sono il frutto del pensiero umano imperfetto e che i sistemi di IA rispecchiano interessi, pregiudizi, intenzioni e disuguaglianze socio–economiche ancora presenti nelle nostre società, nonché discriminazione, violenza, sete di potere, accumulazione e disinformazione. Pertanto, un livello di analisi e riflessione etica che non può essere ignorato è la dimensione biopolitica o "realistica" dell'IA, rispetto alla quale dobbiamo essere consapevoli del potere tecnologico che gli esseri umani hanno raggiunto.

L'IA non deve favorire solo gli interessi delle grandi aziende che devono recuperare i loro ingenti investimenti in server, chip, energia, infrastrutture, ma anche la società e l'ambiente con grande responsabilità e impegno etico. Come tutta la tecnologia, l'IA è un mezzo o uno strumento al servizio non solo degli interessi umani, ma anche dell'ambiente naturale. Le grandi aziende tecnologiche devono considerare che, sebbene ci siano cose che si possono fare dal punto di vista tecnologico, non è consentito farle dal punto di vista etico–legale.

Un uso improprio dell'IA si ha quando Stati, organizzazioni imprenditoriali o individui possono trarre vantaggio da informazioni personali relative alla salute fisica e mentale, ai sentimenti, alle abitudini, alla situazione economica, all'inclinazione sessuale, religiosa o politica per manipolare il comportamento umano. Questo tipo di rischio può essere presente nella creazione di profili di persone, nella classificazione di segmenti di popolazione come criminali o indagati e nella generazione di discriminazioni professionali, razziali, sessuali, religiose ed etniche dovute a pregiudizi nell'apprendimento automatico. Ecco perché è necessario sviluppare sistemi di protezione giuridica, tecnica o tecnologica che salvaguardino la privacy delle persone.

In secondo luogo, i poteri degli algoritmi e dei sistemi di IA devono essere accompagnati dalla responsabilità di saperli gestire, anche in situazioni di evidente valore e urgenza, come la gestione di crisi ambientali, economiche o sociali. Ciò richiede una serie di responsabilità.

Questo deve valere per gli sviluppatori (grandi aziende), gli utenti che implementeranno i sistemi di IA (persone fisiche o giuridiche, autorità pubblica, agenzie o organizzazioni) e i destinatari finali.

In terzo luogo, è necessario implementare e sottoporre a un esame costante le pratiche di trasparenza che devono essere presenti durante lo sviluppo, l'implementazione e il funzionamento dei sistemi di IA, in modo da poter stabilire la tracciabilità del loro funzionamento, i dati utilizzati per generarli e il modo in cui sono stati prodotti. La trasparenza implica definire chi è responsabile del funzionamento e delle decisioni prese dai sistemi di IA, proteggere i dati personali, garantire la privacy, segnalare l'origine dei dati utilizzati per addestrare i modelli di IA, rendere pubblici i possibili rischi nell'implementazione di tali sistemi e informare gli utenti quando sono esposti a contenuti creati dall'IA.

In quarto luogo, è necessario sviluppare una pedagogia e un'educazione critiche e riflessive che permettano alle persone di analizzare le pratiche e gli usi dell'IA e di anticipare gli effetti possibili di questa tecnologia, in particolare i rischi legati a discriminazioni che potrebbero essere incorporati negli algoritmi o collegati alla violazione dei diritti fondamentali. In breve, è necessario sviluppare metodologie e strumenti educativi che aiutino le persone a comprendere il modo in cui gli algoritmi prendono decisioni e quali dati utilizzano.

Infine, sebbene sia necessario un quadro etico–normativo che permetta alle leggi e ai regolamenti internazionali di articolarsi con gli standard regionali e locali, è importante farlo di pari passo con la "giustizia globale", nella cui articolazione si possono identificare tre componenti per la sua specificazione: 1) giustizia sostenibile per l'ambiente; 2) giustizia di democratizzazione e partecipazione; 3) giustizia geopolitica e strategica.

La prima dimensione permette di porre in luce che l'IA genera un costo energetico e un'impronta di carbonio con un impatto significativo sull'ambiente, motivo per cui essa deve essere pensata come ecologicamente sostenibile, rispettosa dell'ambiente, centrata sulle persone, attenta agli individui e ai gruppi più vulnerabili.

La seconda dimensione aiuta ad evidenziare il ruolo che i cittadini e la società devono svolgere nell'imparare a utilizzare queste tecnologie, garantendone un'adeguata conoscenza per poter prendere decisioni

informate e massimizzarne i benefici dove possibile, minimizzandone i rischi dove necessario. In una società in cui l'informazione gioca un ruolo strategico, non è auspicabile che le informazioni e le ricerche riguardanti l'IA rimangano nelle mani dei monopoli che le utilizzano esclusivamente a proprio vantaggio.

Il terzo aspetto è legato alla cosiddetta "nuova corsa agli armamenti" tra Stati Uniti e Cina per il predominio dell'IA, che coinvolge anche paesi come Gran Bretagna, Canada, Israele e Brasile. Ciò che è in gioco è la disputa sul nuovo ordine politico mondiale e regionale in cui l'IA, insieme ad altri sviluppi economico–tecnologici e militari, segnerà l'emergere e il consolidamento di nuove potenze egemoniche. Collegato a quanto sopra, non dal punto di vista politico bensì economico e di mercato, esiste il pericolo di monopolio da parte di grandi aziende private o aziende tecnologiche, denominate "Big Tech", come Meta, Google, Microsoft, OpenAI, che finirebbero per relegare in secondo piano altri attori come le università. Di fronte a questo scenario, è cruciale una struttura di *governance* internazionale in grado di controbilanciare la tendenza alla centralizzazione dell'IA, sia nelle mani dello Stato che in quelle delle imprese.

7. Conclusioni

Conviviamo quotidianamente con dispositivi digitali, piattaforme, social network, assistenti virtuali e dispositivi smart che, da un lato, essendo utilizzati in modo simile, facilitano le nostre attività e si trasformano in componenti essenziali per vivere senza grandi inconvenienti; dall'altro lato, la loro logica di funzionamento è a noi sconosciuta. D'altra parte, si tratta di un insieme di realtà tecnologiche così diverse tra loro che ignoriamo la logica che le sottende. Inoltre, nella maggior parte dei casi, non siamo consapevoli di come funzionano i sistemi di IA, né del loro potenziale impatto sul nostro stile di vita. I sistemi di IA stanno cambiando l'essere umano in modo quasi impercettibile: siamo noi a creare la tecnologia, ma, paradossalmente, è la logica degli algoritmi a plasmare le nostre azioni. Lungi dall'essere una tecnologia neutrale, l'IA ha ripercussioni sulla vita degli individui e delle società, in

quanto non è né innocua né un male di per sé, ma piuttosto uno strumento o un mezzo con diversi livelli di complessità e molteplici ambiti di applicazione rispetto ai quali è richiesto un uso responsabile. Il suo utilizzo responsabile, prudente e trasparente, così come una *governance* adeguata e l'educazione critica e informata dei cittadini, tra le altre cose, determineranno se non diventeremo "carne di algoritmi" e se non saremo inghiottiti da sistemi informatici e algoritmici completamente automatizzati. Dobbiamo essere consapevoli del potere che gli algoritmi hanno di cambiare la realtà e del modo in cui possiamo concepirla. Ecco perché è importante riflettere e rivedere criticamente il modo in cui i sistemi di IA, nonché le pratiche e le abitudini da essi instaurate, modificano e potrebbero modificare il nostro rapporto con noi stessi, con gli altri, con la natura, con le cose e con le macchine stesse.

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SEZIONE 5
POETRY AGAINST DISENCHANTMENT
A SYMPOSIUM ON CHARLES TAYLOR'S COSMIC CONNECTIONS

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INTRODUCTION: A REFERENCE WORK FOR HOPELESS AND HOPEFUL ROMANTICS

Paolo Costa

For those who are interested in the development of religion in modern times, few things are as relevant as the romantic endeavor to make art, and poetry especially, a substitute for belief. You might want to discard it as a quixotic fantasy to lyrically counteract the substantial disenchantment produced by the capitalist and utilitarian breakdown and gradual dissolution of everything that goes beyond the individuals, their interests, desires, ideas, commitments, intuitions, boundaries, and standards, but the story goes much deeper and broader.

One of the greatest interpreters of the spiritual sources and philosophical roots of the romantic revolt against the rationalistic excesses of the Enlightenment is the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. At the remarkable age of 93, he produced what Adam Gopnik (2024) has described as "perhaps the most ambitious work ever written by a major thinker at such an advanced age" in a prompt review published on the "New Yorker".

Cosmic Connections is an outstanding book, and not only because of its author's age. It is extraordinary, first and foremost, for the intellectual joy it conveys. Taylor clearly loves the poets he has chosen as his conversation partners in the nearly 600 pages of his text. And he loves them because he believes that, with their poems, they have come close to formulating universal truths about the human condition that are at least as difficult to grasp as the realities that have stirred the greatest expressions of religious sentiment. He even devised a new name for the place where to look for them: "interspace" — the force field of

metabiological significances where mind and world, buffered self and disenchanted nature, can reconnect even after the epistemic triumph of the scientific revolution.

The post–Romantic spiritual predicament still concerns us, even if its actual impact on modern individuals' lives is difficult to measure and is interpreted in antithetical ways by scholars who agree on almost nothing, either on the definition of Romanticism or on the worth of its artistic and cultural legacy. This is one more reason for taking full advantage of the opportunity offered by Taylor's longevity and intellectual standing. In this symposium, which contains two critical reviews and a short interview with the author, his book is discussed at length and in–depth. That is, both its scope and its ethical/spiritual sources are considered, as well as are Taylor's balanced struggle against disenchantment and his urge for "beating the bounds" of human symbolic capacity.

"Romantic" is a word that is employed for different phenomena with sometimes opposing intentions. Notoriously, romanticism is both hopeless and hopeful. At its core, however, it harbors something noble. It indicates a human longing for the absolute, for what exceeds ordinary expectations, which, while it may look like pathetic bovarism when measured by the criteria of earthly success, remains an expression of the baffling and awe–inspiring nature of human beings. And, at any rate, is there a better term to pinpoint the commitment to the life of the mind personified by Charles Taylor in almost a century of thinking and study?

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A WIDER SPACE OF MEANING POETRY AS A RESONANT RESPONSE TO DISENCHANTMENT

Paolo Costa

Abstract: This critical review discusses Charles Taylor's last book, *Cosmic Connections* (2024). The work is first contextualized against Taylor's intellectual path by asking what philosophical question is answered by the image of poetry as an extra or para–epistemic response to modern disenchantment. The second part of the essay reconstructs Taylor's argument as follows. After describing how Romanticism revolutionized the way moderns enter a resonant relationship with the cosmos by resorting to the notions of "interspace" and "epistemic retreat", he outlines the trajectory of this insight within post–Romantic poetry. While Rilke and Hopkins continue the search for a resonant whole with the converging images of "inscape" and "Weltinnenraum", Baudelaire and Mallarmé take modern disenchantment to its extreme consequences without, however, quenching the evocative power of the lyrical force field. With the "modernist" Eliot and Miłosz, the sense of intellectual powerlessness scales back from the heights reached by the Symbolists, but the search for a believable cosmic order does not go beyond a stubborn faith in the "ethogenic" potentials of human history. Accordingly, Taylor's book ends with an examination of the prospects for an ethical growth of humanity and its dependency on the spiritual goal of uncovering mimetic, narrative, and theoretical ways to strengthen resonant bonds with others and the world.

La nota critica prende in esame l'ultimo libro di Charles Taylor, *Cosmic Connections* (2024). L'opera viene dapprima contestualizzata alla luce dell'itinerario teorico tayloriano allo scopo di chiarire quale sia la questione filosofica a cui risponde l'immagine della poesia come reazione extra o para–epistemica al disincanto moderno. Nella seconda parte del saggio viene ricostruito a grandi linee il ragionamento di Taylor che, dopo aver descritto come il romanticismo abbia rivoluzionato il modo in cui i moderni entrano in una relazione risonante col cosmo ricorrendo alle nozioni di "interspazio" e "ritirata epistemica", delinea la parabola di tale intuizione nella poesia post–romantica. Mentre Rilke e Hopkins proseguono la ricerca di un intero risonante con le immagini convergenti dell'"inscape"

e del "Weltinnenraum", Baudelaire e Mallarmé portano alle sue estreme conseguenze il disincanto moderno senza però estinguere del tutto la potenza evocativa del campo di forza lirico. Con gli "anti–romantici" Eliot e Miłosz il senso d'impotenza intellettuale diminuisce rispetto ai vertici toccati dai simbolisti, ma la ricerca di un credibile ordine cosmico non va al di là di una fede caparbia nei potenziali "etogenici" della storia umana. Significativamente, il libro si conclude con la disamina delle reali prospettive di crescita etica dell'umanità e della loro dipendenza dall'aspirazione spirituale a trovare vie mimetiche, narrative e teoriche per rafforzare i legami risonanti con gli altri e con il mondo.

Keywords: Romanticism, Poetry, Disenchantment, Resonance, Ethical growth

Parole chiave: Romanticismo, Poesia, Disincanto, Risonanza, Crescita etica

1. Self and nature

"Does not science teach us more and more emphatically that nothing which is natural can be alien to us who are part of nature? Where does Mont Blanc end, and where do I begin? That is the question which no metaphysician has hitherto succeeded in answering. But at least the connection is close and intimate" (Stephen 1894, p. 260)

Where does *nature* end and where do *I* begin? And how can we sensibly understand their relationship? These questions are not asked by a teenager puzzled by the collapse of childhood certainties, but by Leslie Stephen in one of the earliest attempts to systematically reflect on the spiritual significance of the modern passion for mountains (Woolf 1950). Where does the mountain you love end and where does your loving self begin? And how can you explain the desire to join your most intimate source of agency and a material reality that is known to be mindless and spiritually inert thanks to the efforts of modern scientists?

Come to think of it, the question posed by Stephen ought to sound odd to our ears. On the one hand, for a modern Western individual there should be nothing more familiar and better demarcated than your own "self". I am myself and Mont Blanc is undoubtedly the non–self. On the other hand, however, it is precisely a certain way of conceiving of the self as a self–contained entity that gives rise to a chain of hard questions that more often than not have to do with the attribution, if

not of a soul, of an enigmatic intentionality to things that, albeit being outside of us, arouse in us an out–of–the–ordinary resonance. As Stephen himself notes, nothing which is natural should be alien to us, because we ourselves are a piece of nature. It is no coincidence that the term we generally resort to when describing intimate experiences of resonance with the world is "poetic", and by that we mean epiphanic, revelatory, generative. For those who love nature, nature is never just *natura naturata*, but *natura naturans*, a creative, *naturing* entity.

But if the self is sovereign in its selfhood, why should it be plagued by doubts about its own boundaries? Why should it make room within itself for Mont Blanc, for example? Isn't it enough to find out how to technically build or arrange a world in which to feel at home: a world, if not in your own image and likeness, at least tamed, curbed in its hostility and harmfulness? Why ever feel the need for a more intimate connection with your non–self, rather than being happy to face it from a position of bufferedness?

Evidently, the problem lies in our seeing ourselves as a fragment of nature. If we are so, and modern science, by definition, cannot help but sanction this view, it is hard to understand why we should ever struggle to recognize ourselves in nature, to see ourselves mirrored in it. How can you be both a piece of nature and a subject disengaged from nature? Since you clearly cannot be so, the Gordian knot must be cut through: either you sensibly ascribe to nature a selfhood analogous to that of a spontaneous agent (capable, that is, of being the uncaused initiator of a causal chain) or you treat it as an object inert, devoid of intentionality and interiority, pure extension. If the methodological naturalism of modern science is a variant of monism, philosophical dualisms are not an option here. However, the simultaneous emphasis on freedom and objectivity that characterizes the modern mindset spawns a de facto if not a de jure robust dualism. This causes the worldlessness of the modern self, and the relevant anxieties.

If we are to judge from the pillars of Western philosophy — for example, Plato's dialogues — there was a time when it was easier to imagine thought, ideas, mind as the most direct way to access the ultimate truth of the cosmic order rather than as evidence of humanity's exile from nature. However, after the Scientific Revolution, a view of nature such as

that, say, of Anaxagoras, in which *Nous* (mind) is the foundation of the regularity of the cosmos, seems out of the question. This epochal transition has been described in various ways, for example as the eclipse of the "ontic Logos" or as the end of the Great Chain of Being. Whatever name we want to give it, it indicates the transition from a kind of knowledge that was also meant to account for and foster harmony between soul and cosmos to another type of knowledge that is happy with breaking down and putting back together again the bits of information that can be drawn from experience for the purpose of enhancing the human ability to control and manipulate natural phenomena (the well–known "resolutive–compositive method"). The effect of this frame of mind on the mental habit of modern scholars is a slippery slope toward disenchantment: knowledge is no longer capable of producing wisdom; the divorce between knowledge and happiness is accomplished.

If there is one philosopher who has spent his whole life trying to shed light on such epochal change, this is Charles Taylor, author of at least three milestones in contemporary philosophy: *Hegel* (Taylor 1975); *Sources of the Self* (Taylor 1989); *A Secular Age* (Taylor 2007). In these long books, he gave a nuanced account of it, showing how modern fractured horizons ended up fashioning the very identity of an ever–increasing number of individuals, influencing their life plans, feeding their desire to have a happy and fulfilling life

Taylor is only at first glance a simple philosopher. Quite the opposite, he is a sophisticated thinker who nonetheless aims to be understood by everyone. That is why, even in his most technical writings, he never completely breaks with the life world, with common sense, which is both *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem* of his recursive work of articulation. As a result, his works are easy to misunderstand and, indeed, have often been misinterpreted by those who, lacking the patience necessary to indulge his disposition to slow down in order to make his readers' view more stereoscopic, have demanded from Taylor what is generally expected of a modern philosopher and which he is reluctant to provide, namely, a meaningful reduction of the very "mystery" of the human condition (Taylor 2008).

How does his latest book, *Cosmic Connections* (Taylor 2024), contribute, then, to his multifaceted portrait of modern Western, or as he

prefers to say, North Atlantic civilization? What does it add to the picture provided in "Aims of an Epoch" (Taylor 1975, chap. 1), the opening, justly celebrated chapter of his book on Hegel, or to the compelling overview offered in his more accessible *Massey Lectures* (Taylor 1991)?

In short, the interpretive framework has basically remained the same. His goal is to "ensoul", as it were, the modern Great Transformation by fine–tuning the affirmative genealogy that has enabled him, over six industrious decades, to provincialize Western modernity without diminishing its significance or denying its dangers. His theoretical effort still consists essentially of an "exercise in retrieval" (Taylor 1989, p. xi). That is, he aims to bring forth the spiritual complexity that tends to be pushed to the margins, if not totally obliterated, in modern mainstream self–understanding. To this end, he focuses in his new book on the vision of the tasks and potentialities of modern poetry, which was exemplarily developed in German and English Romanticism and which, directly or indirectly, continued to exert its power of attraction even after it failed to stem the intellectualism built–into the Enlightenment turn.

Although it is essentially a revival of what was already outlined in the final chapters of *Sources of the Self* (Taylor 1989, chaps. 23 and 24: "Visions of the Post–Romantic Age" and "Epiphanies of Modernism"), *Cosmic Connections* is not, however, a book *about* modern poetry. It is deliberately a philosophical book that draws inspiration from post–Romantic poetry to address controversies that cannot be unraveled by strictly logical means. In this sense, it can be pictured as a book that wants to do justice to the inescapable mimetic and narrative aspects of understanding human action in time and space. To sum up: not a book about poetry, but a book that endeavors to show, *along with* poetry, that "Nichts, / nichts ist verloren" ("Nothing, nothing is ever lost", Paul Celan, "Engführung", quoted in Taylor 2011, p. 69).

To this end, however, you have to espouse a view of the human symbolic capacities that, while finding their most astonishing realization in human speech, are not just there for keeping the world at a distance. From this point of view, *Cosmic Connections*, as Taylor reminds us in its opening and closing pages, is a companion study to his earlier book *The Language Animal* (Taylor 2016a). After all, modern poetry is relevant

because it constantly tries to force the limits of human language, striving to transcend the boundaries of empirical evidence that modern reason has a priori precluded to sensible knowers. Using Kant's idiom, we could say that, in a post–Romantic horizon, poetry supplants metaphysics in indulging the dialectical urge to overcome the frontiers of sensory experience. In this sense, poetry is a synthetic power that is not intimidated by the multiple epistemic retreats imposed by the cognitive monopoly of modern science.

2. Poetic rituals of reconnection

Enough for contextualizing *Cosmic Connections*. The essentials about the book's theoretical framework can be easily gleaned from its first part (Taylor 2024, chaps. 1–3), where some classic motives of Taylor's philosophy are rearticulated from an original and fruitful standpoint. The theoretically oriented journey within Romantic and post–Romantic poetry only begins with the second part of the book and goes on for about 500 pages. The way in which Taylor's argument proceeds from here onward, though, may mystify the reader. For his approach is not strictly chronological, the selection criteria for sorting out the poets examined are never made explicit, and the digressions interpolated between chapters ("Notes", "Coda notes" and "Explanatory notes") may have the effect of making his case less clear than it should be. Yet, since a logical thread exists, I would like to provide an account from here on that explains the progression of Taylor's argument and the thematic constellation within which his choices become intelligible.

The first thing that he urges us to register is that, after the Romantic revolt against what is taken by its supporters to be the rationalistic attempt to establish a priori what it is humanly sensible to hope for on the basis of the true, the good and the beautiful, poetry becomes the privileged (cultural) battleground where to check the limits of experience and empower human deeper aspirations. Reduced to its essentials, such a terrain is an intermediate space, a "contact point", between subjective preferences and scientific evidence (the "penumbra of experience", Taylor 2024, p. 177), where the meanings and purposes of

human action can emerge and be endorsed or contested. If you wish, we could call this realm the "ethical". It is the space, in brief, where the diverging ideas of the good life circulating in modern society and the strong evaluations underpinning them may come into collision. Borrowing the notion from one of his pupils, the German sociologist Hartmut Rosa, Taylor pictures the post–Romantic poetic field as a space of "resonance" and, consequently, of attempted sentimental reconnection with the cosmos. Indeed, to resonate with the natural otherness produced by the epistemological split between subject and object is to reappropriate the "non–identical" via self–transformation. The "Anverwandlung" Hartmut Rosa (2019) talks about in his recent work is an assimilation that, rather than proceeding in a single direction (with the self taking over the non–self), is the product of a two–way relation between subject and world that can be expressed symbolically by the oscillating movement of "a←ffection and e→motion" (Rosa 2019, p. 163). In a resonant liaison, self and world touch each other and change simultaneously (in the interspace). Put otherwise, resonance is a responsive relation in which both poles are active and partially independent. Exploiting to the full the symbolic potential of language, poets such as Rilke and Hopkins were able to build a bridge between self and non–self by showing how "Through all beings ranges a single space / World–inner space" (Rilke's "Es winkt zu Fühlung", quoted in Taylor 2024, p. 205). And the "closeness" of such resonant space is felt even, if not especially, in moments of despair: "I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day. / What hours, O what black hours we have spent / This night! What sight you, heart, saw: ways you went! And more must, in yet longer light's delay / With witness I speak this" (Hopkins, quoted in Taylor 2024, p. 168).

In short, thanks to the poets whose work he discusses and by banking on their attempts to live up to the Romantic revolt, Taylor leads the sympathetic reader through a range of "interspaces" and spiritual stances, where the metabiological saliencies to which humans are receptive become linguistically palpable. And this occurs via plumbing the depths of things, although "not the depths as they 'objectively' are, *an sich*, as it were; but the depths as they are sensed as connected, *as opening to us*" (Taylor 2024, p. 175, italics mine). In this realm, moreover,

there is no way to oversee the landscape: you must explore it sideways–on and thus expose yourself to contingency and possible loss. The central chapters of *Cosmic Connections* are offered, then, to the reader with tentativeness, caution, humility: reader to reader, as it were, in a genuinely horizontal spirit.

To sum up, the impulse ruling Taylor's argument all the way down comes from the Romantic habit of not taking modern chasms as inescapable facts. Hence, the main vector of his argument has its origin in the effervescent spiritual reaction against the three main causes of modern discontent: atomism, primacy of instrumental reason, disenchantment (Taylor 1991, chap. 1). The Romantic revolt, however, only half succeeds. Or better, rescuing the restorative aim of reconnection entails failure as a structural element (what Taylor calls the "epistemic retreat"). For poetic resonance may bring about trust, even felt certainty, self–confidence, but not demonstrable and intersubjectively accessible knowledge. Already Hölderlin's poems, in fact, are infused with an atmosphere of ontological indeterminacy, fragility, uncertainty (Taylor 2024, p. 155), an "extremely tentative tone" (Taylor 2024, p. 99), placing "the 'transfiguration effects' of post–Romantic art" (Taylor 2024, p. 86) beyond people's control. For such art "convinces us through moving us; whereas a cosmology has also to be based on other kinds of reasoning, bringing in considerations from science and history. These epiphanic flashes of insight which are incomplete, no matter how much they may be further elaborated. They are frequently also fragmentary" (Taylor 2024, p. 86). And, "as the century unfolds", experiences of reconnection become, if possible, even "more fragile, easier to dismiss, rarer, and tied to a particular place and a privileged moment in time" (Taylor 2024, p. 129).

While Romantic and post–Romantic epistemic retreat has long–term effects, it should not be mistaken with an endorsement of the Grand narrative of the disenchantment of the world. Although the Romantic revolt produces no small amount of ideological confusion downstream (especially, in politics, where reactionism and radicalism are both options open to critics of the Enlightenment), upstream it handed down a crisp depiction of the moral, spiritual and anthropological flaws of modern dualisms. And, along with an often–dismayed

sense of the relevance of goods lost or at risk of being lost, it spread also seeds of hope in the ethical growth of humanity.

The path trodden by Taylor after the introductory chapters includes three major stages. The first one is axed on the reaffirmation *malgré tout* of the gist of the Romantic revolt that can be sensed in the epiphanies of the resonant whole produced by "poetic" personalities as diverse as Hopkins, Rilke, Proust, Emerson, and Cézanne. In the inscape conjured in Hopkins' verses and in Rilke's glorification of the fullness of existence encountered in the *Weltinnenraum*, echoes can be heard of the experiments in reconnecting with nature undertaken with different poetic means by Wordsworth, Novalis, Shelley, Hölderlin and Keats. However, the arc of oscillation between accomplished disenchantment and possible re–enchantment becomes, if possible, even wider and the task of devising poetic "rituals of restoration" (Taylor 2024, p. 297) gets more adventurous both artistically and intellectually. In particular, the interspace expands into an "intertime" as the tension between cosmic and lived time becomes increasingly important in individual experience and brings forth new peaks of fragility and fullness of the human condition.

In his second step, Taylor focuses, instead, on the resilience of the Romantic urge for reconnection even in the most radical lyrical reactions to the experience of modern alienation, including linguistic alienation. For, in an only seemingly paradoxical way, "(re)connecting [...] may include the failure to connect" (Taylor 2024, p. 89). With their wavering efforts at staying afloat in a non–episodic condition of artistic and personal shipwreck, first Baudelaire and in his wake Mallarmé break out from the limits of the Romantic goal of poetic reconnection with nature by taking on, sometimes with a luciferous stance, the *impuissance*, the inability of verses to pander to the nonbinary logic of interspace. Baudelaire's fascination with evil, decadence, abjection, and the paradoxes of expression which Mallarmé's orphic inspiration must cope with, end up raising to dizzying heights the benchmark (Taylor 2024, p. 377) by which the success or failure of lyrical striving is ultimately measured. In their poetic radicalism, symbols gradually become detached from their function (and promise) of reconnection by taking over the whole interspace with an aesthetic and existential emptying effect. The romantic

dream of reconnection now hangs by a thread, the thread of an expressive tension that materializes under the guise of a creative restlessness that systematically oscillates between euphoria and dysphoria. And in the background hovers the "oft–returning temptation toward annihilation" (Taylor 2024, p. 157) already experienced by Hölderlin and Novalis. But even when despair seems to prevail and resistance against disenchantment is on the verge of surrender, the lyrical force field is there to prove that "le vague n'exclut pas l'intensité" (Taylor 2024, p. 360) and that even the "metaphysic of *Néant*" espoused by Mallarmé does not exclude, but rather "captures the absence–in–presence of the things" (Taylor 2024, p. 471). In the end, this turns out to be the superabundance of meaning that natural human language struggles to express faithfully.

With "modernist" Eliot and Miłosz, finally, we are faced with two intrepid attempts to reshape post–Romantic poetic epiphanies in an anticlimactic, less subject–centered, and reactively anti–Romantic key. Although the sense of intellectual powerlessness scales back from the heights of drama touched with symbolism, the "picture of a believable cosmic order" (Taylor 2024, p. 485) does not go beyond the negative form of an "empty marker" (Taylor 2024, p. 487), a *dessein en creux* that tells us more about the "hole, the lack it would fill" than about the "higher world where a higher version of our spontaneous aspirations could be fulfilled" (Taylor 2024, p. 488). The outcome is a sort of resonant meta–disenchantment that, especially in Miłosz, is reconciled with a view of ethical growth that is neither lightheartedly optimistic nor fatalistically apocalyptic.

This vision of humanity's ethical/spiritual growth is discussed at length in Chapter 15. Here, Taylor's *corps à corps* with Romantic poetry comes to an abrupt halt and Miłosz's resilient faith in the "ethogenic" potentials (Taylor 2024, p. 544) encapsulated in human history is discussed at length. The result is a both candid and original reformulation of Taylor's (1989, chapter 4) influential inquiry into moral sources, which reaffirms the primacy of the ethical–spiritual element over the moral codes or procedures doggedly pursued by the main currents of modern moral philosophy.

While it certainly is not the theater of the "magnificent and progressive destinies" (G. Leopardi) envisioned by the Enlightenment

Geschichtsphilosophien, human history can be reasonably seen as the site of a slow ethical growth. The process of achieving this goal, however, is neither linear nor unbroken. Rather, it has a dialectical form, though not in the Hegelian sense whereby each historical stage resolves one tension to create a new one at a higher level. Things, in fact, are much messier than that. In the chaotic impulse towards ethical growth in human history, the steps made by the different civilizations and, within them, by minority groups can become sources of significant ethical innovations. These, however, are never the result of anonymous and impersonal processes, but of the moral creativity exercised by individuals or communities in distinctive historical situations. This is why Taylor speaks of ethical "growth" instead of "progress". Put differently, there can be no moral advancement without a corresponding spiritual transformation sustained by the sui generis "force" of strong evaluations, i.e. of the values shaping people's deeper identity.

If we are converging toward a common ethic, however, it does not follow that we are moving toward a single universal spirituality or worldview. Moral pluralism and the diversity of goods still are a cornerstone of Taylor's outlook. Bearing in mind the bloody experience of twentieth–century totalitarianisms, it is important to reiterate that any spirituality, whether secular or religious, offers pathways to personal transformation, via practices, meditation, and disciplines, without which any list of norms and values is bound to remain a dead letter. Disagreement, even irreducible disagreement, is never a good reason for despair. This is a lesson that the beneficiaries of the modern Great Transformation must learn and relearn at every turn of history without giving in to the temptation to expect from technology an easy way out of the labors of ethical growth, which are ultimately guaranteed only by the resilience and moral creativity of people of goodwill.

From this point of view, post–Romantic poetry can be seen as replacing the premodern Great Chain of Being with a contingent three–steps ladder of reconnection (Taylor 2024, p. 88). To begin with we have *mimesis* ("the striking power of art is that it can place you, sometimes imaginatively, sometimes really, in the situation which has this meaning and inspires these feelings"). The second step is *indeterminate epiphany* ("this *mise en situation* enables us to experience and grasp

hitherto unexplored, unidentified meanings, such as Goethe's *Ruh* or the sense of connection in *Tintern Abbey*"). Once reconnection is complete, the longed–for outcome consists of spiritual transformation ("some of these experiences present themselves as transformative, in an ethically important way; that is, they help to realize crucial human potentials").

In conclusion, just a few words about the style in which the book was written. There is something poignant in the patience with which Taylor goes about discussing texts that he evidently loves, having read and reread them in his long lifetime, with a chronic sense that he never got them "right" (Taylor 2016b). This humility and resultant tentativeness account for both the recursive nature of his contextualization efforts and the absence of any kind of magniloquent conclusions in chapters that seem to break off rather than being accomplished, conveying to the reader the sense of an open–ended discourse that solicits, even demands, their own taking stance.

"Philosophy", as Taylor (2008, p. 41) observed in one of his rare metaphilosophical considerations, "is in a sense a perpetual disturbance of the peace". And the same might be said of the "rituals of restoration" (Taylor 2024, p. 297) staged by post–Romantic poets in their quixotic efforts to shake us out of our disenchantment. For their "poetry is like a ritual which makes the connection more powerful" (Taylor 2024, p. 134) and, by enabling such self–enlarging experiences, triggers "a transformation, which realize[s] crucial human potentials" (Taylor 2024, p. 90). As a result, the atmosphere surrounding a book that still demands a lot from the reader is ultimately joyful. After all, "reconnections [...] can bring joy" and not "just pleasure" (Taylor 2024, p. 90). "You experience joy", reminds us Taylor (2024, p. 133), "when you learn, or are reminded of something positive, which has strong ethical or spiritual significance, whereas intense pleasure tends to enfold you even more in yourself". More specifically, "there are moments where, through articulation in a work of art, we can concentrate and thus identify the effect [of beneficial contact with nature surrounding us]: some painting gives us an acute sense of the light over a scene, or a poem intensely concentrates how a given scene, or being in a certain space, moves us. And there is a certain joy which comes from articulating this experience. This joy, the sense of

how important it is, how essential a human fulfillment it is, all come together. The diffuse feeling can be brushed off as subjective, but the concentration is a heightening awareness and a sharpening of focus, and the joy which accompanies it demonstrates how much this articulation is a realization of our nature as human beings, or to use an Aristotelian expression, the human Form" (Taylor 2024, p. 133).

Accordingly, the post–Romantic epistemic retreat is anything but a surrender. Or rather, a retreat in matters of knowledge is not matched by a parallel retreat in matters of recognition. Hence, banking on the evocative force of this word in modern philosophy, it can be claimed that all the poets insightfully discussed in the book display a capacity to mimetically and narratively *recognize* something that has become hard to discern, to distinguish, to identify — in a word: to understand. Thus, it makes sense to see post–Romantic poetry also as a chain of subtle rituals of re–connection *through recognition*. And this might explain the puzzling coexistence of deep reflexivity and epistemic exhaustion, which are both typical traits of the modern mind.

To sum up what I have said so far, poetry is so empowering for many of its readers even these days, precisely because it helps them to re–connect with the world by enacting a resonant, albeit mystifying, restorative ritual of recognition. In this sense, *Cosmic Connections* has the motivating force of a genuine spiritual testament: the last word of a "hedgehog" with the wit of a fox (Taylor 1985, p. 1), as well as the work of a tireless teacher in a time when too many people think that they have nothing meaningful to learn from others.

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THE INEFFABLE IN POETRY

Claude Romano

Abstract: The essay discusses Charles Taylor's last book *Cosmic Connections* (2024), focusing on the issue of poetic epiphany or, more precisely, the characteristic of poetic language that Taylor calls "insight" and which can serve as a bridge between the subjective and objective facets of experience (the "interspace"). In particular, the essay considers the question of the poetic expression of the inexpressible, drawing on some verses by Arthur Rimbaud and using Ludwig Wittgenstein — the greatest absentee in *Cosmic Connections* — and his theory of meaning as a guide for progress.

Il saggio discute l'ultimo libro di Charles Taylor *Cosmic Connections* (2024) concentrandosi sulla questione dell'epifania poetica o, più precisamente, la caratteristica del linguaggio poetico che Taylor chiama "insight" e che può fungere da ponte tra dimensione soggettiva e oggettiva dell'esperienza (l'"interspazio"). In particolare, nel saggio viene presa in esame la questione della espressione poetica dell'inesprimibile prendendo spunto da alcuni versi di Arthur Rimbaud e usando la teoria del significato di Ludwig Wittgenstein — il grande assente in *Cosmic Connections* — come filo rosso per la discussione.

Keywords: Poetry, Insight, Meaning, Inexpressible, Rimbaud, Ludwig Wittgenstein

Parole chiave: Poesia, Intuizione, Significato, Inesprimibile, Rimbaud, Ludwig Wittgenstein

In this critical notice of Charles Taylor's *Cosmic Connections*, which I also intend as a personal tribute to his entire body of work, I wish to further elaborate on a central idea of it: the importance he attaches to the notion of revelation in poetic language, or of "epiphany" (Joyce's

term), or of what he also calls "insight into things" […], with all the semantic richness that the word "insight" possesses in English: aspect, idea, way of seeing or of thinking, but also penetration or perspicacity[1]. Like the German term *Stimmung,* "insight" has both a subjective meaning (the ability to see, to discern, sagacity) and an objective meaning (what is seen thanks to such discernment, the aspect of the thing that is revealed through it). It is a word which embodies one of the main ideas of Taylor's book: to show that the poem creates a new kind of connection with the world or with nature, that it promotes what he calls an "interspace". In French, I would say an *entre–deux* between the mind and the world, and thus a renewed experience of *connectedness,* of junction between the poet (or the reader) and his sensory environment.

The notion of "insight" allows us to get to the heart of poetry, which has the quality of "open[ing] a new avenue of insight" (Taylor 2024, p. 18) into the world.

I would like to gloss over this image of insight by adding what might seem like a footnote to Taylor's impressive and incredibly rich book (which, therefore, would need none). The poetic use of language, he says, brings to light "a language of insight". This is a slightly different image, but one that is consistent with the notion we might find in Heidegger, but also in Ricœur (1995) in his work on metaphor (and already in Aristotle, when he emphasizes that metaphor places something before the hearers' eyes: *pro ommatôn*)[2]. *The Language Animal* (Taylor 2016, p. 109) already insisted on the "Cratylism" of language, which the mainstream philosophy of language fails to do justice to.

The question I would like to raise now is the following: With this dimension of "insight", are we not touching on something like an inexpressibility that nonetheless can be expressed? This theme of the inexpressible is ubiquitous in Romantic poetics, less so in Taylor's book. My footnote to his work will be devoted to it.

In Western thought, the ineffable has often been approached as an external limit to speech: what speech *cannot* say, a radical exteriority to the domain of the sayable. An illustration could be easily found in the

(1) This text was originally written for a symposium on Charles Taylor held at McGill University on the occasion of his 93rd birthday (November 2024). The page numbers in brackets refer to Taylor 2024.

(2) Aristotle (1984, p. 190, III, 1411 a 25): "making your hearers see things".

Neoplatonic tradition or the apophatic theology of pseudo–Dionysius. Certainly, in this tradition, the ineffable (which is also unthinkable) can at least be said *indirectly* through a series of negations: God is not wise, but beyond wisdom, and so forth. The fact remains, however, that the ineffable is essentially outside discourse as such and can only be approached through the negation of attributes in their usual usage. In a way, this is also what is suggested by the main text in contemporary philosophy that deals with the question of the ineffable. By this I mean, of course, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico–Philosophicus*, with its famous final proposition, numbered 7 (one of the most symbolically charged numbers in the Bible): "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (Wittgenstein 1922, p. 189). The image, here, is that of a delimitation between what can be said and what cannot be said, and therefore of an exclusion: the unspeakable *cannot be said*, and there is no point in claiming to say it. As Wittgenstein famously maintained, it can only be shown, or rather, it is shown in the logical form of propositions.

Could not this first conception of the ineffable be contrasted with a second one? Should we not think of the inexpressible not as *something exceeding* language but as something internal to it? Not what cannot be said, but what cannot be said *otherwise than it is said*, and therefore what cannot be paraphrased. If this is a viable understanding of the inexpressible, is not such an inexpressible at work everywhere in poetry? Is it not inseparable, one might say, from the poeticality of the poem? Is not poetry precisely a form of expression in which the words used cannot be replaced by others, *salva significatione*? The ineffable, then, is no longer what cannot be said at all — since, actually, it is said in the poem, the poem rests on such a "saying" — but rather what cannot be re–said outside the poem, that in which the saying and the said absolutely coincide, and which thus establishes an almost perfect adequacy between words and their meaning.

This is the basis of the Romantic theory of the symbol to which Charles Taylor attaches great importance. Unlike allegory, the symbol is an opaque sign that does not withdraw itself before what it signifies and, therefore, paradoxically points primarily toward itself and only *indirectly* to what it means. Thus, the meaning of an allegory is

transparent (for example, the meaning of the scales as an allegory of justice), whereas the meaning of the symbol is opaque and sets in motion an endless interpretation. Schelling defines the work of art as an expression of this inexhaustible meaning, and thus of the infinite in the finite: the work of art "presents an Infinite finitely displayed" (Schelling 1978, p. 225). Hence, the essence of art is symbolic, not allegorical. This is why the Romantics (the two Schlegel brothers, for example) placed so much emphasis on the impossibility of paraphrasing a poem as one of its distinctive characteristics. Poetry is not allegorical (transitive, functional, utilitarian, with no informational value of its own) but symbolic (intransitive, irreplaceable, informative, because fully intuitive). In poetry, the sign returns from its conventional status to its natural status, that is, to the status of a *motivated* sign, thus establishing a secret affinity with the thing. As August Schlegel wrote: "Poetry is nothing but a perpetual creation of symbols; we either seek for something spiritual an external mantle or we relate something external to an invisible inner reality" (quoted in Taylor 2024, p. 14). What is signified poetically, i.e., signified through a *symbol,* cannot be said in any other way. For a symbol cannot be dissociated from what it symbolizes. In this case, access to what it symbolizes is only possible through *this* symbol.

However, the philosophically difficult question (which I will not presume to answer here) is: What exactly prevents such paraphrasing in poetry? Here, several answers immediately come to mind.

The first and most obvious answer insists on the inseparability of what we usually call "content" and "form", following Valéry's definition of poetry in *Tel quel*: "Le poème, cette hésitation prolongée entre le son et le sens" (Valéry 1943, p. 79). This is what Jakobson (1960) calls the "poetic function" of language, which consists of highlighting the materiality of language for its own sake.

However, I think that this first answer is insufficient. Is it true that you cannot replace one expression with another in a poem? Would it not be better to say that you cannot replace one expression with another *without being a poet yourself,* in other words, without having a "poetic sense"? Let us not forget that poets spend most of their time replacing one expression with another. It is not unusual for them to write several versions of the same poem. Often, all these versions have their

own poetic quality. Let us take as example the last stanza of Rimbaud's "Eternité", which describes an experience of eternity through the connectedness to nature, the main topic of *Cosmic Connections*. In the version cited in *Une saison en enfer,* the poem is introduced by the following passage: "Enfin, ô bonheur, ô raison, j'écartai du ciel l'azur, qui est du noir, et je vécus, étincelle d'or de la lumière *nature*" [At last, O happiness, O reason, I removed from the sky the blue that is black, and I lived, a glitter of gold in the light of *nature*]. The version of the stanza generally retained by publishers is the following:

Elle est retrouvée.
Quoi? L'éternité.
C'est la mer allée
Avec le soleil.

But in other autograph manuscripts and in *Une saison en enfer,* we find:

Elle est retrouvée!
– Quoi ? l'éternité.
C'est la mer mêlée
Au soleil.

A third version, which I personally find of great poetic beauty, reads as follows:

Elle est retrouvée.
Quoi? l'éternité.
C'est la mer allée
Avec les soleils[3].

Can we say that one of these versions is more poetic than the others — or more prosaic? I don't think so. The one that mentions "suns" in the plural is perhaps the most surprising. How are we to understand this plural? Does it mean a plurality of stars, suggesting thereby the

(3) The three versions can be found in Rimbaud 1999, pp. 761-767.

infinity of nature? Or does it suggest the myriads of tiny suns shimmering over the sea, multiplied on its surface? Whatever the case, the argument that it is impossible to paraphrase a poem clashes with the multiple variants of a text.

Another answer seems more interesting. The impossibility of paraphrasing a poem stems from the fact that poetry uses language differently from everyday language, according to a different "logic". In poetry, language is used as a means for experiencing aspects of meaning that cannot emerge in ordinary sentences. But how can we characterize this other "logic" or this other "use" of words?

In this respect, it would be interesting to turn to a philosopher who is, in a sense, the greatest absentee in *Cosmic Connections* (but very present in many other Taylor's books): Ludwig Wittgenstein. Earlier, I said too hastily that he tended to relegate the ineffable outside language in the *Tractatus* and he thought of it as a limit of language, also corresponding to the limits of our world. Such a boundary silences the ineffable. But we know from his friend Paul Engelmann that Wittgenstein was fond of poetry (Goethe, Mörike, or Gottfried Keller, among others) and even that "he recited [Mörike's passages] with a shudder of awe" (Engelmann 1967, p. 86). Wittgenstein once read a poem by Rabindranath Tagore to the astonished representatives of the Vienna Circle, who had invited him to talk about the *Tractatus*! And yet Wittgenstein, even though he has written very little on the subject, seems to have seen poetry as one of the places (along with metaphysics) where the *animal loquens* measures herself against the limits of language. For him, this confrontation with the ineffable is perhaps even the main characteristic of poetry and this is already the case in the *Tractatus*. A poem precisely seeks to express the inexpressible and thus to blur the limits of the sayable and the unsayable. It uses language to bring it to its limits. But, unlike philosophy, this renewed effort is not fruitless since it is, on the contrary, the source of the greatest achievements. This is what emerges from the only written commentary that Wittgenstein seems to have made on a poem, a poem by Ludwig Uhland, in a letter to Engelmann dated 9 April 1917: "The poem by Uhland is really magnificent. And this is how it this: if only you do not try to utter what is unutterable, then *nothing* gets lost. But the

unutterable will be — unutterably — *contained* in what has been uttered" (Engelmann 1967, p. 7).

This astonishing formula can be commented on by saying that it marks the passage from a conception of the ineffable as a limit or as an "outside" of (meaningful) language to a positive conception of the ineffable as internal to language itself. According to this reading, the poem, strictly speaking, does not seek to *express* the inexpressible (which is impossible, according to the *Tractatus*), but rather, with all the paradoxicality of this formula, to express the inexpressible *inexpressibly* (or to express the inexpressible without making it expressible, i.e. by *manifesting* it). I mean, not to reduce it, but to bring it to the fore. We find here again Taylor's "language of insight".

Now, one might be tempted to say that what Wittgenstein condenses here into a single formula is discussed in greater detail at the very end of *Philosophical Investigations*, in a set of remarks grouped in section XI of its second part. Here, Wittgenstein shows that poetry proceeds from a relationship to words that is quite distinct from the one we have with ordinary language. And he goes on to stress the fact that, in poetry, words come to be experienced as having, in addition to their use (and therefore their meaning in the ordinary sense) something like a "soul" or an "aura" of meaning. This is what could forbid paraphrasing. In this context, he does not hesitate to speak of a fullness of meaning for the poem (and for a *poetic* reading of it) that brings into play another concept of meaning than our ordinary one: "When I pronounce this word while reading with expression it is completely filled with its meaning (*mit seiner Bedeutung angefüllt*). — 'How can this be, if the meaning is the use of the word?' Well, what I said was intended figuratively. Not that I chose the figure: it forced itself on me. — But the figurative employment of the word can't get into conflict with the original one" (Wittgenstein 1963, 215e).

This is a difficult passage to comment on. What we have is an inner dialogue in which several voices are heard. On the one hand, this dialogue suggests that what is often retained from *Philosophical Investigations*, namely that for a large class of cases, the meaning of an expression is its use, is not enough to describe what meaning is. And yet, as one of the voices objects, couldn't it be because, when I speak of

a poetic word as "filled with meaning", I am using a mere metaphor? Yes and no, because this image forces itself on me. There really is no other way of putting it. In other words, we are not talking about a mere figure of speech, but about an aspect of meaning that cannot be captured by the equivalence: meaning = usage.

Wittgenstein's subsequent remarks seem to confirm this reading. Indeed, he tries to fathom out what can be understood by the word "meaning" used in this new way — not with reference to the rules of usage of a word but to the fullness of meaning it possesses in its poetic use (but is this word still appropriate?). This fullness of meaning corresponds to a pictorial or figurative use of language, that is, an experience in which meaning is in some way present in the word itself as its "soul" or "physiognomy". As Wittgenstein observes, "if a sentence can strike me as like a painting in words, and the very individual word in the sentence as like a picture, then it is no such marvel that a word uttered in isolation and without purpose can seem to carry a particular meaning in itself" (Wittgenstein 1963, 215e).

Are we dealing here with a different concept of meaning or with a concept that is merely an extension of the concept that is set forth in *Philosophical Investigations*? It does seem that we are dealing with another concept since the apparently tautological, but in fact deflationary, explanation of the meaning offered by Wittgenstein against all semantic Platonism does not apply to it: "For a *large* class of cases — though not for all — in which we employ the word 'meaning', it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (Wittgenstein 1963, p. 20e, § 43). We can better understand the restriction: "though not for all" if we admit that this use of "meaning" is different from its ordinary use. However, Wittgenstein abandons his previous thematization of this other use of language (which is precisely not a *use* in the instrumental sense of the word) in terms of ineffability. The reference to the ineffable is relinquished in favor of the idea of a particular *experience* of language. Poetic language provides us with an experience of the word and its aura of meaning, analogous to that provided by a painting, and thus "in connexion with this *game* of experiencing a word, we also speak of the 'meaning' and 'meaning it'" (Wittgenstein 1963, 216e). One wonders whether Wittgenstein is not getting here very close to the

Romantic theories of poetry as symbol that Taylor discusses in *Cosmic Connections.*

Hence Wittgenstein's distinction — albeit a very underdeveloped one — between what he refers to as a "primary sense" and a "secondary sense" that words can possess, the latter corresponding to the fullness of meaning achieved in poetry: "Here one might speak of a 'primary' and 'secondary' sense of a word" (Wittgenstein 1963, 216e). As Wittgenstein (1963, 216e) immediately points out, this secondary sense should not be understood as a metaphorical or figurative sense, because what is at stake here is not resorting to tropes but a particular use of language as a whole, a properly *poetic use*. This is not so much a figurative use as a *figural* (or pictorial) one — where words resemble a painting because they acquire a kind of intrinsic evocative power: "The secondary sense is not a 'metaphorical' sense. If I say: 'For me, the vowel *e* is yellow', I do not mean: 'yellow' in a metaphorical sense, — for I could not express what I want to say in any other way than by means of the idea 'yellow'". Wittgenstein's example reminds us of another of Rimbaud's poems, "*Voyelles*".

Can we understand these passages as an appendix to the letter to Engelmann? If we follow this line of thought, it seems that the inexpressible, which has disappeared, is replaced by the figurative or pictorial sense that the pure experience of language gives us, and which defies any paraphrase, just as a painting is unique and cannot be replaced by another.

Many metaphors that can be described as *poetic* are of this type. When Rimbaud, in *Alchimie du verbe*, writes the sentence "Je devins un Opéra fabuleux" [I became a fabulous Opera], he uses an expression that *can* certainly be paraphrased but whose quasi–pictorial character lies elsewhere: in the absolute economy of means that poetic expression achieves. Of course, we can always comment on it by saying that, in the *illuminations* from which the poet is seized, his interiority is enriched by visions offered to several senses, to the point of mimicking the interior of an opera: both a stage with characters, painted scenery, etc., and an orchestra playing divine music. Yet all this is suggested by a single word, or rather an extraordinarily condensed expression that shocks the reader by its incongruous, even absurd character: "to become an opera".

But beyond any particular figure of speech, it is language itself that means differently here, and this is precisely what the image of language as painting suggests. Let us return briefly to the multiple "suns" in the last version of the poem "Eternity". There is no metaphor here either. And yet a proper noun is used in the plural to designate — what? the multiplication of this star by the waves? The vertigo that seizes the poet and gives him a sense of eternity, putting him in the presence of an infinity of suns? Or perhaps the "cosmic connection" achieved by the poem with the infinity of the stellar universe?

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"POETRY MAKES CLAIM TO A TRUTH WHICH HOLDS INDEPENDENTLY OF US" AN INTERVIEW WITH CHARLES TAYLOR

Paolo Costa

Abstract: This interview with Charles Taylor revolves around some key theoretical issues that emerge from his latest book. Among the topics discussed are: the existence of a universal "truth" brought to light by Romanticism; the notion of "interspace"; the importance of poetry in modern life experience; reconnecting with nature as a form of empowerment; the contribution of *Cosmic Connections* to Taylor's account of the ethical and spiritual sources of modern identity.

Questa intervista con Charles Taylor ruota attorno ad alcune questioni teoriche chiave che emergono dal suo ultimo libro. Tra i temi discussi: l'esistenza di una "verità" universale portata a galla dal romanticismo; la nozione di "interspazio"; l'importanza della poesia nell'esperienza di vita moderna; la riconnessione con la natura come forma di potenziamento; il contributo di *Cosmic Connections* all'indagine tayloriana sulle fonti morali e spirituali dell'identità moderna.

Keywords: Romanticism, Interspace, Poetry, Reconnecting with Nature, Cosmic Connections

Parole chiave: Romanticismo, Interspazio, Poesia, Riconnessione con la natura, Cosmic Connections

Paolo Costa: *To obliquely invoke the title of an influential (and controversial) book by René Girard (1961), is there a distinctive "Romantic truth" that everybody ought to know and that you try to articulate in the first part of* Cosmic Connections*?*

Charles Taylor: The answer to this question is emphatically "yes". The experience that the poetry brings on comes across not only as a truth,

but a truth about something which is really important. That's what creates the communication problem. It's not just that those scientistic–minded can't imagine, let alone accept such a "subjective" truth, and want to reduce the experience to a subjective feeling. There also is the problem that even those who are willing to believe us, but don't share the reaction, may not understand us: the problem of finding an adequate language of communication. Someone who is tone deaf to poetry, but doesn't share the prejudices of the scientistic-minded, may still remain closed to our experience.

Probably, the most interesting new tool for understanding that you develop in your last book is the notion of "interspace". Interspace is like an interface between what is out there independently of us (or "absolutely", to quote Bernard Williams, 1978, p. 66) and a mere subjective projection. Am I wrong to think that it can be taken to be a re–formulation of an insightful distinction you made between subject–relatedness (i.e., being–relative–to–a–subject) and subjectivism in the past (Taylor 1985)? I mean, what you are gesturing at, here, is the insight that what is taking place in such an interspace is worthy of consideration, is "real", is not a mere "delusion", aren't you?

Yes, the point here is that I cannot accept the idea that the experience is simply subjective, on all fours with a feeling of comfort, or feeling a cool breeze blowing on us. In other words, that the experience makes no claim to a truth which holds independently of us. The category in which our religious convictions fall, when we feel them strongly. But just as the believer in this case will readily admit that his sense of God is woefully inadequate, so the reader who feels the "force" running through all things when he reads Wordsworth will admit that this force while real may have features beyond his experience, a reality *an sich,* as it were.

What the committed reader gets, willy–nilly, from reading your book is a deeper sense of the importance of poetry in modern life. Modern poetry

(like modern music, like modern visual arts) enables us to have access to the aforementioned interspace, sometimes reluctantly (see Baudelaire and Mallarmé), and despite the modern systemic drive to disenchantment. This gain seems to be at least contingent on the way great poetry changes its thoughtful reader's gaze, makes them more aware, and significantly empowers their capacity for attention. Is this an inherent quality of the literary genre we call "poetry" or is it a specifically modern phenomenon, or even the power of a specific strand of modern poetry?

I think that opening us to this kind of interspace is a power which we encounter in some poetry, but also in some music, painting, etc. For me, it was music and poetry before the big political and civilizational questions. At the beginning, it was Keats. His poems, just the musicality of his prosody, had a remarkable impact on me. I had a wonderful teacher at Selwyn House when I was a student there — he was a poet himself, Patrick Anderson who wandered out to Canada from England. He taught us the Romantic period. He had a way of making that poetry live that blew my mind, and I was hooked for good. Someone may rightly say that I have come full circle with my last book.

"Connection" and "re–connection" are key terms in your book. They clearly are antonyms of detachment or disengagement. In your account of the modern self, disengagement goes hand in hand with a distinctive form of self–empowerment that involves, in turn, bufferedness, self–fashioning, sovereignty, Verfügbarkeit*, etc. Does re–connecting with nature and the cosmos mean, then, unconditionally endorsing human fragility, dependence, or does it also involve a different view of what force, robustness, self-empowerment might be in human life?*

Being open to this kind of empowering interspace — "empowering" because it give us the force and courage to approach even more what it reveals, to come closer and more open to this — is very different from another kind of empowerment, that which we get by assuming an instrumental stance to the world, and study it as an "inert"

object, rather than one with which we can be in communication. There is an empowerment arising in communication, and another arising from objectification. They are not incompatible: one can be a reverent scientist — think of Goethe, Alexander von Humboldt — but they are different. And those I'm calling "scientistic-minded" believe that real science requires one abandon all reverence.

Cosmic Connections *(Taylor 2024) is the last of four big books you wrote about the making of modern identity:* Hegel *(Taylor 1975),* Sources of the Self *(Taylor 1989),* A Secular Age *(Taylor 2007), and now this large tome about the role of poetry in a time of disenchantment. Did your last effort make you see your whole trajectory under a different light? Do you sense any significant turns,* détours, *revisions, progress, or quantum leaps regarding your original project? And how distant are you now from what you saw as the end goal of your quest for a Best Account of the rise of the modern self at the beginning of your career?*

I don't think my orientation has really changed since my doctoral thesis (published as *The Explanation of Behaviour*). This (Taylor 1964) was written to strike back at the Cartesian–Lockean positivism which dominated analytical philosophy in the fifties. I felt I couldn't rest until I had done something to show how erroneous and shallow it all was. Later, of course, as I explored this alternative, the negative motivation gave way to a desire to explore further this alternative understanding, through a series of studies, history of the self (Taylor 1989), the secular age (Taylor 2007), language (Taylor 2016), etc.

Hegel (Taylor 1975) is related somewhat differently to this course. It was originally commissioned for the Penguin series on great philosophers. They turned to me because no self–respecting analytic philosopher would touch it. But then my manuscript was rejected because it was much too long. But through writing it, I gained a sense of the crucial importance of the Romantic period, particularly in Germany, to the whole current of modern critique of the scientistic-objectifying stance. *Hegel* is a fore–runner to *Cosmic Connections.*

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AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHIES / BIOGRAFIE DEGLI AUTORI

Nadiia Andreichuk is a researcher in the field of semiotics, semiotranslation, and contrastive linguistics, a full professor at Ivan Franko National University of Lviv (Ukraine). Earned her Doctoral Degree in Philology in 2013 at Odesa I.I.Mechnikov National University (Ukraine) for the research of the semiotics of Tudor England cultural space. Before joining the Department of Translation Studies and Contrastive Linguistics of Ivan Franko University worked at Lviv Polytechnic National University where she founded and chaired the Applied Linguistics Department (1997 – 2010). Her accomplishments include the publication of two monographs (*Semiotics of the Linguocultural Space of England in the Late 15th - Early 17th Centuries* (2011) and *Dimensions of Semiosis* (2021)). She is the author of numerous publications, many of which presented at international conferences, on various topics that develop the innovative approach to the analysis of texts, belonging to different genres, based on the code, informational and cultural dimensions of semiosis. Nadiia Andreichuk was the first to translate Charles Peirce's articles (*On a New List of Categories*, *How to make our Ideas clear*, *Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man* and others) into Ukrainian and thus contributed to the promotion of semiotic studies in Ukraine and the development of native Ukrainian semiotic metalanguage.

She is a member of the International Association for Semiotic Studies (IASS/AIS) and Shevchenko Scientific Society.

Nadiia Andreichuk upheld the development of Contrastive Studies in Ukraine. Her achievements in the field were presented in two textbooks: *Contrastive Linguistics* (2015) and *Contrastive Lexicology of English and Ukrainian Languages: Theory and Practice* (2019), which are used for academic purposes in several Ukrainian universities.

Giustina Benedetta Baron is a PhD student at the Italian Doctoral School of Religious Studies, also pursuing a *o-tutell* at the University of Tartu. Her research focuses on the semiotics of religion, with particular interests in immortality speculations and Russian Cosmism along with its political and ideological implications.

Mohamed Bernoussi is Full Professor of Semiotics at the University Moulay Ismail of Meknes. He was visiting professor at the universities of Bologna, Palermo, Torino, Paris-Sorbonne, Tours and Nice. He is interested in the works of Umberto Eco, intracultural problems in Morocco and the Arab world and in Semiotics of Islam. He recently published: *Principes de la sémiotique du texte* (2016), *Umberto Eco sémioticien et romancier* (2017), *Mémoire et trauma dans la culture marocaine* (2017), *Introduction à l'interculturel* (2018), *L'Art du roman chez Umberto Eco*, Special issue of "Cahiers de narratologie" (2018), *Douces schizophrénies* (2018), *La culture culinaire marocaine (2020*), *Culinary and the Clash of Civilisations (2020)*, *Epistémè liquide* (2021), *Communiquer le corps dans la culture marocaine* (2022), *Introduction à la sémiotique de la culture* (2023), *Raconter le désastre, numéro spécial de Cahiers de narratologie* (2023), *Introduction à la sémiotique de la culture* (2023), *Le chercheur modèle, Umberto Eco et la recherche sémiotique* (2024).

Luca Brunet è laureato in Semiotica presso l'Università di Bologna, con una tesi di semiotica interpretativa dedicata al cinema psichedelico, redatta sotto la direzione del prof. Claudio Paolucci. Attualmente è al secondo anno del dottorato nazionale "Immagine, linguaggio, figura: forme e modi della mediazione" presso l'Università di Torino, in collaborazione con l'Università di Milano, sotto la supervisione della prof. ssa Jenny Ponzo. Tra il 2024 e il 2025 ha svolto un periodo di ricerca

in qualità di visiting student presso la Fondazione Bruno Kessler a Trento, e presso l'Università Paris 8. La sua ricerca attuale, all'incrocio tra media studies, semiotica e filosofia, si concentra sulla relazione tra allucinazioni e dispositivi mediali, con particolare attenzione alle "allucinazioni emergenti" nelle tecnologie di intelligenza artificiale. Ha partecipato come relatore al sedicesimo congresso mondiale di Semiotica a Varsavia, ai Seminari di Semiotica dell'Università di Torino, e al ciclo di seminari "Conservazione e trasformazione nell'etica e nella religione" della Fondazione Bruno Kessler.

James Brusseau (PhD, Philosophy) is author of books, articles, and media in the history of philosophy and ethics. He has taught in Europe, Mexico, and currently at Pace University near his home in New York City. He is also a visiting professor in the Department of Information Engineering and Science at the University of Trento in Italy. His academic research explores the human experience of artificial intelligence in the areas of personal identity, authenticity, and freedom.

Nicholas Buck is Professorial Lecturer in the Department of Philosophy and Religion at American University in Washington, D.C., USA. He writes and teaches at the intersections of religious studies, moral and political philosophy, and the philosophy of religion. His current research includes projects on moral perception and the practices and beliefs that inform it, and on democratic theory and religious patterns of imagining political community.

Arkaprava Chattopadhyay is presently associated with SRM University Sikkim, India, as an 'Associate Professor' and 'Head', at its School of Journalism and Mass Communication. Formerly, he has also served as the 'Head of Research' for the University, as well as the 'Deputy Director' of its Centre for Online Education. He is also the 'Founding Director' of the independent research setup – 'Centre for Artistic Research, Spiritual Phenomenology & Ethnosemiotics', Kolkata, India, engaged in various research projects. Awarded his Ph.D. in February 2023 by Sikkim University; a Central University established by an Act of Parliament, in India (2007) – his thesis is titled "Folk

Media and Religion: An Ethnosemiotic Study of Purulia Chhau". Apart from having presented his research at various international conferences across the world initiated by prestigious organizations such as the IAMCR (International Association for Mass Communication Research), ICA (International Communication Association), IASS (International Association for Semiotic Studies), NASS (Nordic Association for Semiotic Studies), EuARe (European Academy of Religion), and the ISMRC (International Society for Media Religion and Culture) – he has published his work in various Scopus Indexed and UGC Care-listed journals over the past five years. Most notably, in the Cambridge University Press journal – 'New Theatre Quarterly' (https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X22000203), administered by the University of London, as well as in 'Anthropological Notebooks' (https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14254209), published by the Slovene Anthropological Society of Europe. Concomitant to his research within the domain of 'Media & Religion', 'Folk Media Anthropology', 'Children and Media', and 'Semiotics' – he has also been a resource person for various SWAYAM MOOCS (online courses) initiated by 'St. Xaviers College' EMMRC (Educational Multi–media Research Center), Kolkata, in association with the UGC-CEC (University Grants Commission — Consortium for Educational Communication), MHRD (Ministry of Human Resource and Development) and the National Knowledge Commission, New Delhi, India.

Paolo Costa (1966), philosopher, is a Tenured Researcher at the Center for Religious Studies of the Bruno Kessler Foundation (Trento, Italy). His main fields of research are philosophical anthropology, moral and political philosophy, theory of secularization, modern spiritualities. He is the Italian translator of works by H. Arendt, C. Taylor, C. Darwin, and others. Among his books: *La ragione e i suoi eccessi* (Milan 2014); *The Post–Secular City* (Paderborn 2022; or. ed. Brescia 2019); *L'arte dell'essenziale* (Udine 2023).

Veronica della Dora insegna Geografia Umana presso la Royal Holloway, University of London. I suoi interessi di ricerca e le sue pubblicazioni spaziano dalla geografia storica e culturale, alla storia

della cartografia e agli studi bizantini, con particolare attenzione al paesaggio, allo spazio sacro e all'immaginario geografico. Le sue monografie includono *Imagining Mount Athos: Visions of a Holy Place from Homer to World War II* (University of Virginia Press, 2011), *Landscape, Nature and the Sacred in Byzantium* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), *Mountain: Nature and Culture* (Reaktion, 2016; trad. Einaudi, 2019) e *The Mantle of the Earth: Genealogies of a Geographical Metapho*r (University of Chicago Press, 2021). Finanziato dalla Fondazione Leverhulme, il suo progetto attuale *Mapping the Journey of Lif* esplora rappresentazioni della metafora del viaggio della vita e le topografie a essa associate dall'antichità al presente.

Antonio Pio Di Cosmo è ricercatore associato presso l'ISACCL, The Institute for Advanced Studies in Levant Culture and Civilization Center of Excellence of the World Academy of Art & Science di Bucarest. Laureato in Giurisprudenza presso l'Università degli Studi di Macerata e in Lettere e Beni culturali presso l'Università degli Studi di Foggia, ha poi ottenuto il Master in Archeologia e Patrimonio presso l'Università di Cordoba (Spagna). Dottore di ricerca in Archeologia presso la medesima Università di Cordoba con una tesi dal titolo "I motivi erranti della regalità: evidenze archeologiche e indicatori dei procedimenti di transito e diffusione nell'area della koinè bizantina", è membro del progetto ITSERR e attualmente candidato al dottorato di ricerca in Religious Studies presso l'Università di Modena e Reggio Emilia. È autore di molteplici saggi concernenti la fenomenologia della regalità romana e bizantina ed il culto imperiale pubblicati su riviste scientifiche internazionali, e ha partecipato a numerosi convegni in diversi paesi europei ed extraeuropei.

Marta Fasan is a post-doctoral research fellow in Comparative Constitutional Law at the Faculty of Law, University of Trento, where she earned her PhD in Comparative and European Legal Studies. She has conducted research at national research centers, such as the Italian Institute of Technology, as well as at foreign universities, including the Centre de Recherche en Droit Public at the Université de Montréal and the Health Law Centre at Lund University. Her research focuses on

the relationship between artificial intelligence and constitutional law, examining the impact of this technology on contemporary constitutionalism from a comparative perspective.

José Enrique Finol es Licenciado en Letras por la Universidad del Zulia, Venezuela, (1972); DEA y Doctor en Ciencias de la Información y de la Comunicación por la Escuela de Altos Estudios en Ciencias Sociales, Francia (1980); realizó un postdoctorado en Semiótica y Antropología en la Universidad de Indiana, (1991-1993). Es Autor de los libros *Semiótica, Comunicación y Cultura*, *Mito y Cultura Guajira*, *Los Signos de la Crisis*, *El Neoanalfabetismo*, *Capillitas a la orilla del camino: una micro-cultura funeraria*, y *On the corposphere. Antroposemiotics of the body*.

Ha publicado más de ciento cuarenta artículos en libros y revistas arbitradas y ha dictado más de 130 conferencias y cursos en diversas universidades del mundo. Fue decano, investigador y docente en la Universidad del Zulia, Venezuela, donde trabajó por más de cuarenta años. Fundó *Opción. Revista de Ciencias Humanas y Sociales* y el *Laboratorio de Investigaciones Semióticas y Antropológicas* en la Universidad del Zulia, Venezuela. Fue Presidente de la Federación Latinoamericana de Semiótica y Vicepresidente de la Asociación Internacional de Semiótica. Actualmente es vicepresidente de la Asociación Internacional de Semiótica Visual. Entre 2014 y 2016 fue investigador "Prometeo" en Ecuador y entre 2017 y 2018 fue investigador de tiempo completo en la Universidad de Lima, Perú. Recibió un *Doctorado Honoris Causa* en 2009. Actualmente es profesor en el Doctorado en Estudios del Español: Lingüística y Literatura de la Pontificia Universidad Católica Madre y Maestra en República Dominicana. Entre sus principales líneas de investigación están Antropo-Semiótica del cuerpo y del rito, Semiótica del discurso publicitario, Semióticas de la experiencia.

Muchas de sus publicaciones están disponibles en su sitio web: www.joseenriquefinol.com

Francesco Galofaro is an associate professor at IULM University in Milan. He received his PhD in semiotics with Umberto Eco and Maria

Pia Pozzato in 2005. He is a member of the Centro Universitario Bolognese di Etnosemiotica, directed by Francesco Marsciani, and a former member of the ERC NeMoSanctI research group, directed by Jenny Ponzo at the University of Turin. He is co-founder and member of the editorial board of the online semiotics journal *Ocula*. Among his publications: *Morphogenesis and Individuation*, Berlin, Springer, 2014 (with A. Sarti and F. Montanari).

Lucia Galvagni Ricercatrice presso la Fondazione Bruno Kessler — Centro per le Scienze Religiose. Laureata in Filosofia (Università cattolica, Milano), ha conseguito un dottorato in "Bioetica e sperimentazioni cliniche in oncologia" (Facoltà di Medicina, Università degli Studi di Genova) e un master in "Ethique, santé et institutions" (Université catholique de Lille, Francia). I suoi principali interessi di ricerca riguardano la bioetica, la filosofia della medicina e l'etica clinica, l'etica della salute e della sanità. È autrice di: *Percorsi di etica clinica* (EDB 2003), *Bioetica e comitati etici* (EDB 2005), *Narrazioni cliniche. Etica e comunicazione in medicina* (Carocci 2020).

Accursio Graffeo is a PhD candidate in the Italian Doctoral School of Religious Studies (DREST) at the University of Turin jointly with the University of Zurich and at the Bruno Kessler Foundation. His research focuses on AI–related new religious movements. He holds a master's degree in cultural anthropology from the University of Turin. In 2022 he published his first monograph entitled *Religioni e complessità. L'antropologia di Enrico Comba e i Nativi nordamericani*. On the social work side, he has more than a decade of experience in the field of social community empowerment in the metropolitan district of Milan and has a solid experience in social design and project writing too. In the field of anthropology, he is a member of the editorial board of AceTonico, an online project for independent and participatory anthropological publishing.

Sara Hejazi is a resident anthropologist at the Center for Sensors & Devices at the Bruno Kessler Foundation in Trento, and a research fellow at the Department of Engineering and Information Sciences (DISI),

University of Trento. Her work bridges anthropology, technology, and belief systems, with a focus on how identities and communities evolve in response to cultural and technological shifts. Over her extensive research career, she has conducted in-depth ethnographic studies on a diverse range of topics. These include contemporary monasticism, Islamic minority communities in Italy, the historical and modern-day politics of the veil in Iran, and the effects of digital technologies on sexuality and sacred practices. She has explored the dematerialization of religious objects through digital media, the revival of Tengrism in Central Asia as a form of cultural resistance, and civil society movements in Iran, particularly following the "Zan, Zendegi, Azadi" uprising. Her recent research focuses on the social implications of emerging technologies. Her last monographic work "Iran, donne e rivolte" was published in 2023 by Morcelliana, Scholé, Brescia. Her last paper contribution was published on "I saggi di Lexia" in 2025 and is titled "Rivoluzioni digitali. Il senso immerso nello spazio pubblico e virtuale iraniano".

Marilia Jardim is a Semiotician, Cultural Researcher, and Educator, and an Associate Lecturer at the Royal College of Art (London). With a previous background as a visual and stage artist, she is an alumna of the BA (Hons) Communication of the Arts of the Body (PUC-SP, Brazil), where she received a polymathic undergraduate education combining the Human, Social, Physical, and Biological Sciences. She is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, MPhil in Communication and Semiotics (PUC-SP / CPS, Brazil) and PhD in Communications and Media (University of Westminster / CAMRI). With past research interests in the body and fashion rhythms in both historical contexts and emerging identity dynamics in the contemporary urban and online environments, her work showcases eclectic research interests in Poststructuralism, Post-colonial Theory and Religious Studies fused on interdisciplinary dialogues beginning at the many paradigms of semiotic theories. Her recent research focuses on the constructions of "Truth" in a post–veridiction world, the cyclical aspect of epistemological discourses, and the transposition of semiotic concepts as tools supporting interdisciplinary pedagogies in tune with the 21st-century learners and their needs.

Eugenia Lancellotta è una ricercatrice in Filosofia della Psicologia. Studia come le credenze irrazionali, incluse quelle deliranti, cospiratorie, estremiste e pregiudiziali, si formano, che cosa le distingue e cosa si può fare per metterle in discussione. Più di recente, ha cominciato ad approfondire le potenzialità e i limiti delle nuove tecnologie, come intelligenza artificiale e realtà virtuale, nel campo della salute mentale e in quello della lotta all'oggettificazione femminile. Dopo aver conseguito un Master in filosofia presso il King's College di Londra e un dottorato, sempre in filosofia, presso l'Università di Birmingham, ha lavorato come ricercatrice post–doc nel progetto "Resilient Beliefs: Religion and Beyond" presso Il Centro per le Scienze Religiose della Fondazione Bruno Kessler.

Massimo Leone è Direttore di FBK–ISR, il Centro per le Scienze Religiose della Fondazione Bruno Kessler di Trento; Professore Ordinario di Filosofia della Comunicazione, Semiotica Culturale e Semiotica Visiva presso il Dipartimento di Filosofia e Scienze dell'Educazione dell'Università di Torino, Italia; Professore di Semiotica presso il Dipartimento di Lingua e Letteratura Cinese dell'Università di Shanghai, Cina; membro associato di Cambridge Digital Humanities, Università di Cambridge, Regno Unito; professore aggiunto presso l'Università UCAB di Caracas, Venezuela, e Professore Aggiunto della Korea University, Seoul, Korea. Membro dell'Accademia d'Europa, è stato professore invitato in diverse università dei cinque continenti. È autore di sedici libri, ha curato più di sessanta volumi collettivi e ha pubblicato più di seicento articoli in semiotica, studi religiosi e studi visivi. È vincitore di un ERC Consolidator Grant 2018 e di un ERC Proof of Concept Grant 2022. È caporedattore di "Lexia", la rivista semiotica del Centro di Ricerca Interdisciplinare sulla Comunicazione dell'Università di Torino, della rivista "Semiotica" (De Gruyter) e direttore delle collane "I Saggi di Lexia" (Aracne, Roma), "Semiotics of Religion" (Walter de Gruyter, Berlino e Boston), "Advances in Face Studies" (Routledge, Londra e New York) e "Religion and Technology" (Springer).

Giulio Mariotti holds a Ph.D. in Second Temple Judaism and Christian Origins. He is a postdoctoral researcher at the Foundation

for Religious Studies (FSCIRE – Bologna) and teaches at the ISSR 'R. Guardini' of Trento. He serves as secretary of the Enoch Seminar for its Italian meetings. He has published essays and scholarly articles on apocalypticism, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the within Judaism reading of the New Testament corpus. His MA dissertation focused on a philological and semantic analysis of the term mystery (זר) in Second Temple literature. In his doctoral work, he developed a method for analyzing New Testament ideas as fully embedded within the diverse world of Second Temple Judaism. He is the author of 'L'elezione, il dualismo, il tempo. Leggere 2Tessalonicesi nel giudaismo del Secondo Tempio' (Edizioni dell'Orso 2024), and co-authored 'Paolo di Tarso, un ebreo del suo tempo' (Carocci, 2025) with G. Boccaccini. He is also one of the editors of Riattivare Paolo di Tarso (Effatà, 2025).

Jon Mathieu è professore emerito di Storia all'Università di Lucerna, in Svizzera. Ha scritto numerose opere sulla storia delle regioni montane, tra le quali *Die Alpen: Raum-Kultur-Geschichte* (Reclam, 2015). In italiano è disponibile *Storia delle Alpi: 1500-1900: ambiente, sviluppo e società* (Casagrande, 2000). Il suo ultimo libro si intitola *Mount Sacred. A Brief Global History of Holy Mountains since 1500* (White Horse Press, 2023).

Luís Neiva is a Portuguese performer and researcher in the field of Historical Musicology. He began his singing studies in 2009 at Conservatório de Música do Porto and completed a Bachelor in Singing at ESMAE in 2015. In 2023 he completed a Master's Degree in Advanced Vocal Ensemble Studies at the renowned Schola Cantorum Basiliensis (Switzerland), after having accomplished a Master's Degree in Early Music Performance (Renaissance - Romantic) at the same institution in 2022.

He is currently a PhD student in Musical Sciences at NOVA FCSH, a fellow of the Foundation for Science and Technology and a researcher at the Centro de Estudos de Sociologia e Estética Musical (CESEM) and the Global Centre for Advanced Studies (GCAS).

From his activity as an ensemble musician, and in particular in the area of early music, his collaborations with Arte Minima, Capella

Sanctae Crucis, NikanOmpa, Le Concert de la Reine, thélème, Accademia Barroca Lucernensis and Zürcher Sing Akademie stand out.

He was scientific co-coordinator of the project "AD TENEBRAS: Lamentações e Responsórios para os Ofícios das Trevas no Mosteiro de Santa Cruz de Coimbra 1550-1630" organised by the ensemble Capella Sanctae Crucis and funded by D.G. Artes and the Caixa Cultura initiative in 2023.

As a researcher, his main focus of interest is on the relationship between Historical Musicology and the fields of Philosophy, Psychoanalysis and Radical Theology.

Boris Rähme (Dr. phil. in Philosophy, Freie Universität Berlin, 2010) is a researcher at the Center for Religious Studies of Fondazione Bruno Kessler in Trento (Italy) and lecturer in Philosophy of Logic at the University of Trento. He has been researcher and lecturer at the Freie Universität Berlin, Visiting Fellow at Harvard University's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, and has held research fellowships at the Universities of Sheffield, Helsinki, and Heidelberg. His main research interests are in social epistemology, philosophy of religion and the intersection between religious studies and theories of innovation. Rähme has published numerous articles in philosophical epistemology, theories of truth, religion and new technologies, as well as a monograph titled "Wahrheit, Begründbarkeit und Fallibilität" (Ontos 2010).

Claude Romano is Maitre de Conferences (HDR) in the Department of Philosophy at Sorbonne University and Professorial Fellow at the Australian Catholic University. He works in contemporary philosophy, especially Philosophical Hermeneutics and Phenomenology, with a strong interest also in the analytic tradition from Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle onward. His first books were devoted to the topic of events from a phenomenological perspective. They are translated into English as *Event and World, Event and Time* and *There is: The Event and the Finitude of Appearing* (all three published by Fordham University Press). *Au cœur de la raison, la phénoménologie* (Gallimard, 2010) appeared in English as *At the Heart of Reason* (Northwestern University Press, 2015). His more recent research is devoted to the question of

personal identity from the viewpoint of truthfulness or authenticity. He published two books on the history of the idea of "personal truth", or truth "in life itself", from Aristotle and Augustine to Heidegger (*Être soi-même. Une autre histoire de la philosophie*, Gallimard, 2019) and more recently *La révolution de l'authenticité à l'âge du romantisme : de Goethe à Nietzsche* (Mimesis, 2023). He is also the author of *L'identité humaine en dialogue* (Le Seuil, 2022). His works are translated in more than ten languages, including English, Spanish, Italian, German, Portuguese, Russian, Chinese, Turkish. He received several awards and academic distinctions, among which the Grand Prix Morton of the French Academy (2010), the Prix Gegner of the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques (2011) and, more recently, the more prestigious French award in philosophy, the Grand Prix de Philosophie of the French Academy (2020).

Tommaso Ropelato is PhD candidate with a strong interest in practical philosophy, bioethics, and applied ethics, with a particular focus onthe ethical challenges posed by emerging technologies in the reproductive field. His current research explores how consent practices can be reimagined through value–sensitive approaches in the context of prenatal testing. He is especially interested in the intersections between bioethical frameworks and broader issues such as vulnerability, disability, and social justice. He is also deeply drawn to the philosophical traditions within Islamic and Jewish thought, which he approaches not only as intellectually rich sources but also as living traditions that continue to shape contemporary moral debates.

Outside academia, he comes from a journalism.

Daniel Toscano Lopez is a postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Cádiz (Spain). PhD in Philosophy, Pontifical Catholic University of Chile (Chile). Master's degree in Philosophy, Pontifical Catholic University of Chile (Chile). Master's degree in Philosophy, Pontifical Javeriana University (Colombia). Master's degree in Political Studies, Pontifical Javeriana University (Colombia). Bachelor's degree in Philosophy, Pontifical Javeriana University (Colombia). Professor of postgraduate studies at the University of Valparaíso. Research interests

include political philosophy, contemporary philosophy, biopolitics, bioethics, philosophy of technology, and the archaeogenealogical method applied to phenomena such as the COVID-19 pandemic and migration. Toscano, D. (2024). COVID-19 pandemic in Chile: an analysis from biopower technologies of Foucauldian inspiration. Dorsal, Revista de estudios foucaultiana, nº 17, pp. 121-143. Toscano, D. (2023). Unconcealing Contemporary Technology: Human Enhancement as Biopolitics of Vitality. In Fritzsche, A. and Santamaría, A. Rethinking Technology and Engineering: Dialogues Across Disciplines and Geographies, (pp. 251-260). Springer International Publishing. Toscano, D. (2023). Biopolítica molecular y producción artificial de la vida: Dispositivos de biogeneración e infogeneración. En-Claves Del Pensamiento, (34), e566. DOI: 10.46530/ecdp.voi34.566 Toscano, D. (2022). El Dispositivo Biopolítico de mejoramiento humano del siglo XXI: poder molecular sobre la vida y producción de nuevas subjetividades. Revista de Filosofía Aurora, Curitiba, v. 34, (61): 244-266. DOI:10.46530/ecdp.voi34.566 Toscano, D. (2019). The Society of the Digital Swarm: Microblogging and Construction of Subjectivity in Homo Digitalis. In González-Prida, V. and Zamora, J. (2019). Handbook of Research on Industrial Advancement in Scientific Knowledge, (pp. 95-110). IGI Global.

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