

Eternity as Relationality: The Problem of the External Foundation of Time in the Thought of Emanuele Severino

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When Jacques Lacan said that ‘God does not know he is dead (that’s why he is alive)’, he implied that Nietzsche’s scandalous affirmation did not free believers from the grip of culpability and judgement. Affirming, as Nietzsche did, that ‘God is dead’ does little to vanquish the position of power held by a transcendent entity and its related social order. As Gilles Deleuze points out, the inexistence of God does not free humankind from a bond of obedience, because rather than ‘being burdened from the outside, man takes the weights and places them on his own back’.¹ The symbolic force of God cannot be declared null and void once and for all. And even if one reached that conclusion, as the Italian philosopher Emanuele Severino notes, nothing prevents people from ‘going back to believing again’.² Because of this reversibility, it is plausible to state that the finite domain cannot simply erase the ancestral pact with transcendence. Paradoxically, it seems more reasonable to state that it is the entity that occupies that position of power that shall rescind its obligation towards mankind.

Although the difficulties in asserting radical immanence are not easy to overcome, the formula for dissolving the hold of transcendence is essential to a proper understanding of this immanence. As the claim of the death of God shows, immanence seems to assert what it wants to abolish: although completely self-inherent, it appears to be relying on a non-immanent principle. In other words, the erasure of transcendence seems to be enunciated from a transcendent standpoint, thus surreptitiously re-introducing the concept of transcendence. Because of this, the strategy to disclose the truth of immanence must take a roundabout way, entering into a strange relation with transcendence. By following a series of appropriate steps, one must dance with transcendence in order to deflate it, so to speak. The first step within this dance involves taking up the argument of transcendence *as if* it were true. Greek Philosopher Aristides Baltas explains the reason for this philosophical twist as follows: ‘if there can be no position outside the world (and thought and language), then there can be no position from which to issue this proposition – talking, as it does, of the world (and thought and language)

¹ Deleuze, *Pure Immanence*, 71.

² Severino, *Il Muto di pietra*, 92 (all translations from the Italian are mine unless otherwise indicated).

from outside'. This is a serious objection because stating that immanence is all that exists risks replacing the previous metaphysical position with a new transcendence. Baltas continues, 'the strategy should involve provisionally accepting the possibility of a world – thought – or language transcending standpoint', in other words, this path 'involves granting legitimacy to the philosophical views opposing the perspective of radical immanence'.³ Once this stance is assumed, the next move is to have this position show its own impossibility or 'self-annihilation'.⁴

While the possibility of dissolving transcendence in spatial terms is conceivable – an endless landscape is intuitively imaginable – the temporal side of this issue is harder to articulate. As temporal creatures marked by growth, decay, and death, we normally picture time as an absolute universal order following an inflexible direction.⁵ Such progression forces upon us notions like *beginning* and *end* that circumscribe life (including that of the Universe), thus reinstating an externality that calls into question a form of transcendence. Put differently, questions regarding what was there *before* time – which perhaps caused it to exist – and what will be there *after* its end, point toward a concept of time limited by – but also based on – external conditions: again a form of transcendence. Yet, dissolving these transcendent markers creates the problem of describing an immanent concept of time without falling into some version of subjectivism – where reality turns into a possession of the subject. In the following pages, I want to discuss how the complexities of immanent infinity can be understood from a temporal point of view. To do so, I will delineate the tenets of Severino's thought, examining his autobiography, *Il mio ricordo degli eterni* (2011) (*My Recollection of the Eternal Beings*), which offers a meditation on the inconsistency of an exterior temporal foundation to reality. I will study the structure of immanence by way of a discussion of time focusing particularly on two main points of Severino's philosophy: the understanding of nihilism as the structure of Western civilisation, and the oracular announcement of its overcoming, which discloses the necessity of *eternity* as the singular instantiation of immanence. Severino reaches this point through the idea of *Appearing*, a form of eternity that excludes annihilation, in

³ Baltas, *Peeling Potatoes*, 5.

⁴ Baltas, *Peeling Potatoes*, 6. Lorenzo Chiesa reformulates in psychoanalytic terms a similar concern: 'Lacan suggests that speech cannot convey the incompleteness of language without immediately giving it a meaning, and thus transforming it into an apparent completeness. Saying "there is no meta-language" inevitably institutes this very statement as a meta-linguistic semblance', *The Not-Two*, 85.

⁵ In the words of physicist Carlo Rovelli, 'we conventionally think of time as something simple and fundamental, independently from everything else, from the past to the future, measured by clocks and watches', *The Order of Time*, 3. Albert Einstein's notion of Spacetime has already disclosed how Newtonian time as a universal order is an illusion. As Rovelli writes, 'the world is not like a platoon advancing at the pace of a single commander. It's a network of events affecting each other', 16.

other words, *death* as non-being. In order to examine this point, I will draw on the work of an unlikely companion for Severino: Ludwig Wittgenstein.⁶

The Temporality of a Philosophical Autobiography

The reader should approach *Il mio ricordo degli eterni* with caution. The recollection (*ricordo*) of that which is eternal should not be understood as a return to Plato's Hyperouranion. On the face of it, this title seems a parody of the biographical object par excellence: My recollection of the events x, y, z. Yet, no one can remember eternity because one remembers only the past, which, according to common sense, does not exist anymore. Does the locution *recollection of the eternal beings* imply that in the distant past, eternity was and now has ceased to be? Certainly not. A substance that is everlasting cannot cease to exist – else it would be returned to the status of quantitative time, perhaps a time that took a long time to pass. This is why Severino argues that recollection is possible only because reality is eternal. In this sense, remembering is not the retrieving of something that does not exist anymore, but the appearing of an image that is, was, and shall always be. It is the *appearing* that discloses the eternal essence of the remembered content and that of the subject who thinks it.

Il mio ricordo is a calibrated sampling of the life of an academic: the milestones, the controversies (Severino was excommunicated by the Church and fired from The Catholic University of Milan), the encounters with important (and less important) people, intimate portrayals of loved ones, voyages, etc.⁷ Most significantly, the narrative begins with trauma and ends with its denouement. Severino's earliest memory is of a kitchen – a persistent image in the book – where a boy is hiding under the dining table. The tablecloth falls from the edges of the table and provides a curtain that conceals what's underneath. The young Severino is anxious. A storm is brewing in the distance. His mother is waiting to meet the new housemaid. When she arrives the boy relaxes, but a feeling of uncertainty still troubles him as it begins to rain.⁸ The scene encodes several themes of Severino's philosophy: 1) the anguish and pain that produce the need for protection; 2) the idea of destiny: here the storm that is approaching; 3) the theme of the appearing and disappearing of things, not only the arrival of the maid but the premonition of a future event: several years later in that same kitchen, the family will receive the news of the death of Emanuele's older brother, Giuseppe, who took part in the disastrous military campaign of the Italian army in Russia, during WWII.⁹ This trauma has reverberations, as Giuseppe's death is superimposed on another painful

⁶ In this essay, I will leave aside the other transcendent delimitation of time: beginning.

⁷ On Severino's excommunication, see Carrera, 'Severino vs Western Nihilism', 47. I would like to thank Carrera for his precious comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this essay.

⁸ Severino, *Il Mio Ricordo Degli Eterni*, 7.

⁹ Severino, *Il Mio Ricordo Degli Eterni*, 7-8.

casualty, the passing of Esterina.¹⁰ This is not a simple narrative ploy – a prolepsis that brings together two events that are distant in time – but it rather illustrates point number three. As I will discuss later on, the belief that things die and turn into nothing obfuscates the true singular dimension of eternity.

Giuseppe was not only a model for the young Emanuele, he was also involved in the crucial function of introducing Severino to philosophy, particularly Giovanni Gentile's version of Italian neo-idealism, actualism. Esterina, in turn, was the loyal companion, who sacrificed her career (she was a talented linguist) to support the unorthodox philosopher. Both deaths represent the fault line where trauma emerges in all its clarity or, I may add, in all its undeniable truth. According to Severino, trauma (not wonder) gives rise to philosophy. The etymology of the famous Aristotelian definition of 'marvel' as the cause of philosophy, in ancient Greek *thaúma* (or *thaumadzein*), is inadequate. *Thaúma* connotes a shock as it refers to 'the blow and terror that man feels before the becoming of life, of pain, and death'. This explains why 'Aristotle affirms that philosophy leads to a state that is the opposite of *thaúma*, that is to say, happiness, which ensues from resolving problems afflicting the meaning of rightful human actions'.¹¹ Philosophy is the response to terror and produces a discourse that seeks to immunise us against existential anxiety by offering protection – as I pointed out, this is the table of Severino's youth.

Giuseppe's memory is also tied to another primal scene that appears at the end of the volume. This event records the beginning of speech for Severino. Giuseppe jokingly asked his younger brother, 'Can God be overbearing [*prepotente*]?' I answered – and this is the first sentence I remembered having said – No! Because if he is omnipotent, he doesn't need to be overpowering [*prepotente*].¹² This is not a moral but a logical statement, one that is typical for children of this age, who are almost invariably visceral logicians. God's power cannot transcend itself because his movement would negate his own essence by trespassing it, thus implying that divine essence was, at a certain point in time, not all-embracing. According to Severino this is his first memory because it illustrates the paradox of *becoming other*. God is absolute perfection: even his own (absolute) power cannot encroach on his being. To be consistent with his absoluteness, he must keep on being what he is. Severino places this episode at the end of his memoir, although it chronologically happens much earlier in his life, because this fact is not the premonition of his future philosophy but rather the manifestation of

¹⁰ I will not consider the figure of Esterina, Severino's wife, who died of cancer in 2009. Esterina's death becomes unreal, as she turns into one of the proofs of the eternity of all that exists, first symbolically through the figure of the sun and then apodictically when these memories will appear as eternal. See *Il Mio Ricordo Degli Eterni*, 150–51, 163–63. When speaking about the impossibility of death, Esterina doubted, however, Severino's confidence in eternity. See Ursini, 'Il pensiero di Emanuele Severino'.

¹¹ Severino, *Immortalità e destino*, 116.

¹² Severino, *Il Mio Ricordo Degli Eterni*, 160.

its eternal presence. The critique of the foundation of metaphysics echoes in a timeless persistence. Severino's literary style privileges the fragmentary but the result is not a post-modern pastiche; the fragmentary is the anchor that guarantees eternity, while the lyrical intensity of some of his symbols reflects the richness of meaning that is secured in a depiction of Being that lacks transcendence.

The Three Discourses of Western Civilisation

The kitchen table, conjugal love, and Giuseppe's philosophy are shields forged by existential traumas. According to Severino, death and the transience of the world generate a reaction that brings forth the structure of the three great discourses of Western civilisation: myth, philosophy, and *techne* (technology). This periodisation begins with a mythologeme that is common to all ancient tales which perceive becoming as a marker of destruction. Severino writes:

By becoming other, man keeps on dying. First, by becoming other, all stages of life that he leaves behind die. Then he becomes other in a different way: he turns into a corpse. Primitive people find a way to coexist with the defunct by considering it another mode of being alive. To those who survived, the corpse has the appearance of that which has been subtracted from the visible.¹³

The mythical relationship with death is based on a form of permanence of all that exists; what changes is its visibility. The dead are still with us, they are just less visible. They are spirits. In the myth of Chronos, for instance, the father of the gods does not put an end to his children by eating them, because he vomits them right back into the world so that they keep on living.¹⁴ However, even this type of non-final death produces suffering, which, in turn, requires a response in the guise of some saving mechanism. Severino points out that Genesis offers a template for the mythical response to the afflictions of mortality. The story attests to how mankind attempted (unsuccessfully) to defeat God. Adam's and Eve's eating of the apple is an example of divine cannibalism which signals the will to replace God. But this effort fails. Hence, 'after having killed the divine in order to live, mankind is urged to strike up an alliance with God so as to find a remedy against the anguish of death'. At this point, mankind begins to imagine transcendence 'as the supreme power [...] as the dimension where everything must return to find salvation from death and its anguish', and this is what the myth of Chronos, who devours and expels his children, shows.¹⁵ The divine beyond turns into the substance that guarantees permanence and thus offers relief from the transformation of reality into nothing.

¹³ Severino, *In Viaggio Con Leopardi*, 62.

¹⁴ See Severino, *Il muro di pietra*, 19-22.

¹⁵ Severino, *In Viaggio Con Leopardi*, 63.

The age of myth is replaced by philosophy, the second moment of Severino's periodisation, which begins with early Greek civilisation and ends with Hegel. The discourse of philosophy consists in understanding and thus assuming the full power of becoming via a series of different intellectual structures or epistemologies that explain and thus control how reality mutates. Severino writes that this trait is already manifest in Aeschylus, who 'thinks that truth is the supreme remedy against suffering, anguish, and death'.¹⁶ Philosophy, however, marks a shift from mythical thinking because it formulates the doubt about the credibility of the ancestral belief in persistence. Modern epistemologies embrace the idea that 'the beings of the world (wholly or in part, all or some aspect of them) issue from and return to Nothing – passing from their nothingness to being a not-Nothing and vice-versa [...]. The supreme evidence of Western civilisation consists in the purest and most abysmal alienation – the conviction that being is nothing'.¹⁷ There are different degrees to which this conviction is held; but at its core, nihilism proves to be the shared foundation for Western philosophy. Even those who believe in the afterlife follow the general template of this form of knowledge. All monotheistic religions do this. Consider Christianity. As it professes the eternity of the soul and the belief in the afterlife, Christianity may indicate a return to mythical thought but it is firmly rooted in Greek epistemology because it believes in a depreciated version of this world. God is said to have created the world *ex nihilo*, from nothing. Creation, thus, becomes the locus of transition between being and nothing, it is the dimension where things disintegrate. Functioning as the guarantee for the existence of being, God populates the outer edge of reality standing motionless in its perfection. Creation splits reality in two. On one side, the ontic dimension, i.e., the reality of beings marked by transformation and decay. On the other side, the divine is eternal and immutable. The price one pays to secure salvation is that eternity is irrevocably reduced to something splendid but ossified so as to become the elsewhere of heaven. This dualism is based on what Severino calls the supreme evidence of Western civilisation, which believes that something is and, at a certain point, ceases to be. The age of philosophy recognises and takes advantage of nihilism. Fully immersing itself in the transformation of things, modernity wants to control and direct the process of things' becoming other (i.e. annihilation).

The erasure of the divine proclaimed by Nietzsche inaugurates modernity. Severino interprets this gesture as follows: 'God is dead means that the world has realised not only that it has no need of a transcendent immutable being, but that such a being would make man's creativity impossible [...] because the creation and destruction of beings is itself the immanent process of their becoming'.¹⁸ When immanence proclaims its priority, transcendence emerges as a blockage that must be dislodged. The true meaning of Nietzsche's affirmation is that in order for man

¹⁶ Severino, *Il Mio Ricordo Degli Eterni*, 121.

¹⁷ Severino, *The Essence of Nihilism*, 276.

¹⁸ Severino, *The Essence of Nihilism*, 281.

to act and dominate the world, divine omnipotence must vacate that world and relinquish its overdetermination.¹⁹ As Severino points out, the actual infinity of God overflows space and time, reducing reality to the domain where the simple mechanical execution of his will occurs. Hence, he writes, ‘from the Christian God one cannot pull the knowledge of a single breadcrumb because if one eliminates God’s awareness of it, that breadcrumb ceases to exist’.²⁰ The consequence for mankind is significant. A world governed by the perfection of the God of the Judeo-Christian theology precludes any possibility for human intervention in life. This is why Severino maintains that ‘the void of nothingness is necessary to becoming, that is, to the supreme evidence of creativity [...] hence there cannot exist any immutable entity filling that void with its presence’.²¹ In a sudden reversal, the divine is transformed from the condition for the possibility of existence (as the guarantor of permanence) into the blockage that prevents movement and becoming. Its perfection pre-determines everything, thus disabling change.

At this juncture, *technology* takes over philosophy by producing a new discourse that subsumes both myth and philosophy, while embracing the open-ended nature of becoming. Modern technology claims the status of God and demands to preside over creativity and the transformation of the world. It does so by erasing God’s overdetermining knowledge and replacing it with the full mobilisation of reality. Technology declares that ‘any existing limit (or law) is only factual, historical, provisional, and contingent’, and that its apparatus ‘can and must extend its dominion over things indefinitely’, and deploy ‘its capacity [...] to avert death’.²² As an impersonal will to transform, dominate, and thus alienate reality, *techne* now rules the world by drawing upon scientific potentiation.

The death of God also implies that *techne* is not an instrument but an end in itself. One can say that *techne* inherits the divine prerogative of theology. Modern technology is autonomous; it posits itself as the necessity to optimise its structures. It does not serve the purpose of human ends but uses humanity as a means to exert and expand its power. Severino points out that technology is omnipotent because it ‘does not allow itself to be reduced to a means; in contrast, it reduces the voices of the past to means for the indefinite increase of its capacity to realise aims’.²³ And yet, despite the enormous power of technology, the promise of ending death by controlling becoming is in vain. Technology advances nihilism

¹⁹ Gilles Deleuze’s interpretation of Nietzsche is different and points to a transmutation of values that ‘elevates multiplicity and becoming to their highest power and makes of them objects of an affirmation’, *Pure Immanence*, 84.

²⁰ Severino, ‘Le Radici Del Nichilismo’, 97.

²¹ Severino, *Immortalità e destino*, 13.

²² Severino, *Immortalità e destino*, 13, 14.

²³ Severino, *Il muro di pietra*, 14–15. Severino brings into focus the radical autotelic movement of technology, echoing thinkers like Günther Anders, who argued that under capitalism humans must increase consumption not to fulfill their needs but to ensure that technology grows indefinitely. See Anders, *Gewalt*.

by automating the transformation of things into nothing and then into being, pulverising and recreating *ad infinitum*.

The Three Players

Mankind seems to enjoy seeking remedies that are worse than their afflictions: protections that further enslave people. According to Severino, Western discourse, and thus science as well, is not completely rational, that is to say, it does not follow the logical consequences of its premises. Italian Poet, Giacomo Leopardi (1798–1837) is the thinker who illuminated these insoluble contradictions, and Severino considers him the greatest Italian philosopher and true anticipator of Nietzsche. Severino dedicated extensive work to showing how Leopardi is the fearless thinker of modernity, who stares into the void of Western civilisation, particularly its senseless understanding of progress.²⁴ In particular, Severino illustrates Leopardi's philosophy, the *Zibaldone* (1898), by using the metaphor of a game between two players. Leopardi embodies the Black Player, while Western Civilisation embodies the White Player. Both players begin from the framework I have previously outlined: the essence of reality is that of becoming as the alternation of life and death. The difference is that,

[t]he White Player maintains that a reality that becomes nothing and comes from nothing is impossible – it is contradictory – unless an immutable Being exists, in other words, the world would be unthinkable without the existence of God. The Black Player, instead, shows how a reality that becomes nothing and comes from nothing is impossible because an immutable Being exists – i.e., the existence of God would make the world unthinkable.

The two positions are not equal. The Black Player easily outmatches the White Player. As observed, any divine principle is ultimately absurd because its omnipotent perfection and immutability prohibit the transformation of reality, which religion professes to be the realm of death and decay.²⁵

As transcendence becomes an obstacle that must be removed, the Black Player's move makes the whole metaphysical construction of the White Player implode. At the same time, however, the Black Player reaches an impasse as well, for he declares that beyond our small and senseless life there is *nothing*. But by affirming the principle of immanence as a foundation of reality, his discourse slips into an unfortunate meta-level, a beyond that occupies a position analogous to the 'elsewhere' of religion. Severino thus mentions the need for a Third Player, who uncovers a different kind of truth, one that is buried by our faith in the becoming

²⁴ See Severino's trilogy, *Il nulla e la poesia. Alla fine dell'età della tecnica: Leopardi* (2005), *Cosa arcaica e stupenda. L'Occidente e Leopardi* (2006), and *In viaggio con Leopardi* (2015).

²⁵ As Severino notes, 'Leopardi establishes the necessity of the death of God sixty years earlier than Nietzsche's Zarathustra', *In Viaggio Con Leopardi*, 78.

other of the world. The Third Player changes the rules of the game, thereby affirming that becoming must be explained differently. This is a difficult step to take because it defies the structure of the field in which both players (and us) normally play.

To illustrate the nature of the third position I will refer back to the issue of the illegitimate foundation established by the claim of immanence. As discussed, nothingness cannot constitute the beyond that circumscribes immanence because it would occupy the place of transcendence. But if immanence is all there is then we need to explain what happens at the temporal level, that is to say, what happens to beings when they come into the world and leave it behind. The plane of immanence confronts us with a situation that parents will likely understand. Consider the case of a young child looking at a picture of her mother or father from before she was born. The girl asks: where was I when the picture was taken? Her parent will casually remark: 'you did not exist back then'. The response engenders various degrees of disbelief in the child. She regards the parent as mad (perhaps this is not far from what Severino calls the folly of Western Reason). The idea of her non-existence is inconceivable since, for the child, a visceral attachment to life does not admit of exceptions because it is tailored to what Deleuze calls the 'unity of life and thought', where 'life activates thought, and thought, in turn, affirms life'.²⁶ To a certain degree, this is analogous to the perspective of Severino's Third Player. The child has no problem in admitting a before and an after, but her non-being is simply incredible. The concept of nothingness must be rigorously crafted over time as a leap of faith. The child must be coaxed to bend her intuitive logic, which assumes that whatever can be said regarding her must presuppose the being of her being. Likewise, the mindful parent experiences logical discomfort as well because, from the standpoint of their identification as a parent, they must attest to the truth of a point in time that obliterates the being of that relationship.²⁷ And yet who would object to the fact that people are born, grow old, and die?

The position of the Third Player wants to keep together transformation as well as the impossibility of nothingness. This means that reality is singularly eternal, while its transformation is due to a change in perspective, which Severino calls 'the appearing and disappearing of the eternal, that is their entering and leaving the eternal circle of appearing'.²⁸ Severino is not using a metaphor here; the logical concatenation of his argument brings him to this conclusion. This is how he explains the timeless duration of being in *Il mio ricordo*:

What passes disappears for some time. The dead that leave us disappear for a larger portion of time. Later on, all that which has

²⁶ Deleuze, *Pure Immanence*, 66.

²⁷ Using an example that similarly regards infancy, Carrera notes that, 'if the past disappears from the horizon of appearing, the relations (or configurations) that every instant creates [...] cannot altogether vanish from Being', 'La pagina della strega', 122.

²⁸ Severino, *In Viaggio Con Leopardi*, 204.

disappeared shall reappear. Everything: from that winter kitchen, to the burning fire in the hearth, to my family around the table, to the child that I was [...] *et gaudium vestrum nemo tollet a vobis* [and your joy no man shall take from you, *Vespers* 16:16] [...]. Beyond Christian faith, to go home to the Father means that the eternal of the world appear, in everyone, together with the eternal of the world in everybody else, because the world that shall draw to a close our being separate individuals will come forth. The world saves us because it is the appearing of Joy, that which our destiny ultimately and truly is.²⁹

Beyond the lyrical tones of this description, there is a clear effort to think multiplicity in immanent and non-theological terms. For instance, Severino writes that this truth is more democratic than the previous mythical or religious one. He observes that ‘the philosophical tradition affirms the existence of eternity. But it is a type of eternity that is above the perishable things of the world and ultimately presents itself as their Lord and Master. Eternity acquires a different sense when we realise that all things, all configurations of the world and soul, all the instants are eternal and are not the serfs of a Master’.³⁰ Eternity cannot be the Biblical paradise, which immediately produces the vexing question that Wallace Stevens asks in his famous poem, *Sunday Morning*, ‘Is there no change of death in paradise? Does the ripe fruit never fall?’³¹ Paradise cannot be a fulfilment that lacks life.

On January 17th 2020, Emanuele Severino passed away. The Third Player would rephrase this fact as follows: the circle of Appearing moved beyond the philosopher, who did not go anywhere. What does it mean to assert that Severino did not cease to exist? It certainly does not mean that the molecules and atoms that were once part of the organism formally known as Emanuele Severino live on. The Third Player points to something beyond the law of conservation of mass. Yet even when conceding Severino’s point regarding the impossibility of non-being, something prevents us from taking the impossibility of his death seriously.

I agree with Alessandro Carrera: at its core, Severino’s philosophy rests on its power of confutation; it is one of those logical systems designed ‘in such a way that the opponents [are] bound to contradict themselves even before they [have] voiced their objections’.³² Instead of elaborating definitions and spaces of operations, Severino stuns the reader with ‘theological or mystical names such as Joy and Glory’ that do not function as ‘metaphors or metonymies but rather as absolute and mystical *symbola*’, which preclude any further interpretation.³³ Still, that leaves us with the task of working through these exoteric names by way of

²⁹ Severino *Il Mio Ricordo Degli Eterni*, 160–61.

³⁰ Severino, *Il Destino Della Tecnica*, 224.

³¹ Stevens, *Collected Poems*, 69.

³² Carrera, ‘Severino vs Western Nihilism’, 61.

³³ Carrera, ‘Dalla Gioia Alla Gloria’, 82.

comparisons. To better understand the eternal form of *Appearing*, it is necessary to consider the concept of the field of vision as elaborated by Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Appearing: The Impossibility of Negating a Picture

Severino does not negate difference and its processual nature. At the same time, the horizon of immanence precludes nothingness both in its spatial and temporal dimensions because it would occupy a point of exteriority that negatively circumscribes the manifold. The problem is to conceive of this wholeness as a plane that cannot be boxed in by something else. This is the *becoming other* that Western folly accepts, prompting the endless movement of domination typical of its logic. This same issue is noticeable at a temporal level as well. The White Player relies on a false origin while the Black Player falls prey to the desperation of an ending. On the one hand, if time is God's property, as the White Player or Mediaeval theology claimed, transcendence emerges as the inhibiting factor for the becoming other of reality that mankind, and now technology, wants to control. On the other hand, if we follow the Black Player and say that things will end by crumbling into nothingness – that very nothingness that was there *before* time – we would have again to admit that a beyond exists that surrounds and presupposes reality. But how do we explain change and difference?³⁴

The idea of a prior dimension to the ontic is not only a metaphysical problem. Asked about the Big Bang and the origin of the Universe, Italian Astrophysicist Margherita Hack favoured the theory that the universe was eternal, a solution that simply eradicated the infinite regression that asks what was there before time.³⁵ Eternity is not just a religious concept. When vacated from the anthropomorphic entity that reigns over it, it turns into a crucial component of radical immanence. Severino remarks that 'being and death, growth and change, generation, corruption, and destruction are the various ways in which Being *appears* and *disappears* (i.e. they are the various aspects assumed by any Being in

³⁴ Faced with a similar problem, Baruch Spinoza offered a solution that entailed the idea of incompleteness. It is our partial knowledge of infinity that skews our view, creating confusion and contradiction. The final totality of the manifold will line up facts showing that there was no real contradiction, wherein the whole is safe in its final arrangement. Severino argues that his idea of infinity is different from Spinoza's, for the Sephardic philosopher is still working within the folly of Western reason. 'The truth of Being', Severino argues, 'demands that all Being be immutable and eternal', but 'this is not to say that the becoming of things is mere illusion (as Spinoza thought), and thus that the appearing of change is merely phenomenal; rather, it means that the changing and becoming of things do not appear as an annulment of Being', Severino *The Essence of Nihilism*, 168. For a study of the limits of Spinoza's notion of eternity in Severino, see Farotti, *L'eternità mancata*. Modern physics takes, however, a Spinozan twist/turn/ gives x a Spinozan twist. Rovelli, for instance, writes that our perception of time, which is based on thermal time, 'is determined by a macroscopic state, that is, by a blurring, by the incompleteness of a description', *The Order of Time*, 137.

³⁵ Similarly, Stephen Hawking has elaborated a 'no-boundary' proposal in terms of time, *A Brief History of Time*, 145.

its appearing and disappearing)'.³⁶ The structure of Being must be singular, punctual and, I may add, metonymic. In the manifold, the multiplicity of relations is the contiguity of eternal moments. Severino's solution is a form of philosophical pointillism: the *punctum* is eternal in its dense state, and so are the relations with other *puncta*.³⁷ The instant names what is beyond measurability, beyond any succession of time. Eternity is the juncture in which the incalculably big and the infinitely small are the same thing.³⁸ Eternity is the manifold of the eternal instants. As Carrera writes, this view of reality 'does not mean that the empirical you and I are immortal in time (eternity is not immortality) but that each moment, every slice of reality is'.³⁹ This is why Severino calls destiny what we normally understand as future. He writes this word as *de-sti-ny* because of the Indo-European root '*stha*', that which persists. *Gioia* (Joy) is the appearing of Glory precisely as the glowing of the multiplicity of all events that persist in an endless series.⁴⁰

What makes these eternal *puncta* emerge, giving us the illusion of the flow of time, is the structure of *Appearing*, or the circle of destiny, that is to say the condition of possibility for something to appear. Severino states that 'the truth constitutes itself, insofar as Appearing itself belongs to the Being that appears', hence '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'.⁴¹ The structure of Appearing is arguably one of the most complicated and seemingly unnecessary schemes in Severino's philosophy, because it seems to establish a dualism between Being and the circle of Appearing. Let us work through it by way of the notion of 'similitudes'.

Severino's treatment of visibility echoes Wittgenstein's point regarding the limits of the world, which is a distorted figure of speech that portrays whatever

³⁶ Severino, *The Essence of Nihilism*, 168.

³⁷ Alessandro Carrera explains this scheme as follows: 'Severino's universe is to all intents and purposes a theory of parallel universes. The totality of that which appears — let's say [...] the totality that comprises Hiroshima an instant before the explosion of the atomic bomb — is surpassed by a coming totality — i.e., the instant when the bomb explodes over the city —, so that the surpassed totality — i.e. the instant before the bomb — leaves behind the circle of appearing', 'Dalla Gioia Alla Gloria', 84.

³⁸ See Soncini and Murani, *La totalità e il frammento*. Difference as the appearing of these different states must then be accounted for with the idea of destiny.

³⁹ Carrera, 'Severino vs Western Nihilism', 46. Severino repeats many times that he is not afraid of death. Not because he believed in some kind of immortality, but because his disappearing simply meant entering the totality of that which has disappeared, the infinite network of singularities that still are. One might speculate that entering the totality of Being overcomes the solitude of the earth, that is to say the blurred vision that we as living species have developed. Certainly, it would also mean to take leave of the folly of the West and its belief in time as an absolute universal force.

⁴⁰ Carrera, 'Dalla Gioia Alla Gloria', 94.

⁴¹ Severino, *The Essence of Nihilism*, 258.

appears in the field of vision as the projection of the eye.⁴² But there is no eye in the field of vision, in other words, I see whatever appears but I never see my eye seeing. No eye can capture the vision, it is rather the opposite, the field of vision is all that appears, while the eye is hidden. In this approach to the field of vision as the condition for the possibility of visibility, one contemplates the brilliance of immanence, for if we posit a point of view that controls the limits of the emerging of the world, one is reproducing a transcendent exteriority based on the finite. Similarly, for Severino, there cannot be any intentionality of the world that masters how this world comes forth, 'precisely insofar as one is convinced that the world appears, the world brings about an inevitable phenomenalisation or subjectivisation of the things that appear'.⁴³ Our world is not the totality of Being, but rather a form of eternal view that is limited by the Western Folly and its belief in becoming. Severino describes the earth as isolated, because it represents the illusion of a system surrounded by nothingness. If we take heed of Wittgenstein's idea that there is no eye in the field of vision, we begin to imagine a plane of immanence that is all appearing. The fact that this plane is uncircumscribed implies that there are no final points of view (God) and that there is no limit that separates the being that is from the being that is not.

The comparison with Wittgenstein allows us to grapple with the scopic dimension of the circle of appearing, which is a self-presenting and impersonal totality. We can take a further step in this direction when considering what Wittgenstein called the 'mystery of negation'.⁴⁴ In his *Notebooks 1914-1916*, he asks a fundamental question: 'Can one negate a picture?'⁴⁵ That is, can an image portray the fact that, for instance, *it does not rain* just as a proposition asserts the case that *it does not rain*? Let us ask ourselves what sort of an image would depict the non-rain event? If the answer is a picture of a sunny countryside, then actually the picture of two puppets fencing would negate rain just as much. We cannot deny *what* the picture shows, we can only deny its meaning. Negation does not bring forth nothingness. Negation is not a fact but an operation, for it 'reverses the sense

⁴² Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 5.6331. Similarly to Severino's notion of Being, Wittgenstein describes a world of positive facts, for he maintained that in reality, negative states of affairs, in German, *negativen Tatsachen*, do not exist. For psychoanalysis, the solution to the structure of the field of vision is ontological. Kiarina Kordela writes that 'it is by imagining a specific gaze there where is the series of appearances that the object can appear at all and that the series of appearances is subjugated to a principle and obtains the structure specified by this appearance. The gaze, therefore, is altogether *within*, in that it manifests itself *in* the aspect of the finite gaze I imagine in the field of the Other; but it is also altogether *outside*, for the gaze itself, as the infinite series of possible points of view, cannot appear', *Being, Time, Bios*, 6.

⁴³ Severino, *The Essence of Nihilism*, 171.

⁴⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-1916*, 15.11.14.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.11.14.

of a proposition'.⁴⁶ Negation merely produces difference: by stating $\sim p$, we may be affirming a plethora of meanings (q, a, b etc.). Thus, negative facts (*negative Tatsachen*) are logically impossible.

Just as Wittgenstein dismisses the existence of negative state of affairs, Severino attests to the impossibility of non-being. This assumption, sometimes called the 'golden implication' of Severino's argument, grounds his affirmation of the eternal positivity of Being.⁴⁷ This matter would take too long to discuss here. Suffice it to say that Severino argues that when we negate the existence of any shape or form of Being we fall into an aporia, because we actually affirm that something positive is negative, or that something that exists is non-existent. We should remember, warns Severino, 'that Nothing can be predicated only of Nothing; that "is not" can be said only of Nothing; that if the subject of a proposition is not Nothing, but is any determination whatsoever, then the predicate is "is", and is never "is not"'.⁴⁸ Hence things must eternally be what they are and must reveal themselves as an image that manifests its contents.⁴⁹

Granted the impossibility of non-Being, the problem now is to reconcile eternity with the movement of variation. As observed in *Il mio ricordo*, the sequence of the eternal instants is *destiny*, that which comes forth in the field of Appearing. As an ordained structure, Appearing is not intentional; rather it inevitably happens. Severino offered a depiction of the eternal landscape analogous to an optical mechanism when referring to Einstein's explanation of the universe as 'a film where all the frames that constitute the events in the world eternally co-exist'.⁵⁰ Glimmering under the circle of light, reality is the tape rolling with all its discrete states. Severino writes that 'obviously, the content of the Appearing varies',

⁴⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 5.2341. My interpretation here is greatly indebted to the work of Roberto Dionigi, *La fatica di descrivere*, 76-79. For a similar argument, see Paolo Virno, *Multitude*, 175-190.

⁴⁷ See Goggi, 'The Golden Implication', 44.

⁴⁸ *The Essence of Nihilism*, 45. Severino's idea of the eternal positivity of Being can be compared to the concept of the unconscious, which is equally timeless and affirmative, in Freud. See Pulli, *Freud e Severino*. Immanence is not an area of concern for those who study Severino's philosophy. This is particularly true in Italian academia, where scholars either dispute or praise the consequences of Severino's logic whilst leaving untouched the most fascinating aspects of his work, which I believe expose the radicality of the immanence of time. See Cardenas et al., 'Giornata di Studi'.

⁴⁹ Severino differentiates the empirical appearing of something concrete, that which comes forth and recedes into the twilight, from a transcendental appearing which is not in motion, and which is not, in his words, 'the coming forth of that which keeps on coming forth'. (<https://books.openedition.org/res/6333>). He refers to Bertrand Russell's paradox, arguing that a set which includes itself is precisely the structure of the transcendental appearing, one that does not establish itself via a transcendent externality. The coming forth of a single object always involves a visibility that is self-reflexive. Although it is partial, the object must be implicated in the space of appearing and, by appearing, it, so to speak, is carved forever in its instant. This totality involves a negation that always results in a self-negation.

⁵⁰ Severino, *Il Destino della Tecnica*, 225.

but for the Third Player this movement reflects the series of events that are illuminated by the circle of Appearing and are then left behind without becoming nothing.⁵¹ The coming forth of reality structures what Severino calls the *destiny* of truth: every possible configuration of being: in short, ‘every thing, relation, instant, experience, state of consciousness and nature, every event, from the most irrelevant to the most significant, everything appearing in any way and also everything that does not appear and cannot be experienced’.⁵² It is easy to misunderstand the nature of the circle of Appearing, perhaps by conflating it with common images such as the eye of providence or the probing lens of a microscope. These are not good comparisons because they rely on intentionality and the agency of the entity that casts light on reality. They are also constructed as a spectacle performed for somebody who watches. But Appearing attempts to describe the scopic: a scene without a spectator, the pure presenting of an open system. It defines the ways in which things democratically interact with each other, or better it expresses the entanglement between visibility and events as eternal *puncta*. In the scopic structure, we encounter what is universal and immanent because there is a coming together of the object in the field of vision. Severino usually adopts the verb *sopraggiungere*, which implies that something is coming forth or catching up with its horizon, thus avoiding any elements of intentionality in the reconstruction of the perception of reality.⁵³ Severino argues that Appearing is the totality of the relations between every interaction, that emerges as a timeless dimension. Only a thought that can live up to the task of thinking this eternal multiplicity may follow the path of the non-Folly that Severino attempts to describe while reflecting on his life. This is a path along which transcendence has imploded as a result of its non-sustainability, thus opening the horizon of eternity. Therein we encounter the true nature of transcendence itself. Reframing this problem using our terminology, we can say that transcendence is the originary exception that negates immanence, but by so doing, transcendence actually reveals that it is grounded on immanence. The negative is not external to the founding principle; rather, it derives from it.⁵⁴ To the extent that it works as a negation, transcendence is an effect of immanence, not its

⁵¹ Severino, *Immortalità e destino*, 194.

⁵² Testoni, ‘Fear of Death?’ XV.

⁵³ In Severino’s language, whatever exists is inextricably bound up with its appearing as Being. Severino was well aware that his philosophy pointed in the direction of modern physics, which has now experimentally proved that time exists only at certain magnitudes. Rovelli writes that, ‘if I observe the microscopic state of things, then the difference between past and future vanishes’, and that the difference upon which we ground our life, ‘refers only to our own blurred vision of the world’, *The Order of Time*, 33. Similarly, he asserts that there is no present of the universe: the now ‘is an illusion, an illegitimate extrapolation of our experience’, 44.

⁵⁴ Similarly, Severino redefines the Aristotelian *elenchos* by disclosing how the negation of the negation works to affirm the positivity of Being. Non-being (Nothingness) ‘exists, only if it affirms that which it denies. Indeed, denying, it denies its own ground’. Thus it self-implodes, because, ‘the negation of the opposition effectively includes the declaration of its own non-existence [...] it says, “I am not here”, “I am meaningless”’, *The Essence of Nihilism*, 63.

foundation. As in Severino's and Wittgenstein's refutation of non-Being and *negative Tatsachen* respectively, we can conjure up transcendence only because a negative operator acts on immanence. We imagine an exception only by including a positive content (immanence) that is negated.

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