

## **The God of Men and the God of Women**

### **A Dialogue between Emanuele Severino and Luisa Muraro**

Andrea Righi

#### **Abstract**

This essay maps the uncharted imbrication between the philosophy of Emanuele Severino and the work of a feminist branch of the Thought of Sexual Difference, particularly as outlined in the reflection of Luisa Muraro. In a comparative manner, I activate a series of linkages between concepts such as the structural impasse of the real and the unorthodox implications of the theory of salvation as they emerge in selected works by both authors. Interrogating transcendence as a decisive tenet of the patriarchal symbolic order, I finally illustrate how these concepts are instrumental in dismantling the nihilistic discourse of modernity.

Philosopher Emanuele Severino (1929–2020) was genuinely interested in the development of the Thought of Sexual Difference, particularly the work of Luisa Muraro, whom he personally knew — they were part of the same cohort of young philosophers gravitating around the Neo-Scholastic school led by Gustavo Bontadini in 1960s Milan. Although Severino expressed an interest in Muraro, his writings contain no direct engagement with feminism. By contrast, Muraro references Severino's work several times, as do other feminist theorists like Adriana Cavarero.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I would like to bring together these two areas of thought. Naturally, I understand the enormity of the task, especially the challenge of synthesising Severino's philosophy or even approaching the plurality of voices that constitute the Thought of Sexual Difference, not to mention the difficulty of comparing two such distant ways of thinking.<sup>2</sup> More modestly, I propose to establish a dialogue between Severino and Muraro concentrating solely on the transcendent status of the divine. In examining this theological category, I am interested in exposing the internal contradiction of transcendence — a deadlock or abyss that both authors capture and productively use in their philosophy. A working definition of transcendence is in order.

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Ida Dominijanni for providing this information. See Luisa Muraro, *The Symbolic Order of the Mother*, 26–27; Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato*, 124 n.8. Muraro also worked on Severino in an unfinished and unpublished essay from 1980, entitled 'Intorno a un giocatore di dadi. Nietzsche, Fachinelli, Mach, Severino'.

<sup>2</sup> On the Thought of Sexual difference see Casarino and Righi, eds., *Another Mother*; Bono and Kemp eds., *Italian Feminist Thought*; Parati and West eds., *Italian Feminist Theory and Practice*; Cicogna and de Lauretis eds., *Sexual Difference*. For Severino see, Alessandro Carrera 'Dalla Gioia Alla Gloria', 'La pagina della strega', 'Severino vs. Western Nihilism'.

Transcendence is a domain that claims to constitute reality from the outside without being limited by any other cause. From a religious perspective, a divine substance is transcendent because it causes and guarantees the existence of reality, that is, it occupies the position of that which is uncreated and causeless. This symbolic system is one with patriarchy. In the sequence Father-King-God, each entity functions as a founding principle, a singular exception ensuring that the field is coherent by marking or *othering* a portion of those who populate it (the woman, the slave, the homosexual, the migrant, to mention but a few).<sup>3</sup> Operating outside the field of created reality, this symbolic substance is one, perfect, and infinite; but insofar as it presides over the corruptible and finite domain of reality it also engages in a contractual system (elsewhere I have called it pactional) through the Father-son lineage, which offers salvation or damnation to humanity.<sup>4</sup>

Severino paid a hefty price for outlining the aporias of this model, appearing like a novel Galileo before the Holy Office in 1970 and consequently losing his post as professor of Moral Philosophy at the Catholic University in Milan. What is overlooked in his view, however, is the sexed dimension of his argument. On the one hand, the symbolic law and logics of patriarchy are, in fact, comparable to what he calls the folly of the West, or the path of the night, a nihilistic discourse that grew out of Greek thought. On the other hand, Severino's depiction of God is better understood through the lens of Muraro's work on the symbolic dimension of the Mother. In this essay, I am interested in activating a union of purpose between Severino and Muraro that is instrumental in dismantling transcendence and its patriarchal tenets. I begin by discussing Severino's philosophy, particularly his understanding of the concept of totality, nihilism as the structure of Western civilisation, and the oracular announcement of its twilight through the idea of Glory. In the second part of the essay, I demonstrate how these concepts can be further reworked by considering Muraro's discussion of the God of women.

### How Does Totality Totalise Itself? The Truth of Contradiction C

To shed light on Severino's theory I suggest we begin from the question of how to portray a transcendent totality correctly. What does the totality of everything that exists (and will ever exist) look like? By setting a visual limit, any picture ultimately betrays the entirety of such a domain. Any representation conveys a *partial* depiction, thus precluding the possibility of portraying the infiniteness — or *impartiality* — of totality. In other words, representations are conditioned and cannot express the unconditional essence of a true totality. Western thought, however, conceives of truth by rooting it in a similar aspiration to completeness. Truth is comprehensive, it is the whole.

Because totality is the pre-requisite for truth, an abyss is broken open between totality itself and the finite dimension of the world. Severino, for his part,

---

<sup>3</sup> See Righi, *The Other Side of the Digital*, 27-47.

<sup>4</sup> See Righi, 'The Pactional Model of Salvation and its Undoing in St. Catherine of Siena'.

welcomes this asymmetry, using it as a tool to interpret reality. He calls it *contradiction C*, a double-edged structural paradox.<sup>5</sup> On the one hand, because Being must manifest itself through partial images, its totality is not accessible. On the other hand, these images cannot be understood unless they partake of a plurality of relations, that is, a totality. Severino illustrates the contradiction as follows: ‘any being that appears, appears included in the totality of Being, but this totality only appears formally: the concrete fullness of Being remains concealed. The eternal appearing of the truth of Being is the finite appearing of the infinite’. In short, to the extent that a totality always appears as a partiality, this ‘totality and every determination of Being appear as contradiction’.<sup>6</sup> *Contradiction C* illustrates a perplexing characteristic of the whole: as observed, because totality expresses itself via individual parts, each part appears only against the backdrop of this totality, or rather each part is what it is precisely because of the relations it entertains with the whole. In an awkward reversal, totality is always too little, while partialities are always too much. The whole promises something it cannot deliver. Totality is in *debt*, Severino observes, because it does not return the plenitude that it possesses. It promises entirety but keeps offering its parts. Here the logic of an infinite *debt* imposes itself structurally. The impossibility of exhibiting the entirety of the whole produces constant movement: one payment demands another in an infinite succession. *Contradiction C* is the internal mechanism that fuels the continuous manifestation of an infinite series.

The endless movement of Being is not a particularly novel concept. You don’t need a philosopher to declare that reality is endlessly becoming. Yet, it should be noted that *contradiction C* enables Severino to justify *movement* from the point of view of the plenitude of Being, a significant contribution to any critique of transcendence. Consider that, as it contains every possible configuration, Being must be exhaustive. Hence it cannot change into something different, it must be motionless and, thus, eternal. Positing totality, in fact, entails that the temporality of a complete totality is eternity. This is why modern thought must do away with a consistent definition of totality by affirming that reality is open-ended. Or that the truth of the world is its becoming. Reality is in flux and by transforming it, humanity forges its future – i.e., that which does not exist. Totality is always in the making, while the past is lost in the recesses of time and cannot be changed. Yet, this model is beset by a problem. It presupposes at least two points which are external to the manifold of reality: a beginning (the past) and an end (the future). Reality (I will also refer to it as the Real or *immanence*) seems to be enveloped in some type of non-Being: the *nothing* before a certain reality appears and the nothing that this reality turns into when it ends. Immanence is limited by areas of absolute negativity that *transcend* its plane. The fullness of Being is thus circumscribed by a vacuum. To the extent that an exteriority protrudes, the reality of a new transcendence takes

---

<sup>5</sup> See Severino ‘La contraddizione C’, <https://youtu.be/7a1vhpBWBqw>, accessed 27<sup>th</sup> May 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Severino, *The Essence of Nihilism*, 231.

hold as well. Although it is a nihilistic form of transcendence, the manifold of reality seems to be conditioned by it. Since some form of emptiness precedes and follows reality, one must conclude that nothingness serves as its foundation. This is what Severino calls the nihilism (or folly) of the West, or the path of the night, as it pervades every domain of human life, including theology, philosophy, and technology.<sup>7</sup>

Severino's famous solution to this logical problem is to turn to eternalism. He disputes the becoming of Being by claiming that things do not come from and turn into nothingness. Things do not begin and end; they simply perdure as instants outside time. In short, Severino reverses the dominant theological assumption regarding time: eternity does not belong to divine transcendence but to earthly immanence. Obviously, this everlastingness is not empirical, since the instants of reality are singularly outside of time and are thus eternal.<sup>8</sup> This claim to eternity also applies to the accepted belief that Being is circumscribed by nothingness. When stating that Being turns into not-being, one seems to be affirming the concrete content of the annihilation of Being. But this is illogical. Even when we negate Being, we are affirming some form of its determination because the negation relies on Being itself. Giulio Goggi summarises this point as follows: 'the negation of the being itself of Being is founded on what it negates, that is, it negates that without which the negation could not be as such, so that it is a way of saying that includes the declaration of its own non-existence'.<sup>9</sup> To simplify: by negating the dimension of existence (Being), not-being announces its own fallacy.

### Salvation in Severino

In demonstrating the fallacy of the folly of modern thought, I illustrated how Severino posits that reality is not created and destroyed by the passage of time. Let us reconsider this claim by looking at the difference between what we normally consider to be *appearances* and truth, an argument that while recapitulating the main points of *contradiction C* will also introduce us to the solutions proposed by Severino: Appearing and Glory.<sup>10</sup> In Western Thought, truth is the opposite of semblance. Truth is that kernel of solid reality concealed behind exterior manifestations, namely, appearances. At best, they are distorted images of reality – they are, once again, partialities. The classic example is the straight stick appearing bent in water, an optical illusion that proves the fallibility of perceptions and thus the higher perfection of ideas according to Platonism. However, in Greek thought sight is also a criterion for knowledge. Bearing witness to truth requires us to perceive it. Truth is associated with a form of clear and all-encompassing vision. As

---

<sup>7</sup> See Righi 'Eternity as Relationality'.

<sup>8</sup> As Carrera points out, eternity 'does not mean that the empirical you and I are immortal in time [...] but that each moment, every slice of reality, is' (Carrera, 'Severino vs. Western Nihilism', 46).

<sup>9</sup> Goggi, 'Golden Implication', 46.

<sup>10</sup> See Severino 'L'apparire', [https://youtu.be/H6s\\_PTnyv\\_k](https://youtu.be/H6s_PTnyv_k), accessed 27<sup>th</sup> May 2022.

the reader may have anticipated, the dilemma between appearances and truth follows the movement of *contradiction C*. On one side, a comprehensive vision of totality falls prey to the broken promise of completeness previously mentioned – that is to say, the scopic wholeness offers itself through partial views. On the other, appearances make sense only because they are integral to the totality of Being. This hiatus demonstrates that an image reveals not only its content but also its relatedness to the scene on which it appears. Severino calls this visual embeddedness *Appearing*. Appearing is a transcendental template because when something emerges, the relationships with all other things, from which it differs and to which it is connected, also emerge. Consider the case of a red chair. Its appearance is possible because it is part of an aggregate of visual, material, and cultural elements, that is to say, because it occupies a location in space that is different from other objects, because it reflects light that falls into that part of the spectrum which in English is called ‘red’, because it has a place in a cultural continuum that assigns to it a set of physical and symbolic functions, etc. In short, along with the specific image, the structure of *Appearing* also appears, thereby enabling a scopic horizon.<sup>11</sup> This insurmountable perspective should be emptied of any anthropocentric connotations. Its brilliance does not require a human spectator – one can think of it as a gaze emptied of any intentionality. Appearing is thus an immanent scene.

Let us return to Severino’s claim that Being is eternal because things cannot come from and turn into nothing, and look at the case of things that do not yet exist. Consider the example of a new essay on Kim Stanley Robinson’s novel *The Ministry for the Future* that I plan to write. This text does not *appear* to exist yet. Severino would ask: what does ‘not appear’ mean here? The fact that the writing ‘does not appear’ does not mean that we summon nothingness but rather that the unknown emerges in its many alternative forms. Immediately, as I write this sentence, clues about metaphors and narrative patterns begin to take shape. In Severino’s terminology, the future essay appears in a certain way, which is different from the tangibility of, say, this current essay. Perhaps, the essay on Stanley Robinson appears as an opportunity, a duty, a solicitation, or a plan – in other words it is not nothing. Similarly, the past is not annihilated. Through recollection, or inquiry, or simply autonomously, the past reappears. Naturally, as it manifests

---

<sup>11</sup> Severino writes that ‘the Appearing that appears is the very appearing of all the determinations that appear, and in this sense is not “among” them, but envelops or embraces them, positing itself therefore not as a simple part of the content that appears, but rather as the very horizon of that content’ (*The Essence of Nihilism*, 258). Carrera offers a pointed illustration of the interrelated infinity of appearing by writing that ‘Severino’s Being would be a synchronic picture of the totality of appearances that appears in the moment the picture is taken, plus the picture itself, whoever or whatever is taking the picture and whoever is looking at it. Possibly, it would be something akin to the synchronic vision of Rome that appeared to Freud in *Civilisation and its Discontents* [...], plus Freud himself writing the book in his studio, plus us reading the book, plus the whole universe that surrounds us while we are reading the book’ (‘Every Child is a Severino Scholar’, 65).



itself in its particularity, the memory of an event is not the whole of that event. However, anything that appears must do so through a partial image, while that very partiality must also be tied to the totality of Being. Past and future are traces of this plurality: the idea of my future essay is not the final writing, rather it points to it.

However, our posture with respect to reality is discontinuous. ‘All that lives must die, passing through nature to eternity’, Queen Gertrude tells Hamlet as she encourages him to accept the king’s death. Severino tells us that the world does not turn into nothingness, to be saved by God. Every state of the world is eternal. Instead of becoming, we have an indefinite variation in the configurations of beings. Variation, unlike movement, implies that something is coming forth or catching up with its horizon, thereby skirting any intentionality in the reconstruction of the perception of reality. Western thought, in turn, isolates each fact by severing the umbilical cord between the reality that emerges and its vaster interconnectedness with totality. Focusing on seizing and dominating reality, Western reason pulverises the necessary belonging of each individual being to the multiplicity of the continuum. The consequences of this logic are significant even for those who believe in the afterlife, since the doctrine of creation contaminates Being with nihilism. Through the genesis of the universe, in fact, God becomes the orchestrator of becoming, presiding over the metamorphosis of reality from nothing into something, thus immersing himself in the depths of non-Being. The result is that God guarantees permanence in the afterlife through the machinations of his theological economy, a kind of celestial book-keeping that tracks merits and demerits.<sup>12</sup> Severino writes that this discourse ‘assumes that the individual can decide his own destiny independently of the direction taken by the history of peoples [...]. The individual is saved even if the world [...] goes to perdition. He has to live the few good years of his life as best he can [...] then death definitively settles accounts with the world’.<sup>13</sup> The oppression and sacrifice of other people is part of this logic, one that is based on transcendence as a final point of destination.

Severino invites us to recognise the fallacy of this thought and discover a different truth by way of the concept of Glory. Avoiding religious overtones, we should concentrate on the visual dimension of this category. Glory entails a form of exposition or immanent scene that is outside time. In Severino’s terminology, Glory refers to *contradiction C*. As he observes, ‘the whole is the infinite appearing of eternal beings’: these beings are, however, finite and thus contradict the concrete nature of totality. Hence, ‘the totality of the eternal Being constitutes itself as the eternal removal of the totality of the contradiction of appearing’.<sup>14</sup> Destiny is the succession of each stage in which something comes forth that unfolds and thus incessantly removes individual limitations by revealing an expanse of relations. Here, we should be careful not to impress a type of chronological progression upon

---

<sup>12</sup> Severino, *The Essence of Nihilism*, 159.

<sup>13</sup> Severino, *The Essence of Nihilism*, 161.

<sup>14</sup> Severino, *La Gloria*, 28 (from here on in, all translations from the Italian are mine).

this unfolding — recall that Being is immutable in its instantaneity. The removal of the *contradiction C*, Severino notes, ‘is not a future state that does not yet exist. It is rather an eternal being, a path that has been already (and forever) laid out’.<sup>15</sup> Glory is the integral unfolding of plurality, radiating in its fullness.

It is important to emphasise that Glory is not the paradisiac salvation nor the horrific still frame of Hell. This immanent scene stages the continual display of beauty and unspeakable misery. To understand this category, consider the case of pain. Severino defines pain as a contradiction: in other words, pain emerges because someone’s health is negated. In order to be overcome, pain must come fully into its own, that is, it must become fully visible, precisely as the negation of well-being. It is only the concrete spectacle of pain that enables its removal, i.e., health.<sup>16</sup> Pain disrupts the smooth flow of life, and conversely, we truly understand the essence of health only when suffering emerges. Hence, the full manifestation of pain allows us to envisage the possibility of (hopefully) healing. Put differently, something may be overcome only insofar as it emerges in its entirety. This example gives us a clearer understanding of what Glory is: a scene where negation (not having health) is removed by the intensification of each content (pain) forming a totality (a healing that needs the full manifestation of pain). Here we also see how these logical relations form a network of connections that elude our chronological ordering of reality. These multiplicities exist beyond the implacable arrow of time. Finally, they seem to be independent of relations of cause and effect. From a medical standpoint, in fact, it would be absurd to explain pain as the cause of physical health. Yet, we do need suffering in order to understand well-being.

### **The Guardians of Phylogenesis**

I have examined how the depersonalised and abstract structure of Appearing gestures toward a form of eternity, Glory, that excludes annihilation, in other words, *death* as non-being. In so doing, Severino levies a critique of Western reason, which severs the continuity of Being to reduce, dispossess, and instrumentalise reality. He also demystifies any form of soteriology, given that salvation is not the mysterious decision of the Highest Being but a matter of the appearing of the full truth of *contradiction C* and the receding of nihilism — an eclipsing that, however, does not require its complete erasure.<sup>17</sup>

In the second part of the essay, I want to re-interpret *contradiction C* as a marker of sexual difference, or better yet, develop the implications of Severino’s concept in terms of sexual difference. This shift in perspective will be crucial for grappling with the truth of *contradiction C* as a structural impasse. Let us begin with Luce Irigaray’s observation that women have no God, while man ‘is able to exist because God helps him to define his gender [*genre*], helps him orient his finiteness

---

<sup>15</sup> Severino, *La Gloria*, 28

<sup>16</sup> See Severino, *La Gloria*, 52-53

<sup>17</sup> See Marco Risadelli, ‘Verità e Salvezza dell’ente in Martin Heidegger e Emanuele Severino’, PhD thesis, Università della Calabria, 2014

by reference to infinity'.<sup>18</sup> To put this in Severino's terms, men solve the problem of infinity by engaging in a nihilistic discourse structured around a contractual model of salvation, which isolates the plural dimension of totality. Women engage this ontological dimension differently because of their experience as an oppressed group. Irigaray reflects on what happens to women before a mirror, when 'we look at ourselves [...] to please someone, rarely to interrogate the state of our body or our spirit, rarely for ourselves'.<sup>19</sup> The mirror plays a vital role as it represents the creation of a constructed (female) counterpart. Luisa Muraro observes that 'a woman thinks herself insofar as she is thought by an *other*', referring to the male-dominated framework that regulates the complex interplay of visual and symbolic interactions between a woman, desire, and her reflection.<sup>20</sup> This split places women in a challenging yet distinctly singular position. In a dialectical twist, Muraro demonstrates how they occupy a space that is ontologically more aligned with the structure of totality. To the extent that the woman subjectivises herself via a selfhood constructed by men, she experiences herself in a contradiction homologous to *contradiction C*.

Just as the chain of finite elements both mirrors and exists as distinct from the whole, women inhabit a symbolic dimension that permits them to exist through a constructed entity other than themselves, one that it is also impossible to fully totalise. As mentioned, this field is not encompassable, because it lacks an object which would delimit and thus constitute that structure from the outside. Similarly, it is not circumscribable, because if nothingness lies beyond its borders, this very externality would once again validate nihilism. The unconditionality of totality is caused by its inherent structural paradox. Totality is non-all, it contradicts itself because of the infinite-finite knot.<sup>21</sup> Let me use a personal anecdote to clarify the functioning of the logic of the non-all. My daughter is bilingual but, having been raised in the United States, her dominant language is English. When speaking Italian, she frequently uses '*con senza*', a lexical calque for the preposition 'without', which is correctly translated as '*senza*'. 'Without' is one of those metaphysical particles that releases the expanse of nothingness. Interpreted as '*con senza*', 'without' does not declare the non-Being of an object; rather, it attests to the existential condition of being with lack (*senza*), for as Alenka Zupančič writes, 'without something actually means with the lack of something'.<sup>22</sup> Far from being logical claptrap, 'without' illustrates the structure of totality as non-all. We could

---

<sup>18</sup> Irigaray, 'Divine Women', 61

<sup>19</sup> Irigaray, 'Divine Women', 65

<sup>20</sup> Muraro, *Le Amiche di Dio* 36

<sup>21</sup> The psychoanalytic undertones of this illustration of the structure of *contradiction C* are deliberate. Alenka Zupančič writes that the real of the symbolic is 'biased by its constitutive negativity, this structure is always more or less than what it is, that is to say, more or less than the sum of its elements', *What IS Sex?*, 24. See Righi, *The Other Side of the Digital*, chapter 8. This oscillation reflects Muraro's thought: see below.

<sup>22</sup> Zupančič, *What IS Sex?*, 48.



summarise it as follows: totality is a space that is unconditioned because lack is integral to its multiplicity as its inherent contradiction.

However, women did not simply live irreflexively through this ontological position; this crucial difference propels us beyond Severino's argument. One may argue that if with Severino we achieve the greatest epistemological clarity – what he calls, using a Parmenidean expression, the path of the day – through the lens of sexual difference one sees how women have walked along that path. They beat the path of the day by carrying out what Muraro calls a 'kind of symbolic division of labour'.<sup>23</sup> We know the man's symbolic work well: he makes history through the modification of life; he creates and destroys because he believes that he comes from and returns to nothingness. Male work follows Severino's path of the night. Irigaray writes ironically that Man is the self-appointed guardian of ontogenesis – i.e., he commands the making of the individual, in short, his social and political history. Women, instead, 'are still and always guardians of phylogenesis', i.e., they cultivate the development and stratification of life in general.<sup>24</sup> They thus toil in the infinite dimension of life and have created knowledges and practices of resistance out of that experience – in sum, another history.

Muraro's investigations into early modern women mystics, like Margherita Porete (1250–1310), provides us with some clues as to the nature of this repressed history, one that bears witness to a relation to totality that accords with the logic of the non-all. It would take too much space to describe Muraro's incursions into early modern mysticism in detail; I will focus only on the conclusions she draws from the theology of these famous heretics, particularly Porete's doctrine of the annihilation of individual will.<sup>25</sup> Although few original writings have come down to us, Muraro argues that the teachings of women mystics point to a relation with God that does not rely on that god's being treated as male. In fact, they re-work the image of God by informing it with a different distribution, one marked by unconditional totality. Envisioning a feminine God that exists through its contradictions is something only those who have experienced the structural rift between being and thought (between an infinite multitude and its appearing through its parts) can achieve.<sup>26</sup> For Muraro, expressing this condition involves conducting the symbolic work of 'holding the world, the realm of words, and the world of things in themselves in relation with one another'.<sup>27</sup> The significance of this symbolic work for our social and philosophical order should not be underestimated. In Western thought, the unity between the subject and the world has varied across time. As observed, we have moved from a relation guaranteed by the oneness of the highest Being to that of the mobilising force of men's power.

---

<sup>23</sup> Muraro, *Le Amiche di Dio*, 35.

<sup>24</sup> Irigaray, 'Divine Women', 66.

<sup>25</sup> Porete was a French mystic and writer who belonged to the Beguine movement and was burned at the stake as a heretic in 1310.

<sup>26</sup> Muraro *Le Amiche di Dio*, 37.

<sup>27</sup> Muraro *Le Amiche di Dio*, 35.

Therein, the will to power of the subject finds itself on the belief that insofar as one can act on one's environment, the world is disposable, the implication being that the only reality that exists is *subjectivised*. What is not subjectivised is nothing, as is, for instance, the non-being of the future. In contrast to this subjectivist tendency, the thought of Sexual Difference maintains that the world of things, matter, exists independently of the human mind. The real is the being that persists and exists beyond (and despite) the mediating capacity of language. For Muraro, there is an 'abyssal distance' between reality and the symbolic. Again, this lack or gap is not a very large space that one day some AI will be able to compute. It is a structural separation that is, in fact, abyssal because it exists as an impossibility. 'It simply means that it cannot be filled', as Muraro glosses the matter.<sup>28</sup> To use Lorenzo Chiesa's words, the real is 'the *meaningless* from which meaning qua deficit of meaning originates'.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the real insists within the symbolic without being immediately signifiable.

The abyss is unbridgeable not only because of the rift between mind and matter; as mentioned, this deficit is proper to the symbolic dimension as well. The symbolic order, language, science, or the circle of mediation, as Muraro calls it, 'is imperfect, because it does not make the immediate coincide perfectly with the mediate'.<sup>30</sup> It bears repeating that this leftover is not a nothing, an emptiness that has ceased to exist or that will come into being once human capacities improve. In this sense, Chiesa emphasises the challenge that the symbolic faces when it comes to treating this deficit — the difficulty, in other words, of conveying 'the incompleteness of language [what Muraro calls 'mediation'] without immediately giving it a meaning, and thus transforming it into an *apparent* completeness'.<sup>31</sup> I attempted to elucidate this point with the example of the '*con senza*', the without as being with lack. In this sense, Muraro's and Severino's strategies to respect and nourish incompleteness somehow converge. Severino employs para-philosophical formulas (Glory, Appearing, the path of the day etc.), in short, a style based on 'the *literal* element that resists signification'.<sup>32</sup> Muraro values the language of women mystics because it occupies a space that is non-all. Let us look at the significance of the symbolic work exemplified by a mystic like Porete.

The reality of this abyss is both *less* and *more* than nothing. Just as in the case of *contradiction C*, the formula 'less than nothing' should not be translated into quantitative terms: in other words, it is not a negative number, or a higher degree of non-being. Rather, it indicates the situation in which we have 'the real and no symbolic'.<sup>33</sup> We have a reality that does not signify itself. This is the paradoxical situation of incompleteness par excellence, and yet, feminism turns it

<sup>28</sup> Muraro, *The Symbolic Order of the Mother*, 93.

<sup>29</sup> Chiesa, *The Not-Two*, 85.

<sup>30</sup> Muraro, *The Symbolic Order of the Mother*, 93.

<sup>31</sup> Chiesa, *The Not-Two*, 85.

<sup>32</sup> Chiesa, *The Not-Two*, 85. See also Carrera, 'Dalla gioia alla gloria', 90.

<sup>33</sup> Muraro, *The Symbolic Order of the Mother*, 95.

into a rich experience. Muraro offers two personal examples. The first case points to her response to a remark made during a seminar of the Diotima community. A member concluded that in accordance with the Western subjectivist tendency, a reality that does not produce meaning ultimately does not exist. Muraro reasons that this is not true for a woman; on the contrary, 'for a woman, a reality that does not signify itself is both more and less than nothing'.<sup>34</sup> *Less* here entails the disvalue described by Irigaray: the fact of being imagined by an *other* via the imposition of a preconceived, mute ideality, a negation that does not allow a woman to signify herself. Muraro argues that the woman feels 'doomed', or condemned to this state of affairs.<sup>35</sup> The recognition of this infernal situation, however, opens the way to an understanding of the fact that the real is *more* than nothing — indeed, it is much more than that. This supplement refers to the circumstance of a 'child [*creatura*] who is separated from the mother and cannot find the originary common place she or he had with her'. In this case, access to the symbolic dimension, or speaking, is 'a way of finding again the point of view the child used to share with the mother'.<sup>36</sup> From this standpoint, the real is everything: because of its muteness, it indirectly calls for the circle of mediation to begin its labour. It is the mother (or whoever occupies her place) who performs the necessary symbolic work that signifies the real by inducting the child into the world of language. Similarly, recognising the symbolic function of the mother is also the first step that women need to take in order to begin signifying themselves, as this reality 'becomes a source of knowledge [about herself of the world] from her own point of view'.<sup>37</sup> This point of view is sustainable only if the role of the maternal continuum emerges. This is a basic fact, a minimal one in fact, but essential for at least two reasons. First, it diffuses the subjectivist logic of Western thought, which is prone to either discarding or filling up the structural emptiness of the real via its self-propelled agency or will to power. Second, the maternal continuum provides a form of embedded relatedness that solves the paradoxical question about birth as coming into being, or the coming out of nothingness of a subject (or organism for that matter). In this respect, having the mother (and the grandmother) in lieu of nothingness resolves a great many paradoxes or, more to the point, birth as a structural perspective removes the paradox of nihilism and its need for transcendence. Lastly, in its profound simplicity, this shift meets the challenges of the logical problems we have been discussing. As observed, *contradiction C* forces totality to be indebted to itself. Properly understood, this is an inexhaustible debt of signification that produces richness. Language, science, and the circle of mediation are constantly seeking to speak this real whilst failing to comprehend it fully.<sup>38</sup> This discrepancy, Muraro states, is a symbolic cut that divides 'every fibre and cell of [our] organism',

---

<sup>34</sup> Muraro, *Le Amiche di Dio*, 37.

<sup>35</sup> Muraro, *Le Amiche di Dio*, 38.

<sup>36</sup> Muraro, *The Symbolic Order of the Mother*, 95.

<sup>37</sup> Muraro, *Le Amiche di Dio*, 38.

<sup>38</sup> Muraro, *The Symbolic Order of the Mother*, 95.

concluding that there is no ‘escape. Except for the fact that we know it, and we explain it’. Again, this experience and its elucidation makes all the difference. As she underscores, ‘I began this symbolic operation of *explaining* the regime of mediation by saying that I neither brought myself into the world nor did I teach myself to speak. This led me to find once again the originary relationship with the mother’.<sup>39</sup> This unassuming but radical act of dispossession dismantled centuries of narratives centred on the heroic endeavours of the self-made male individual.

The affirmation of a principle of self-dispossession and the necessity of dependency are precisely the novelties that Muraro extrapolates from Margherita Porete. Here we move from a model of salvation based on what Muraro calls the ‘feelings the son has towards the Father’ to one where the ‘relationship with God indeed bears the marks of a female relationship with the Mother’.<sup>40</sup> In her treatise written in the vernacular French, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, Porete recalls Peter’s saying, ‘it is hard for the righteous to be saved’ (Peter 4:18). A virtuous life is no guarantee of salvation; on the contrary, Muraro notes, ‘the more virtuous a person is, the more s/he feels her/his shortcomings’.<sup>41</sup> Naturally, the flawed life of the mortal is no match for the perfection of the highest Being. The radical dissymmetry between finite and infinite shames the finite, which feels in debt. Even more damning is the notion that the will to do good work is incriminating if it is an act of obedience, or a task undertaken out of fear of divine punishment.<sup>42</sup> Muraro thus points to Porete’s heretical notion of ‘the annihilated soul’, a solution that bears a remarkable similarity to what Arthur Schopenhauer, more than five centuries later, would call non-will, *noluntas*, wherein subjective will encounters the possibility of relinquishing itself due to the attainment of a higher understanding of the whole.<sup>43</sup> Muraro writes that,

Margherita discovers that the human will for good has a limit beyond which it can attain perfection, but only by freely ceasing to be, by removing itself, so to speak, thus becoming a place of non-will where the perfect freedom of love (God) can occur. She calls this passage the death of the Spirit.<sup>44</sup>

The death of the Spirit calls into question once again the abyss Muraro mentioned. Consider it against the backdrop of the issue of debt. The ethics of the will for good works can either turn into a form of self-interest, aimed at ensuring salvation, or lead to a sense of eternal guilt. It is virtue itself that exposes the flaws and inadequacies in one’s efforts, thereby compelling the individual to feel perpetually

---

<sup>39</sup> Muraro, *The Symbolic Order of the Mother*, 96.

<sup>40</sup> Muraro, *Le amiche di Dio*, 50.

<sup>41</sup> Muraro, *Lingua Materna*, 112.

<sup>42</sup> See Muraro, *Le amiche di Dio*, 58.

<sup>43</sup> See Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea*, 127.

<sup>44</sup> Muraro, *Lingua Materna*, 91.

indebted. Hence the need for the self-removal of subjective will. It is a liberatory movement that, Muraro writes, ‘causes the place of virtuous operation to be taken by divine action, of the active God, whom Margherita calls a worker’.<sup>45</sup> God is not the lord, the highest being, or the immobile unity of the one; rather, God is manual labour, such as the work of builders engaged in constructing the monasteries of Porete’s time. The death of the Spirit plays itself out along the lines of the ‘*con senza*’ logic of *contradiction C*, where the impasse becomes the engine that fuels the appearing of the interrelated multiplicity Being. It is a debt that does not produce guilt; it is a good debt. It is the excess that keeps on bringing forward the manifold of totality.

In sum, Muraro offers a political pathway for the emergent form of *contradiction C*. As a wholeness that is indebted to itself because it cannot return to its full wholeness, the Severinian Being lacks completion and is metaphorically less than nothing. Simultaneously, it is also more because of the continuous appearing of new configurations of being. This totality, I argued, is marked by sexual difference, it has the same symbolic organisation. From an ontological point of view, the symbolic order signifies a totality that remains stubbornly real. While the path of the night teaches us that power will simply subjugate it, the path of the day embodies the point of view of the maternal continuum. It is not idyllic; it is not one of full plenitude. It knows the oscillations of *contradiction C*, but it turns them into immanent loving relations. Muraro concludes that the God of men is transcendent, it follows a series of mediations, an economic model of punishments and rewards, which condemns the will to do good work to a perpetual guilt and despair. In contrast, the God of women is ‘superabundant’, like a river that breaks its banks.<sup>46</sup> The politics that may ensue from such a different form of theology, from such models and experiences that have cropped up sporadically in history, should be the centre of a different future.

### Bibliography

- Bono Paola and Kemp Sandra eds., *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader* Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991.
- Carrera, Alessandro. ‘Dalla Gioia Alla Gloria. Severino e La Mistica Della Deduzione’. *Annali d’Italianistica* 25 (2007): 77–103.
- . ‘Every Child is a Severino Scholar. The Stubborn Persistence of the Past and the Contradiction of Being Born in Time’, *Eternity & Contradiction. Journal of Fundamental Ontology*, 4:7 (2022): 62–73.
- . ‘La pagina della strega, o l’epoca dell’immagine del mondo e l’apparire della terra isolata: per Emanuele Severino’, *Filosofia futura* 14, (2020): 111–22.
- . ‘Severino vs. Western Nihilism’. In *Open Borders. Encounters between Italian Philosophy and Continental Thought*, 45–64. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2021.

---

<sup>45</sup> Muraro, *Lingua Materna*, 13

<sup>46</sup> Muraro, *Le Amiche di Dio*, 9.



- Casarino, Cesare and Andrea Righi, eds. *Another Mother: Diotima and the Symbolic Order of Italian Feminism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018.
- Cavarero, Adriana. *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*. Trans. Serena Anderlini and Aine O'Healy. New York: Routledge, 1995.
- Chiesa, Lorenzo. *The Not-Two: Logic and God in Lacan*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016.
- Cicogna, Patricia and de Lauretis, Teresa eds., *Sexual Difference*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.
- Goggi, Giulio. 'Golden Implication: The Primary Foundations of the Eternity of Being'. *Eternity & Contradiction. Journal of Fundamental Ontology* 1:1 (2019): 43-56.
- Irigaray, Luce. 'Divine Women' in *Sexes and Genealogies*. Trans. Gillian C. Gill. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993.
- Parati, Graziella and Rebecca West, eds., *Italian Feminist Theory and Practice: Equality and Sexual Difference*. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002.
- Muraro, Luisa. *Le Amiche di Dio. Margherita e le altre*, Naples: Orthotes Editrice, 2014.
- . *Lingua Materna, scienza divina: scritti sulla filosofia mistica di Margherita Porete*, Naples: M. D'Auria, 1995.
- . *The Symbolic Order of the Mother*. Trans. Francesca Novello. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2018.
- Righi, Andrea. 'Eternity as Relationality: The Problem of the External Foundation of Time in the Thought of Emanuele Severino', *The Journal of Italian Philosophy* 6 (2023): 77-94.
- . *The Other Side of the Digital: The Sacrificial Economy of New Media*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2021.
- . 'The Pactional Model of Salvation and its Undoing in St. Catherine of Siena', *Italian Culture* 40:2 (2022): 112-30.
- Severino, Emanuele. *The Essence of Nihilism*. Trans. Giacomo Donis. New York: Verso, 2016.
- . *La Gloria*. Milan: Adelphi, 2001.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Idea*. London: Kegan Paul, 1909.
- Zupančič, Alenka. *What IS Sex?* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017.