

Aristotle, Leopardi, Severino: the Endless Game of Nothingness¹

(Translated by Claudio Tugnoli)

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As Aristotle knew all too well, not being is an equivocal concept. This indeterminate character of nothingness turns out to be the main enemy of the principle of non-contradiction, especially due to its affinity to «chimeras» and poetic metaphors (Leopardi's «things that are not things»). There is an age old philosophical debate about nothingness, at times to defend the reasons for the eternity of being, at others to disprove them. In particular, the work of Emanuele Severino throws some light on the dispute between two giants of thought, Aristotle and Leopardi, with whom the neo-Parmenidean philosopher debated from an impartial position. The article provides food for thought in support of the indefinite and disturbing character – positive, yet 'apocalyptic' – of nothingness. What emerges is the ability of not being to resist both the univocal idea of nihil absolutum, as well as to the closure of a game in which the destiny of beings and the very sense of time remain at stake.

Keywords:

Nothing(ness), Indefinite, Contingency, Destiny, Nihilism, Time, Eternity, Contradiction, Apocalypse, Redemption

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1. The dawning of an aporia

Eternity is a child playing, moving the
pieces across the chessboard.

HERACLITUS

Inasmuch as it is saved from nothingness, the immutable inevitably evokes before us the disturbing abyss that philosophical reason has always tried to remove, in order to guarantee a reassuring *ubi consistam*. As we shall see, the swaying figures of non-being are debating over two great and adverse paradigms that have marked the parable of Western thought, emblematically represented by Aristotle and Leopardi. At the dawning of classical metaphysics, the Stagirite indicated the way to salvation *in* being and *in* the truth. Reversing this path, on the other hand, the philosopher from Recanati finds a scape-route *from* the truth and *from* the evil of being, in nothingness. Severino (2015) gives a compelling allegory in this respect, the «game» of chess involves two opponents: a «White Player» and a «Black Player». The White Player is a generic supporter of western civilisation, believer in the Eternals (here, Aristotle), whereas the Black is represented by Leopardi, who, ahead of Nietzsche, would win easily, overthrowing the entire metaphysical tradition (see Severino, 2015). Severino places very few other «inhabitants of the subsoil» alongside Leopardi, along the line of the 'consistency' of nihilism: Nietzsche and Giovanni Gentile (all three, thus, counter-figures of the Black Player). Emanuele Severino then demonstrates how Leopardi shares with Aristotle the nihilistic faith in becoming (from) other, and therefore the situation of playing on the same chessboard «built by the «White Player» (Severino, 2015, p. 11). The apparent checkmate given to Aristotle by Leopardi (just like with any other White Player) does not, therefore, close the game of nihilism (*ibid.*, p. 175). And hence the need to shift the game to a higher level from which both the Black and

the White player might appear on the same plane and on the very same chessboard of «the Erring» (*ibid.*, p. 183), come «*Players in the game of becoming other*» (*ibid.*, p. 187).

Thus, Severino reduces the «madness» of nihilism (the idea that the entity is nothing) to a perpetual game of chess between being and nothingness (becoming), in the presence of a «Third Player» and stone guest: the undeniable «Destiny of the truth». After lengthy comparisons with Aristotle and with Leopardi, Severino can therefore declare that game finished, having resolved the enigma of Fredegiso on the nothingness (Severino, 2007³, chap. 4; 2013a, p. 107; see Cusano 2011) and having unveiled the apocalyptic secret of the *Seventh Seal* which envelops the mysterious destiny of mortals. Of course, we allude to Bergman's film of the same name (where the famous image of the game of chess against destiny appears), but, more precisely, to the inspiration, in a certain sense both eschatological and 'apocalyptic' that begins with *The Glory* (Severino, 2001, pp. 549-551). By sheer coincidence, Bergman's *Seventh Seal* appears in the same year (1956) in which the neo-Parmenidean philosopher 'discovers' or rather, 'reveals' the eternity of beings (Severino, 1956, pp. 1-25). In the face of such a formidable solution (which also claims to checkmate all forms of nihilism), a number of questions, nevertheless, remain open, starting from that polyvocality of nothingness of which the Greeks were already well aware, and which was to re-emerge in the modern age, especially from Kant onwards. Admitting then that the respective positions of Aristotle and Leopardi might be considered nihilistic, in the Severinian sense, the fact remains that the two thinkers – respectively at the dawning and sunset of classical metaphysics – respectively present two, not univocal, visions of nothingness. Paraphrasing Shakespeare, one might say that there are more *non*-things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in any philosophy. In a way, nothing is far less than nothingness. It was Anaximander, the founder of Greek wisdom, to first think the power of nothingness and of the opposites in ἀρχή, the infinite possibility, the abyss of the «indefinite» (Aristotle, *Physics*, 204-205; *Metereological*, 340A 16). As we know, those such as Cusano, Leopardi, Schelling, and Heidegger (to name just a few of the key figures), would revisit, from various stances, the very same well of Saint Patrick. Although it is a little-known fact, the theory that everything becomes nothing from nothingness is a metaphysical theorem, already clearly enunciated by the sophist, Xenias of Corinth: «he said [...] that everything that is generated is generated by not being, and everything that is destroyed is annihilated by not being» (DK, 81; see

Untersteiner, 1996, p. 241). Xenocrates is not the only ancient thinker to have made the unconscious «nihilism» of the Greeks explicit, if it is true that Democritus too was able to declare that «μη μᾶλλον τὸ δὲν ἢ τὸ μηδὲν εἶναι», i.e. «the thing does not exist more than no-thing» (DK, fr. B 156). With Plato, we enter the scene of the metaphysical struggle between being and nothingness. The battle between those who supported everything as immobile and those who supported the flow appear in the *Theaetetus* (179D-181B), even before then in the famous gigantomachy described in the *Sophist* (245E-249D) between the proponents of flowing matters and the supporters of immobile forms. In this contest between being and nothingness, represented by the «tug of war» (*Theaetetus*, 180E-181A), Plato, in fact, puts the Parmenideans on the one side and the varied array of supporters of Heraclites on the other, maintaining a *super partes* position for himself. As we know, with his refutation (ἐλεγχος) of the sophist, in the dialogue of the same name, Plato puts in place the first big move to dispel the spectre of nothingness, embodying it and hypostatizing it in the conceptual form of ἔτερον. And yet, according to the neo-Parmenidean philosopher, the «absolute not being» remains barely «prospected» by Plato, who leaves its aporia substantially unresolved (cf. Severino, 2007³, p. 210; Severino, 2013a, p. 106), without really managing to overcome the Parmenidean prohibition (Severino, 1985). Indeed, strictly speaking, it is a «parricide missed» (Severino, 1980, p. 150). The refutation of falsehood (and therefore of nothingness), had been a necessary move for Plato to arrive at founding a dynamic ontology, such as the one proposed in the *Sophist*. It was, therefore, necessary to flush the sophist out from his final refuge, represented by nothingness and by the impossibility to enunciate falsehood. But, in order to recognise the sophistic position as false (and therefore contradictory), it was necessary to circumscribe, and therefore somehow determine, nothingness, giving consistency to falsehood and to non-being, given that there is no *falsehood* where *non-being is not posed or not supposed*. The need to pose non-being in order to base a discourse on being is all, therefore, already implicit in Plato. With Aristotle, the truth returns to guarantee salvation in the eternal: not only have we always been safe from nothingness, as the Greek wise men of the 5th century B.C. thought (*Metaphysics*, 983B 13), but we find ourselves, right from the outset, «in the truth» (*Metaphysics*, 1061B 35). Being safe from nothingness, the truth of being, in turn, saves us from nothingness. The fact that we are always «in the truth» is precisely what Aristotle intends to guarantee through the essential character (διορισμός) of the most stable

principle (*βεβαιότητα ἀρχή*), in other words, the impossibility of finding oneself mistaken (Severino, 2005, pp. 24-25; 2013a, p. 35). But then again, how might this principle hold true without nothingness, or even without denial (see Severino 2007³, p. 211; 1980, p. 467)?

2. Aristotle's occult adversary

The ambiguity of nothingness in Aristotle is a mirror of the indefiniteness of being (Aubenque, 2017, p. 232). In fact, the polyvocality of being symmetrically corresponds with that of non-being: «being is given multiple meanings» even in the evidently negative sense of «corruption» of «deprivation» and of «negation» (*Metaphysics*, 1003B 5-10). «Wherefore» Aristotle clarifies, «also, the non-entity we pronounce to be non-entity» (*Metaphysics*, 1003B 9-10), or at least, so «some say» even if in a dialectic sense (*Metaphysics*, 1030A 26). The ancient aporia of nothingness, raised by Plato in the *Sophist* (237A; 256A) is subsequently reformulated by Aristotle (see Severino, 2007³, p. 210). In this attempt to conceptualise nothingness, the Stagirite betrayed a certain debt to his teacher (Plato), who had first conceived of not being as just being something definite, rather than absolute nothingness (in the Parmenidean manner). A passage from *Metaphysics* remains exemplary, in which the determination of being as much as nothingness is upheld so as to safeguard the principles of non-contradiction: «the terms «being» and «not being» have a defined meaning: accordingly, not everything can be this way, and, likewise, not in this way» (*Metaphysics*, 1006A 29-31; cf. *Physics*, 187A 5-6). On the other hand, one can understand the polemics conducted by Aristotle against the archaïcising approach attributed to Plato, which would have brought the birth of all things back to the two abstract and indeterminate principles of being and of nothingness (*Metaphysics*, 1089A).

As we will see, Aristotle battles against the spectres of the indeterminate, mobilising, together with the «most stable principle», the other cornerstone of his own metaphysics: that «form» (*εἶδος*) that never leaves matter indeterminate, guaranteeing the identity of the entity. The «potential being» represents the most obvious example of the positive transposition of nothingness, where the so-called «raw material» remains in the background like the concept-limit of the irreducibly undetermined. The nature of movement also remains undefined, which, in fact, for the Stagirite «can neither be situated amongst the realities in potency, nor

amongst those that are in act» (*Physics*, 201B-202A), therefore being unintelligible. Similarly, space is negatively defined as *neither* matter *nor* form (cf. *Physics*, 209B-210A). The double negative form (*neither* power *nor* act, *neither* matter *nor* form) which, in Aristotle, is conferred to space, and change, therefore, takes on the undecidable trait of platonic *χώρα*. Aristotle therefore strives to neutralise the intractable, disturbing and insidious character of the in-determined, whose uncontrolled and virulent charge is thus translated as far as possible into a positive key: at times as «potential being» at others as a *definite* negation of this or that category, and so on. But this attempt at conceptual ‘taming’ runs fatally against the irreducibly indefinite nature of nothingness, which often reveals the traits of the undecidable.

The indeterminateness of non-being is denounced by the fact that it can be said in so many ways and with various meanings (*Metaphysics*, 1089A, 1067B 25-27 and *passim*; *Physics*, 225A 20-23; see Dorion, 2006, p. 81). In addition to non-being given to mean «potentiality» and «generation» the Stagirite lists two other forms of nothingness in *Metaphysics* (1051A-B, 1069B, 1089A): non-being according to each category (for example, «non-man», «non-white», etc.) and non-being, meant as «false», i.e. *not* true (*Metaphysics*, 1024B 31-32; *The Sophistical Elenchi*, 166B -167A). Other negative figures, such as «privation» (*Physics*, 191B-192A; see Severino, 2005, p. 105) and «corruption» (*Physics*, 225A; *Generation and Corruption*, 317B; 319A) are also added to that short list. In a passage from *Metaphysics*, Aristotle goes on to clarify that «generation takes place» from «non-being» understood as «potentiality» (*Metaphysics*, 1089A 28-29). But more frequently, Aristotle’s non-being tends to take on the evasive physiognomy of the indeterminate, as clearly emerges in the book *Gamma* in *Metaphysics*. Strictly speaking, the indeterminate is not nothingness, as such, but rather a being that is «affected» by nothingness. The logical-ontological structure of the indeterminate refers, therefore, to the Platonic *ἐπαμφοτερίζειν*, that is, to that oscillation between being and nothingness, the double negation: «neither... nor...» (*Metaphysics*, 1008A). This undecidability is represented by the sophist, and it is not surprising that, through the *ἐλεγχος* of the book *Gamma*, Aristotle intends to capture the indomitable, disquieting, fleeting, figure of nothingness. Behind the mask of *ἀμφισβητών* (the generic adversary and negativist objector), the indeterminate is actually hidden, the *ἀόριστον*, the true occult enemy of the Stagirite. And thus, Aristotle reveals a horror in the nothingness and «void» a *horror metaphysicus*, as yet unknown to the tragedians, to the

lyrists (one thinks of the doctrine of *μὴ φθῆναι*), as well as all those Greek thinkers, linked, in various ways, to the Orphic tradition (from Anaximander to Plato). Hence perhaps the Aristotelian removal of the theme of death in relation to the destiny of the soul.

As we have seen, Aristotle battled strenuously against the indeterminateness of nothingness. With his dialectical-confutative move of *ἔλεγχος*, he tried, with the bare minimum of determination, extorted from his opponent, to put the maximum indeterminacy out of the game (cf. Berto, 2006, pp. 222-224; 2010, pp. 228-232; Severino, 2010, p. 84). For the Stagirite, even before the Sophists, the indeterminate remains the refuge of certain, archaic thinkers, such as Anaxagoras and Anaximander: «it seems that these people speak in the indeterminate (*ἀόριστον*); and that while they believe they are speaking of being, in actual fact, they are speaking of non-being, because the indeterminate is potential being» (*Metaphysics*, 1007B 26-29).

A passage in book *Gamma*, recalled by Łukasiewicz (2003, p. 85), but questioned by Severino (2005, p. 97), states: «In power, it is possible that the very same thing is simultaneously opposites, but in effect, not» (*Metaphysics*, 1009A 35-36). The principle of non-contradiction, therefore, would not be valid for potential being, at least in the reading of Aristotle offered by Łukasiewicz, which does, however, seem to be corroborated by a passage from *Metaphysics* which reads: «Therefore, being capable [*δυνατόν*] admits both being, and not being; therefore, the same thing is capable of both being and not being» (*Metaphysics*, 1050B 11-13). Supporting the impossibility of contingency, in *Destiny of Necessity*, Severino analyses the Aristotelian expression *ὅποτερ' ἔτυχεν*, which – following on from the Platonic *ἐπαμφοτερίζειν* – introduces an insidious element of indeterminateness: «the contingent neither is, nor is not» (Severino, 1980, p. 73). The contingent entity «is not destined» either to being or to nothing: «it is not, nor will it be, this way rather than that way» (*On Interpretation*, 18B 9). This indeterminacy, poised between being and nothingness, would claim to be the supreme evidence of becoming, were it not for Severino who succeeds in showing how such a claimed evidence does not, in any way, represent a phenomenological content of appearance, but is rather the projection of a theoretic assumption than the reality that manifests itself (see Severino, 1980, p. 75).

In Aristotle, therefore, an important role is played by contingency, referred to by him with expressions such as *ενδεχόμενον*, *ὅποτερ' ἔτυχεν*, *δυνατόν* (Severino, 1980, p. 73 sgg.). *On Interpretation*, does not just deal

with the indeterminacy of particular expressions (such as «non-man»), that represent «neither a discourse nor a negation». Here, in fact, the same contingent entities appear to be indeterminate, as all sensitive substances, all the entities and phenomena of the sublunar sphere. Aristotle thus introduces the notion of contingent (*ενδεχομένον*) «but it appears that it is possible for the same thing both to be, and not to be» (*On Interpretation*, 21B 12). And so, indeterminacy reigns supreme in the well-known question of future contingents, which, according to some, would, from a distance, open the doors to the so-called polyvalent logics. We think, for example, of propositions such as: «Tomorrow there will be or there will not be a naval battle» (*On Interpretation*, 19A 30), the truth of which cannot be decided today, based on the principle of non-contradiction: «It is not necessary that everything that is, is, nor that everything that is not, is not. In fact, being, for the necessity of all that it is, when it is, is not the same as being absolutely for necessity of all that it is. The same thing is said of that which is not» (*On Interpretation*, 19A 24-27; see Severino, 2005, p. 31). Elsewhere, Severino notes the mirroring between the ‘cadence’ of the expressions «until when [...] until then» of fragment 15 of Empedocles and the afore-mentioned Aristotelian passage from *On Interpretation*, 19A (Severino, 1985, p. 69). In *Physics* (235B 15-16) Aristotle insists on this point: «It is necessary that everything either is, or is not» given that neither the realm of being, nor that of non-being, exhaust everything in our sensitive world. In fact, the Earth represents «the vainest part of all» (*Metaphysics*, 1010A 30), as if to say the most insignificant, regardless of how many people, later on, will point to the centre of the universe as the privileged point of being (Blumenberg, 2009, chap. 10). To the sphere of the contingent and the indeterminate, Aristotle also adds that vast field of the «accidental» and the «casual» which, being similar to the nature of nothingness, cannot be the subject of science (cf. *Metaphysics*, 1026B 21). On the contrary, for Severino (1979), the same vision of science remains linked to the nihilism of the «case» (in *Law and Case*, the randomness to which the same scientific theories would remain prey, are shown). The Aristotelian definition of accidental (*συμβεβηκός*) as «that which happens neither always nor for the most part» is well-known. In *Physics* (197A 8; 196B 28) there is also talk of «indeterminate causes» as well as «accidental causes» (see Wieland 1993, p. 326 sgg.).

The indeterminate therefore remains a ‘reserve’ that exceeds nothingness, the un-thought of par excellence, so much so that Aristotle likens it to a limit-concept such as raw material (which, like Anaximander’s infini-

ty, remains pure power of the opposites). It is not by chance that such a vagueness will give new breath to the theme of the «undecidable» in the twentieth century (think of Derrida).

3. The hendiadyc nothingness of Leopardi

Whereas, according to Aristotle, becoming cannot exist without eternity (cf. *Metaphysics*, 999B),² for Leopardi, becoming, on the contrary represents, the supreme evidence that allows us to deny any kind of eternity. So, between Aristotle (an accomplished expression of classical metaphysics), and Leopardi (the great precursor to contemporary philosophy), a sort of fatal chess game is played out, as already mentioned earlier (Severino, 2015). Reversing the Aristotelian scheme, Leopardi place becoming (and therefore, nothingness), as supreme evidence. «Take away the ideas» of Plato, in other words the reasoning of an over-sensitive world, and everything returns to contingency and the case: everything appears «without reason» based on nothingness (Severino, 1997, pp. 112-113). While in Aristotle the ways of the eternal are, so to speak, paved with the reason, in Leopardi they find themselves illuminated by the illusion, «because the nature of things still requires again that nothing be eternal» (*Zibaldone*, 166)³. To face the spectacle of nothingness (the only «eternal thing» in the chorus of *Federico Ruysch's mummies*), Leopardi resort first to nature and poetry (meant as «an almost last resort») and only after that to the «noble nature» of the genius, to that nature of «another species» (*CXI Thoughts*, I), able to unite the «true philosopher» and the «great poet». This complex figure is able to console us – albeit with an ephemeral spell – offering us the illusion of a fleeting salvation from nothingness. It must be acknowledged that Severino knew how to penetrate the evolution of «genius» and «contradiction» in Leopardi, like no-one else, from the very first passages of *Zibal-*

2 The Platonic scheme (the essence precedes the existence), reproduced in its own way by Aristotle, remains at the center of every kind of ontological argument. In my view, Leopardi inaugurates contemporary thought with its ontological 'counter-argument' (Capitano, 2016, pp. 545-551 and *passim*).

3 Referring to the *Zibaldone di pensieri* (*Zibaldone of Thoughts*), Severino always prefers the short title of *Pensieri* (*Thoughts*), which moreover recalls the first edition of the work: *Pensieri di varia filosofia e bella letteratura* (*Thoughts of Various Philosophy and Beautiful Literature*). Here we will mention *Zibaldone*.

done right up to the last verses of *Ginestra* (*The Broom*). Unlike Aristotle, who had sought an absolute principle to immunise us against nothingness, for Leopardi reason remains «the true mother and cause of nothingness» (*Zibaldone*, 2942). The very principle of non-contradiction begins to waver, limited to the sphere of man, starting from the zibaldonic notes of 1818 to the point of investing nature itself in the years of *Operette morali*. In Leopardi, reason does not protect us from nothing, rather it throws us into that truth of nothingness that remains the unheard secret of Silenus. But it is precisely here that the greatness of Leopardi lies: in contemplating the spectacle of nothingness, uniting philosophy with the illusory and visionary power of poetry. It is not by chance that Severino considered Leopardi the highest paradigm of nihilism and contemporary thought. From the first hundred pages of *Zibaldone*, the man from Recanati speaks of the «nothingness of things» (*Zibaldone*, 84), which is then immediately condensed into the image of «solid nothing» (*Zibaldone*, 85), or rather, a nothingness that surrounds another nothingness: «I was scared to find myself in the midst of nothingness, a nothing myself» (*ibid*). In the same way, the «real and solid shadow» of the song *Ad Angelo Mai*, refers to the paradox: «It seems absurd and yet it is absolutely true that, since all reality is nothing, there is not other reality or other substance in the world but illusions» (*Zibaldone*, 99). The core motif of the song (dated 1820), comes from the nothingness that «only increases» since the modern world, with its expanding geographical horizons, is reduced to *in breve carta*. Once the world of ancient illusions has vanished, it is certain that «everything is in vain» and that our life will fluctuate from «nothingness» to «nothingness» (from the «cradle» to the «grave»). This uselessness of everything seems even clearer from the Copernican «revolution» onwards, which threw our planet into the «mass» of infinite worlds (see Fontenelle). On the opposite side to Aristotle, the contradictions of nature in Leopardi appear «palpable» and «innumerable» (Capitano, 2016, pp. 426-431). We are not dealing with simple metaphors: in our opinion, Leopardi's thought is one of radical contradiction (far more radical than that of Hegel), an «ultra-tragic» thought, because the tragic – made impossible by the collapse of the eternal – now turns to absurd (Capitano, 2016, pp. 413-426). In Leopardi's thought there is therefore a reversal compared to the entire metaphysical tradition centred on being and on the eternal: «everything is nothingness», i.e. being, as such, appears to be nothing, contradiction, especially after the turning point of 1824. Leopardi realises, as Severino adamantly points out, the «total contradiction» of being and nature as such, «the suicide of being as

being» (Severino 1997, pp. 431-439). The «turning point» takes place in the Spring of 1824, when Leopardi denounces the «contradiction in nature», in other words the dissension of a nature that denies the happiness promised and destined to the living, thus making «life [...] imperfect» (*Zibaldone*, 4087). A little later on, in certain annotations which expressly recall the *Dialogue between a Nature and an Icelander* (see *Zibaldone*, 4099-4101), the contradictions of nature were to explode in the most dramatic and deflagrating way. Nonetheless, similar antimonies do not appear so obviously from the outset, as they come from some of Leopardi's aphorisms that move from afar in that direction. In fact, contradiction proceeds by conceding, gradually, to man and to society, and then expanding to reason and, therefore, the whole of nature, to being as such. Furthermore, Leopardi would go as far as to say that only nothingness can save the being from evil (*Zibaldone*, 4175). On that point, an inadvertent aporia of nothingness should be noted: from the two premises that «everything is nothingness» and «everything is evil» we cannot simply conclude that nothingness is evil (according to a certain line of Platonic ancestry). If anything, evil is represented by being as such, from the being that exceeds nothingness. This, then, is how nothingness can be seen by Leopardi as the only «good», not so much because it annuls contradictions as because it discloses that imaginary realm of chimeras in which alone there can be happiness. On the contrary, according to Severino, the «things that are not things» reveals the implicit contradiction in becoming (Severino, 1997, pp. 465-467; 2015, pp. 213-221; cf. Capitano, 2016, pp. 681-835, 852).

On that subject, it is worth going back to underline how, in Leopardi (even without the severity of Kant or Schopenhauer), nothingness does not appear univocally as *nihil absolutum* or *nihil negativum* (in its various forms: negativity, death, caducity and the destructive carousel of time). In fact, the «things that are not things» that throw a ray of light onto the garden of universal evil, echo «an imaginative power [...] to conceive the things that are not things» (*Zibaldone*, 167), to take over reality and imagine that «the soul [...] cannot see» (*Zibaldone*, 171). These «not things» will to appear, even after the turning point of 1824-1826, as very positive figures in the nothingness of the «sensitive and imaginative man» (*Zibaldone*, 4418), which recall Rousseau's «*pays des chimères*» (*Zibaldone*, 4500). In the *Canticle of the Wild Rooster*, creative nothingness («all things that are, are emerged from nothingness»), is simultaneously distinguished from *nihil negativum* that drag everything into the vortex of caducity: «Since is not able to die what does not exist, then all things that exist arose out of

nothing». The ambiguity of nothingness also appears in an aphorism from *Zibaldone* in 1821 and also in the *Memorable sayings of Filippo Ottonieri*: «Children find everything in nothing, men find nothing in everything». Here too it is not difficult to see how distant the imaginative-poetic nothingness is compared to the *nothing* that moves forward in the age of reason. From this «mother and cause of nothingness» (i.e. the reason), Severino analysed the destructive drifts in the «age of the Technique».

The neo-Parmenidean philosopher has always insisted on the univocity of nothing, even with regard to Leopardi. But, as he himself recognises, the agonizing nothingness, that hovers right from the first hundred pages of the *Zibaldone*, cannot be likened to that nothingness of the *Infinite* [in which, for the poet, would be «sweet» destruction. He himself also highlighted the role in Leopardi of that life-giving and comforting nothingness of the «genius» which rises above that destructive nothing and source of «perpetual death». Furthermore, just as he is denouncing the «authentic contradiction», the author of *Arcane and Stupendous Thing* has to admit to a certain distinction between these two versions of nothingness: «pure nothingness is ‘better’ than that nothing that devours being» (Severino, 1997, p. 467). The ambivalence of nothingness in Leopardi cannot, in this sense, be reduced to that «pure nothingness» from which, for Severino, the very same «illusion of nihilism» would descend (*ibid*). Moreover, the Severino does not ignore the ambiguity of nothingness that runs through a whole line that goes from Plato to Neoplatonism, from Schelling, right up to Heidegger and Lévinas, with appendices that even reach as far as contemporary Italian thought (*Il nulla e il Nulla [The nothing and the Nothingness]*, in Severino, 2000, pp. 18-26). On the other hand, the ambiguous nature of Leopardi’s nothingness (as well as that of Heidegger), had already been duly noted by Alberto Caracciolo (1994) who, on the other hand, had positioned it equivocally within a religious perspective as indeed did Pareyson and Givone each in their own way (Givone, 1995, pp. 135-154; 2001, pp. 165-172). More recently, Massimo Donà rightly distinguished the «nothing-for-us» (nothing-of-sense) from the «nothing-in-itself» (the ontological nothing). In his opinion, Leopardi’s nothingness should be clarified rather as «nothing-of-determined» (see Donà, 2013, pp. 171-172; Capitano, 2016, pp. 873-879).

It is also true that in 1821 Leopardi went through a phase in which nothing seemed to identify with the divine principle of «infinite possibility»: «In short, the principle of things, and indeed of God, is nothingness» (*Zibaldone*, 1341; cf. Severino, 1997, pp. 111-113). Hence the many (of-

ten misreading) interpretations in terms of «negative theology». On the contrary, the ‘creative’ nothingness of the afore-mentioned page from *Zibaldone* is an example of that *nihil positivum* which will manifest itself in Leopardi above all as a sign of poetic illusion. Dante’s fantastic «things that are not» of (*Vita Nova*, XXV, 8 Barbi), are transformed in Leopardi into exceptions to the universal evil: «there is nothing good except what is not; things that are not things» (*Zibaldone*, 4174; cf. Capitano, 2016, pp. 724-725). These ‘not things’ refers, in our opinion, to the metaphorical figures, to the poetic chimeras and the «illusions of the imagination» as well as the poetic notion of the vague and the indeterminate. Against the backdrop of Leopardi’s ‘meontology’, we encounter other happy aspects of nothingness: the *μη φῶναι* of Silenus and the Buddhist nothingness (Capitano, 2016, pp. 743-756; 2019, pp. 83, 93). Subtly similar to the Silenic doctrine and also to the «vanity» of the Qoèlet, it is, in fact, to the Buddhist nothingness to which the *Zibaldone* alludes: «an ancient philosopher, an Indian etc.» (*Zibaldone*, 4175), with reference to a vague doctrine of «non-being» meant as only «good» in a universe in which «everything is evil». Leopardi turns often the glove of nothingness upside down, offering opposites points of view: sometimes to show a happy aspect of the imaginary (as in the case of the child and the «imaginative man»), other times to bring us back to the bleakest and vain show of human unhappiness. A simple glance at nothingness does not exist; whereas the glance of the imagination is naturally creative, so reason remains essentially nihilistic. It is not by mere chance that the last words of Leopardi lead to a triple «truth», sceptical and negative: «we know nothing», «we are nothing» and «there is nothing to hope for after death» (*Zibaldone*, 16 September 1832). It is a triple negation, the truth of which appears to Leopardi at the end as undeniable as incredible it does to most people.

4. The chessboard of the «Third Player»

Severino’s two important volumes dedicated to the genius from Recanati from the nineties (*Nothingness and Poetry; Arcane and Stupendous Thing*) form part of a most singular philosophical path, which, as we know, contemplates the «eternity of beings» and the «Destiny of the truth» (see Goggi, 2016, pp. 198-204; Capitano, 2016, pp. 841-853). In a similar context, Leopardi appears as the highest peak of western nihilism, if, by «nihilism» we mean that mad persuasion that remains underlying to the west-

ern faith in becoming nothingness (and coming from nothingness) that now pervades the entire planet. At the dawning of contemporary thought, in Leopardi the truth no longer represented the remedy, as in Aeschylus (cf. Severino, 1989), but – in a reversed perspective, compared to the traditional scheme of metaphysics – becoming is transformed into the undeniable evidence that inexorably announces the sunset of the Eternals. In this sense, according to Severino, Leopardi remains the utmost and most coherent interpreter of the error of the western world (an error, however, destined to collapse, together with the abysmal contradiction of becoming. For Severino, it is a question of the twofold (and inadvertent) contradiction implied by becoming, which, on the one hand poses being and nothingness as identical, yet on the other, it presupposes them to not be identical (cf. Severino 1997, pp. 471-481: 478; 2015, pp. 213-221).

Starting from a radical re-thinking of Leopardi's nothingness to exalting the meaning of certain famous notes in *Zibaldone* in October 1820 on the «works of genius» (*Zibaldone*, 259-262), Severino arrives at an admirable reading of *The Broom*, the grandiose swan song in which the poetic genius of Leopardi finally united with his philosophical side (the «noble nature»), «comforts» the «desert» thanks to its «perfume». In this sort of mindful illusion (that does not exclude «true love» from itself), humanity – albeit with a temporary remedy and fleeting consolation – remains safe from nothingness (cf. Severino, 1997, pp. 513-527). Removing every consideration regarding the dynamics of the sublime, *Il nulla e la poesia* (*Nothingness and Poetry*), at times interprets infinity as illusory «content» (when poetry still proceeded separately from philosophy, such as in the famous 1819 idyll), and at others, as «form», which manifests itself in the «power of song» (cf. Severino, 1990, pp. 328-330). In the same essay, Severino addresses Leopardi's criticism of technique, denounced in the *Palinode to the Marquis Gino Capponi* (1835) as a false remedy for modernity and as an expression of reason's «will to power». In *Arcane and Stupendous Thing*, the irrepressible spread of contradiction from society to nature, to reason itself, and even to the «suicide of being» (Severino, 1997, p. 219), is observed over the entire period of Leopardi's parable, with the greatest attention being paid to the ruthless polemic of Leopardi against Christian nihilism. Nonetheless, at the risk forcing the issue, both the poetic «chimeras» («things that are not things»), and the distinct dimensions of mystery, paradox and absurdity are reported by Severino at a level of pure contradiction. In particular, the nonsense that is expressed in an axiological and existential dimension such as that of Leopardi (but also Rensi and

Camus), cannot be reduced to pure logical contradiction: 'meaningless' differ from nothing at all (Capitano, 2016, pp. 851-852).

Traveling with Leopardi completes at 2015 the trilogy consecrated to Italian thinker, comparing the philosophical position of the latter to that of a «Black Player», who if, on the one hand, seems to win against the «White Player» (in other words, the entire tradition of thought linked to faith in the Eternals), on the other hand is destined to be beaten by the «Third Player», i.e. Severino himself. This «Third Player» represents metaphorically the «gaze of Destiny». For him, «to dispel the darkness» which in Leopardi's thoughts, envelopes «the peak of contemplation of becoming» – i.e. the frightening contradiction –, will be the first move of his game, even though it is not yet the «fundamental move» (Severino, 2015, pp. 174-175). In fact, it is a matter of casting a glance towards a higher chessboard, given that the one on which the white player (Aristotle or Hegel, even), and the black player (Leopardi, ahead of Nietzsche), followed by an infinite phalanx of mortals have played, represents the illusory «chessboard» of «the Erring» (Severino, 2015, p. 183). In this way, the Third Player believes he can win the match, shifting the game to the more solid base of the «primal structure» (*ibid.*, pp. 202-209), from which language can indicate the «undeniable». Heidegger's critique of «deepest thought» Nietzsche's (*ibid.*, p. 166-167), suggest an analogous relief by Severino to that which, in any case, remains his own «privileged interlocutor» (*ibid.*, p. 221): in fact, Leopardi was to withdraw from the abyss of contradiction. Just as Heidegger had observed that Nietzsche's «top of contemplation» (the doctrine of the «eternal return»), remained «shrouded in mist», so Severino want to clear away the darkness lurking around Leopardi's «top of contemplation», in other words the apex of nihilism: «the authentic sense of *nihilism* (essentially more radical than the way in which Nietzsche and Heidegger intend nihilism), is the faith that beings become something else, temporarily reaching out from nothingness» (Severino, 2015, p. 203).

Some pages of Leopardi's huge diary, written between 1824 and 1826, clearly spell out the contradiction of being as such (see *Zibaldone*, 4099-4101; 4174-4175). Thus, Severino can conclude that

Leopardi's thought comes very close to that «thing that is not a thing», which is implicated by becoming, the nomination, but the nomination without flinching, without realising even, that the «thing that is not a thing» is absolutely impossible, necessarily im-

plicated by becoming. Whereas he states that «non-being». meant as the «thing that is not a thing», is the only good («there is no other good»). [...] The abyssal contradiction of becoming is right under Leopardi's eyes, but somehow, without realising, he has pushed it out of the way, and so he doesn't see it. Indeed, he believes that it is the only «good». (Severino, 2015, pp. 219-220)

Leopardi was about to turn his gaze «towards the stars», abandoning his «black robes», but he didn't do it. Perhaps he did not get as far as grasping the «abyssal» contradiction between being and nothingness, implicated by becoming, as Severino reproaches him him. However, it is certain that our Black Player did not remain indifferent towards the numerous, frightening contradictions of nature, nor when faced with the immense mystery of a being who seems to exist purely to annihilate his unhappy «creatures». The contradiction of being as such – as Severino well knew – was to strike Leopardi more than any other Western thinker, to the point of pushing him to reject the principle of non-contradiction, as we read in this page from the *Zibaldone* in 1825:

An evident and undeniable contradiction in the order of things and in the mode of their existence, a terrifying contradiction, but not for that reason any less true: a great mystery which can never be explained, unless we deny (according to my system) every absolute truth and falsity, and abandon in a certain sense the very principle of our understanding, *non potest idem simul esse et non esse*. (*Zibaldone*, 4129; cf. 4099-4100)

Without knowing it, Leopardi commemorated the most remote of battles: the one between being and nothingness. To pick up on an iconic image from *Ritornare a Parmenide* (*Return to Parmenides*), the «battle between being and nothingness» – recalls the one fought way back in time «amongst ancient armies, who fought against each other during the day, while the enemy leaders drank together in their tents at night – enemies, therefore, only *if and when* they were on the battlefield» (Severino, 1995², p. 21). Similarly, the black and white players also partake of that «nocturnal affair of being and nothingness» (*ibid.*, p. 22), that hidden understanding of nihilism which would end up by making their every move in vain.

The Black Player's victory will nevertheless be ineffectual and unfinished, and his game immeasurably distant (Severino, 2015, p. 221) compared to that of the Third Player, who will therefore see the chessboard of

«becoming-other» else crumble at his feet. Severino «demonstrates the madness of the Black Player's great moves and so, therefore, also those of the White Player», hinting, in the margin, at «*other* determinations of destiny» that instead «will go very far» (Severino, 2015, p. 206). The «great moves» of the two players are made ineffective and are disqualified, almost to warn us that the game (between being and nothingness, truth and error) is quite another, played, as it were, with other rules and, above all, *on another chessboard*. Thus, Severino shows how the «game» destines those who still insist on playing on the «chessboard» of «error» (i.e. on the «*structure of error*»), to be defeated (*ibid.*, p. 209). This, therefore, would be the truly «fundamental move»: going beyond the «isolated Earth» of error through the «Earth that saves» (*ibid.*), wanting to recall the vaguely eschatological and apparently mystical intonation of the language of Severino's last writings. Hence, the decisive move, the *ἔλεγχος* of our titanic «Third Player», who repropose more rigorously the Parmenidean dilemma.

5. *The Apocalypse of the Eternal*

«The entire life of man, the entire life of the whole universe, is nothing other than an un-ending and bizarre game of chess of two fields: black and white; a game in which nobody wins, if not fatal death». This aphorism, taken from Wackenroder's *Fantasies about art* might help to illustrate the state of our game, in which none of contenders can win, if not death itself, given that even the eternal, erected to defend themselves against the white player are destined to stand up to the reasons of nothingness. Yet here is how, with the «Third Player», we are transported to a level of contemplation *sub specie aeternitatis*, in which – to say it with Leopardi's apocalyptic imagery, appears «a new sky, a new earth» (*Aspasia*, v. 27). In John's *Apocalypse* (21, 1), in fact, we read: *Et vidi caelum novum et terram novam*. Severino himself recalls the famous passage which exposes the apocalypse («non-hiding» is the literal meaning of ἀποκάλυψις) of *Glory*. In *The Glory*, indeed, the allegorical figure of the Good Friday of solitude» appears as a prelude to the «Easter» of liberation (Severino, 2001, pp. 318, 543-549). (The image of «Good Friday» will be picked up at a later date in other writings, such as *Dike* and *History, Joy*). In *Faith and Knowledge*, Hegel had already exploited the theological figure of the «speculative Good Friday» to demonstrate the need to overcome nihilism (Capitano, 2016, pp. 463-466). In «one single event», so we read in *The Glory*, «sets the sun of mor-

tals and of death» (Severino, 2001, p. 548). A similar apocalyptic «event» nevertheless appears to already have been superseded by the developments of *Oltrepassare* (*Passing beyond*), in which, through a complex phenomenology of «circles of appearance», the immense, phantasmagorical epiphany of the eternal unfolds, including the destiny of being and of man. Such a joyful glorification of eternity («The Glory of Joy»), appears in front of our eyes as the last grand attempt to be made by western thinkers (after Spinoza and Hegel), to redeem time in eternity and the contingency in necessity, to immunise the world against death and to remove the root of pain, the tragic and the absurdity of existence. It is a titanic move, which, in its logical paroxysm, results in the most complete overcoming of nihilism, but also in the defeat of freedom and the sacrifice of contingency and, in a way, of the whole world of life.

As we have seen, Aristotle had put in place a powerful theoretical device to save the becoming from the eternal. Overturning this position, Leopardi would have declared, for his part, the irrevocability of time and the irretrievability of the past («never again»), except in the fleeting illusion of «remembrance» (*Zibaldone*, 644; cf. 4278). This concerns the «horror» of eternal nothingness. Time, however, remains one of the most mysterious and persistent figures of those temporal modes of non-being that are expressed in the well-known formulae: «no more» and «not yet». «One single time is never», Goethe once decreed, inverting Pascal's dictum: «L'Être éternel est toujours, s'il est une fois» (Brunschvicg, 559), i.e. «the eternal is always if is once». For his part, Severino interpreted the thesis that «once is for always» in the most radical and original way, given that the very appearance of any being, according to him, implies its own eternity. In *Gloria* we even read that:

Everything that *once* appeared in the circle of destiny and then fell into oblivion is destined to appear again, in a single event, and to remain permanently in appearing of every single circle of the infinite constellation, which, in infinity, will unfold in the Gloria, after the sunset of earth's solitude. (Severino, 2001, p. 551, *our italics*)

Without making comparisons with previous versions of philosophical eternism – consider McTaggart (see Tugnoli, 2018, chap. 6.7; 2000, pp. 287-484), Broad, Price (see Perelda, 2018, chap. 6.1) – Severino had been declaring «the eternity of beings» ever since 1956, claiming later the primacy of this discovery on the physical theory (Severino, 2013b, pp. 194-

195; 2019, pp. 49-50). Almost half a century later, Severino will write, moreover recalling involuntarily Broad's similitude concerning «moving spotlight view»:

The earth [...] does not go forwards into circles with one single gesture that makes them immediately visible altogether. It is a house, the constellation of circles, where the lights of the earth are not all lit together in different rooms of the constellation, but the earth enters them, illuminating them one by one, and her light appears like a progressive and infinite enlargement – that is the appearance of eternal, always wider, luminous places, where every place is a finite togetherness of circles». (Severino, 2007, p. 391)

The eternist vision of our philosopher brings to mind another famous passage from the *Apocalypse* (10, 6) which had not failed to strike the imagination of Dostoevskij: «In the *Apocalypse*, the angel swears that time will no longer exist» (*The Demons*, II, V)⁴. This means that death, like time, is an illusion, as Severino shows in the trilogy inaugurated by *The Glory* (*Go beyond* and *Death and the earth*) and as, with visionary inspiration, Hermann Broch had already envisaged at the end of the *Death of Virgil*, when «everything suddenly appeared to him in a single, profound simultaneity». For his part, Thomas S. Eliot has cast a shadow of suspicion on the possibility of redeeming time in eternity: «If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable» (*Burnt Norton*, I, in *Four Quartets*). The Nietzschean gesture of redeeming the past thanks to the «eternal return of the equal», remained a hypothesis consistent with other redemptive myths announced by the prophet of the «death of God». Severino (1999) has persuasively demonstrated how the Nietzschean doctrine of the «eternal return» is basically much more consistent and less 'mythical' than what was previously admitted by the interpreters. With this move, Nietzsche thought he could proclaim himself the «winner of God and of nothingness». But all that is (or falls) in the past is (or remains), eternal (see Severino, 2001, p. 141), and no myth of «redemption», not even that of the «eternal return» would be able undermine its immutability or unrepeatability in the slightest. To take an example dear to Severino, if wood now

4 For an interpretation of Dostoevskij as 'underground thinker', comparable to Leopardi, see Severino, 2006, pp. 53-88; 2019, p. 151.

appears as ash, that doesn't mean that it has disappeared into thin air, but rather that *it will have been forever*: once is already forever. But at times it seems that not even the very same language of Severino's writings remain immune to the perils of nihilism. Suffice to think of expressions such as the following: «when, throughout the unfolding of the Glory, the destined time arrives» (Severino, 2001, p. 549). Such phrasing would seem to assume *a time* in which something did *not* happen, did *not* unfold, had *not* yet appeared. But despite the moves following the *Glory*, our chess master will always be able to appeal to the need to not be distracted by looking at his finger pointing to the moon, paying attention to «destiny» witnessed by language (just as Heraclitus asked not to listen to him, but to the *logos* (cf. DK, fr. B 50). Nonetheless, it must be recognised that not even the Black Player has ever stopped observing the moon and contemplating the stars, even if from the other side of the chessboard. «Singer of nothingness», Leopardi did not claim to be «the perpetual flower of eternal joy that “d'eternità s'arropa il vanto”» (Severino, 2013b, p. 30). Even if we don't see the end of the game, we could perhaps conclude with the judgment of Jorge Luis Borges: «to deny eternity [...] is no less incredible than to imagine its total redemption» (*A History of Eternity*).

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