

# Every Child Is a Severino Scholar The Stubborn Persistence of the Past and the Contradiction of Being Born in Time

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A child is afraid that the witch of Snow White may continue to exist even in death. Another child looks at the picture of her parents before she was born and cannot believe that she did not exist at that time. A third child (Emanuele Severino, ten years old) argues with his brother that because God is omnipotent, He does not need to be overbearing (*i.e.*, to transcend Himself and become Other than what He is). These three stories show a common thread, namely, they challenge – in ways that are both childish and profound – the very notion of becoming. They also show that reality is not “whole”. It can be understood as succession or co-presence of different temporal cuts in the shapes of images (Bergson), planes of immanence (Deleuze and Guattari) or totalities of appearing (Severino). The question is the statute of the shift that allows the transition from one totality of appearing to the next one – without forgetting that the shift is itself a totality (a non-nothing).

**Keywords:**

**Bergson, Deleuze, Freud, Guattari, Heidegger, Righi, Severino**

### Three smart children

These three very short stories are taken from everyday life. Because the first one will acquire its meaning only at the end of this paper, I must rely on the readers' patience and on their willingness to follow my argument. It goes like this: a father reads *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* to his eight-year-old son who is about to fall asleep. When the story is over, the son asks his father to take away the book. Why, the father asks. Because the witch might get out of the book, the son explains. The father reassures him that the witch is dead. Yes, the witch is dead, the son says, but the page where the witch is alive is still there.

My second story expands (I hope not to the point of becoming too fictional) a small episode I came across in a very interesting recent paper on Severino by Andrea Righi (Righi 2023, forthcoming). I admit that I owe so much to Righi's insights that this article reads as a commentary on Righi's almost as much as it is a commentary on Severino's. I had the chance to read Righi's piece when it was in manuscript form and to discuss it with him. I hope therefore that what looks like appropriation will be understood as an ongoing discussion. At any rate, here's the second story: A young girl is looking at a picture of her mother and father taken before she was born. The girl asks: Where was I when the picture was taken? Her parents casually remark: You did not exist back then. The response triggers various degrees of disbelief in the child. She thinks that her parents are mad. How can it be that "she did not exist"? To her, Righi says, the very idea of her non-existence is inconceivable, "for the child attachment to life admits no exceptions; it is tailored on what Deleuze would call the 'unity of life and thought'."

True. However, I think that in this instance it is wise to put Deleuze aside (for now, at least) and go back to Parmenides, where the unity of life and thought is superseded by the unity of Being and Thinking, "for being and thinking are one and the same" ("to gar auto noein estin te kai einai")

or, as Heidegger would put it, “That, namely the same, is both becoming-aware (thinking) and Being” (Heidegger 2006, p. 36)<sup>1</sup>.

The third story is told by Severino himself in his autobiography, *Il mio ricordo degli eterni* (My memory of the eternal). It is the example chosen by Righi, and the one I would have chosen myself if Righi had not come first:

I was about ten and my brother was talking to me about my school-work. At a certain point he asked me: “Can God be overbearing (*prepotente*)?” I answered him – and this is the oldest phrase I remember saying, “No, because if He is omnipotent (*onnipotente*) He does not need to be overbearing” (Severino 2011, p. 170)<sup>2</sup>.

It is the first sentence that Severino remembers having pronounced, and it really sounds like destiny. It depicts God like a being (whom Severino will later replace with “Being”) whose absolute power lies in not having to negate its omnipotence by trespassing it. Righi observes that this is not a moral but a logical statement, “one that is typical for children of this age, who are almost invariably visceral logicians”. I would add that they are visceral theologians, too – an inclination that nonetheless exposes them to the same paradoxes of omnipotence that the shrewd theologians of old knew all too well. Sure, an omnipotent God does not need to transcend Himself. The need to transcend would negate His own omnipotence and put the deity in contradiction with itself. There is a remarkable difference, however, between a God who does not need transcendence and a God who *cannot* transcend Himself. Because, if that were the case, we could not say that God is omnipotent. And the old quip attributed to St. Peter Damian would come back to haunt us: can God create a boulder so heavy that He Himself cannot lift it? If He can, He is not omnipotent because He cannot lift it; if He can’t – because the boulder is too heavy even for him – He’s also not omnipotent.

This is just the popular version of the paradox. Peter Damian’s actual argument goes further than that: Can God restore virginity to a woman

1 “Das Selbe nämlich ist vernehmen (Denken) sowohl als auch Sein”. Heidegger 2006, p. 36.

2 “Ero sui dieci anni e mio fratello parlava con me dei miei compiti di scuola. A un certo punto mi chiese: «Può Dio essere prepotente?». Gli risposi – ed è questa la frase più antica che ricordo di aver pronunciato: «No, perché se è onnipotente non ha bisogno di essere prepotente». Severino 2011, p. 170 (my translation).

who has lost it? In other words, can God *change the past*? Peter Damian seems to believe that He can, and to back up God's absolute omnipotence he also appears to be ready to throw away the principle of non-contradiction (*De omnipotentia divina*, 611D–612B). Or maybe not, or not entirely. His approach is nuanced and does not amount to a “viscerally” logical statement (he's not a child anymore). God can restore virginity to a woman who has lost it without changing or annihilating all the events that brought her to lose her virginity in the first place *if it is good to do so*, because God is about Goodness rather than Being-ness and because suspension of logic and nature is what miracles are about (Resnick 1992).

Damian is no less ambiguous about the possibility that God can undo what has been done or bring about that what it is, is not. Saving God's omnipotence and the principle of non-contradiction at the same time and under the same respect is indeed a complex task that we will leave to him and his fellow theologians to debate for all eternity. What matters to us is that in Severino's early statement about God not needing to transcend Himself we find the thread that connects our stories.

## A slice of the Real

The first story evokes a past that refuses to be dead and gone. The second story deals with a present that does not recognize the existence of a “different” past (a past that does include the present “present”, that is). The third story implies that God's omnipotence is co-substantial to His “internal” immanence. Because immanence is “all” that He is and all that He can and needs to be, He cannot become “other” than what He is. He cannot *change*. And we assume that if He cannot change, He can change neither the past nor the future, since both are “in” Him.

The reason for this limitation to God's omnipotence (which, by the way, may be a limitation according to Peter Damian but not according to Severino) must be understood in its own terms. It's not really a matter of “changing the past”; it has never been. We need a better understanding of what “past” is. Even if you think, like Jay Gatsby, that you can repeat the past and therefore change the outcome of the present, you end up changing the present only to the extent that the past that you want to repeat exists *as past* only in the present. The past was not actually past the moment it happened. It was the present of back then. Therefore, it lacked the hallmark—of being past—that the present lays on it retrospectively. By the

same token, the moment the future realizes the premises laid out in the present, it is no longer future, and it lacks the hallmark—of being in the future—laid on it in the present and by our present judgment.

The past never returns the way it was and never altogether because there is no place and no time from and to which it could possibly return. A time machine will never be invented because the past does not stand as an unconnected entity; it is not a location you can go back to. What is never gone and remains “missing” in the present and out of our hands, is precisely the “unpastness” of the past, the past’s *always-present event*, which is entirely hidden from us for the simple reason that we can only interpret as “past” the signs the past sends us through its “monuments”, which we decipher in our present. Because such a conceptualization happens in the here and now, the past *as past* only exists here and now, for those of us who think of it. Approximately, the same line of reasoning applies to the future.

Let’s put it this way. If we could take a picture of the whole universe in a specific instant of *X* duration, and if we could discern in that picture each thing that is actually happening, not unlike the vision haunting Jorge Luis Borges in *The Aleph* (Borges 1979, pp. 3-17), we would not see “the world”, because the world (the world of *metaxy* that we inherited from Plato) is made of both visible and invisible things, of beings and ideas, of the past that is no more and the future that is not yet. To quote loosely from Hilary Putnam’s stance on internal realism, “the world” is made up of the world and of all our descriptions of the world—which means that the cyclical attempts of well-intentioned philosophers to move back to absolute metaphysical realism are doomed to fail insofar as they do not break the Platonic mold (Putnam 1990, pp. 261-262).

So, what would we see instead? A slice of the Real, of “the” Being in all its messiness, and without the reassuring barriers of the symbolic order. When Severino speaks of the totality of appearing, we must think of something along these lines. A perceivable approximation of Severino’s Being would be a synchronic picture of the totality of appearances that appears in the moment the picture is taken, plus the picture itself, whoever or whatever is taking the picture and whoever is watching it. Possibly, it would be something akin to the synchronic vision of Rome that appeared to Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontent* (Freud 1961, p. 16, one of the few texts by Freud that Severino actually quotes), plus Freud himself writing the book in his studio, plus us reading the book, plus the whole universe that surrounds us while we are reading the book.

What we have just described is a veritable *plan d'immanence*. The question that immediately arises is, if immanence is all that there is and nothing transcends it, how can we make statements about it? How can we even know that we are included in it? Don't we need an external observer telling us that we cannot be the external observers of ourselves? Such questions always take on an air of annoying formalism, and it is easy to answer with an equally annoying anti-formalist empiricism (do I have to wait for an alien to tell me that I am a human being?). We need to find an exit, possibly intersecting immanence and transcendence in a way that will not create an addendum to the history of metaphysics (a metaphysics of *presence* rather than immanence, which in the history of philosophy is really nothing new). Or maybe, for the time being, we can be content with Deleuze's and Guattari's observation that the plane of immanence is neither a concept nor a method. It is the "image of thought" and, to be precise, a moving image: "the horizon itself that is in movement" (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, pp. 37-38) or, to stay closer to Severino's idiom, the horizon of the totality of appearing (without forgetting that in Deleuze and Guattari what we have is a *mouvant* totality of appearing while in Severino we have totalities of appearing constantly superseding each other).

What puzzles the young child watching a picture of her mother and father before she was born is that the image does not seem to be moving at all (moving in time, that is). The child, to quote Righi, has no problem in admitting a before and an after, but it is simply impossible for her to think about the being of her non-being. It's even more than that: the picture implicitly asks the girl to conceptualize not just the being of her non-being, but the very essence of nothingness. It's not that the little girl doesn't believe in time. It is that she is a radical Parmenidean who has faith in the unity of being and thinking – her thinking, obviously, without the contribution of which (without whose *presence*) there is no being.

Bergson, the philosopher of creation and becoming, is quite remote from Severino, yet when Bergson in *Matter and Memory* writes that matter is "an aggregate of images" and "more than that which the idealist calls a representation, but less than that which the realist calls a thing", he says precisely that reality can be perceived only as a slice, a temporal cut in the fabric of the world (Bergson 1911, p. vii). In other words, reality is a picture – because it is likely that Bergson was thinking of photography. And a picture is not a Platonic idea; it is absolute yet casual, undisputable yet contingent – but in fact imbued with necessity, because the network of spatial dispositions and temporal coordinates among the elements of the

taken image are now absolute in their “unpastness”. The picture will decay. Those dispositions and coordinates (like the page that contains the witch) will not. Maybe in the picture the future father was looking at the future mother. That look happened, and then it was over. But the fact “that it happened” still happens. The picture is a fragment of the Real. To the extent that it is real, every picture is also eternal. The temporal cut it captured was an event, and events do not change. They do not even “exist” the way an object does (the event of the picture is not the picture).

Obviously, Bergson is aware that fixed images are at the opposite pole of the movement of reality. A picture is a compromised experience as it cuts away the becoming, the *durée* (although Severino would not be “moved” by such objection). No, events do not move, yet they are not young Severino’s God and therefore allow changes, *differences*, or differentiations to happen. The child is one of these differentiations<sup>3</sup>.

## What the unconscious wants

Appropriately, Righi refers to Wittgenstein’s *Notebooks 1914-1916*: “Can one negate a *picture*? No. And in this lies the difference between picture and proposition. [...] I can only deny that the picture is right, but the *picture* I cannot deny” (note of November 26, 1914, Wittgenstein 1961, p. 33e). Adding to Righi’s commentary of Wittgenstein (there are no negative pictures; no picture can tell me that “it’s not raining”), I would say that pictures can be used to *demonstrate* a negative (“You told me that yesterday it was raining but this picture was taken yesterday – the date on my phone says so – and it shows a sunny day”) but it cannot be used to *construct* a negative (the *meaning* of the picture is *not* that it wasn’t raining). A cartoon I saw once in a newspaper’s funny pages showed an angry mother asking her children, “Who broke the vase?” and the children answering, “Not me!” while the grinning ghost of a child with “Not me” written all over his romper was leaving the scene. In a similar fashion, the girl who is confronted with a negative event of “not-being” in the picture must choose between saying, “This is the picture of my mother and father when I did not exist” or, “This is the picture of my mother, father, and not-me”. In time, she will

3 For similarities and differences in Bergson’s and Severino’s critique of contingency see Ronchi 2017, pp. 75-93.

realize that her not-being in the picture is an eternal truth as much as her parents being there. In time, she will also realize that the meeting of her parents was the consequence of a chance connection whose outcome is the eternal truth that she is.

The library scene in *Interstellar* (Christopher Nolan, 2014) is a good visual analogy of this cut in the fabric of time, with movement added to it. Every moment Murphy Cooper spends in the library of her house is forever “present” in the space-time continuum that Joseph Cooper (her father) “visits” from another continuum. In Severino’s universe, however, Joseph Cooper would not be able to move freely back and forth in time—from a position outside the daughter’s continuum—and instruct his daughter to stay in the room and wait for his messages, which come in the shape of books that he pushes out of the shelves and on to the floor from the “other side” of the library. The father would be in a continuum alongside his daughter’s continuum, close yet incapable of interacting with it.

Interaction among *continua* is not possible, yet the problem still unresolved is the shift from one totality of appearance (one continuum) to the next one. Every totality of appearance or plane of immanence is akin to a picture of the world, and every picture – because it is an isolated picture and not *the* picture of all totalities (there cannot be such thing, since no one could *take* that picture) – is surrounded by the threshold that separates it from the others, and that threshold is *nothing*, for *nothing* separates the *continua* and they are separated by *nothing*. Since every shift is a totality in-itself (and every totality is in fact a continuum because we don’t know how much it lasts, we don’t know its *durée*), we risk infinite regression, or Zeno’s paradox all over again. The shift from one totality to the next is “natural” and as smooth as a billiard mat, provided we do not try to conceptualize it. The moment we attempt to grasp it “logically”, its *durée* gets divided into half, half of the half, half of the half of the half, etc., and we are Achilles never reaching the turtle in the next totality (here I follow the suggestion in Sini 2009, p. 88).

In other words, how can the witch still be a threat from her page in the past (from her continuum) if the *continua* are essentially separated? Moreover, the young girl is worried for the opposite reason, because she begins to realize that there is a continuum in her parents’ life that is “lost” to any interaction with her continuum. The persistence of the past seems mired in too many contradictions. We must sharpen our understanding of continuity if we want to find the key to the infinite multiplication of totalities and *continua*.



As Severino observes in *Destino della necessità*, “the history of the mortals is the history of the image”; that is, the history of what has had prominence in the image, what has stood out (Severino 1980, p. 503)<sup>4</sup>. But the unconscious of the mortals has no image, there is no “image of the world” in the unconscious, and the unconscious is destiny. (It goes without saying that Severino’s notion of unconscious is ontological rather than psychoanalytical; all the same, a psychoanalytical implication, as we will see, must be reintroduced.) All the isolated images of the world that occupy, make up, or sum up the totality of appearing in the eyes of mortals have no counterpart in the unconscious. Outside the Cartesian and post-Cartesian image of the world that has been adopted by western modernity there is “nothing” except other images of the world – all competing for the dominion of the Earth – which reject each other and are the “nothing” of each other. Yes, but what does the unconscious want, given that “it” does not care about an image of the world? For what dominion is the unconscious fighting?

The unconscious want only one thing, *i.e.*, the denial (the end) of the conflict between isolation (the condition of the individual being) and destiny (where the *principium individuationis* has no role)– for any other goal would be another partial image of the world, another isolation. The unconscious can only want the “sunset” (as Severino says) of isolation, *i.e.*, the sunset of the image of the world, which is another way to say that the unconscious is pure, unlimited, infinite desire for the fulfillment of destiny (the end of the separate *continua*) and the joy that such outcome will bring (joy is Severino’s term, and also one of the key words – *chara* – in Paul’s *Letter to the Romans*).

That may be Severino’s idea of Paradise, which is strangely personal and impersonal at the same time. Personal, because in the fulfillment of destiny the little girl will be “reunited” with her parents even in the picture where “she did not exist”. Impersonal, because there can be neither “she” nor “her parents” when and where (if there is a “when” and a “where”) every isolation is overcome.

Severino would probably say – in his theodicy-without-God – that joy is already here, it’s not an event that will take place somewhere in the future. We are just too “isolated” to perceive it and live in it. This is material

4 “In questo senso, la storia del mortale è storia dell’immagine, ossia è storia di ciò cui l’immagine ha dato rilievo”. Severino 1980, p. 503.

for another discussion. It is true, however, that science has come to Severino's help as far as the age of the "image of the world" is concerned – by dismantling it, that is. The question that science asks of us today is, do we still live in the age of the image of the world – meaning the modern age in which humans, endowed with *cogito*, have given themselves the chance to frame and "represent" the totality of the world before them in one comprehensive image? As for quantum physics, the answer seems to be no.

Quantum physics does not provide an image of the world, and the knowledge it proposes is neither anthropocentric nor objectifiable, nor, in the Platonic or Cartesian sense, visible. Sure, Max Planck spoke at length, in 1932, of the "so-called physical world image" (Planck 1946, p. 52) but then he immediately specified that it was "merely an intellectual structure" and even arbitrary to a certain extent. "The world image contains no observable magnitudes at all; all that it contains is symbols. More than this: It invariably contains certain components having no immediate meaning as applied to the world of the senses nor indeed any meaning at all" (Planck 1936, p. 54). The advantage of such world image "consists in the fact that it permits a strict determinism to be carried through" (Planck 1936, p. 54). Ninety years have gone by, and an image of the world that accounts for what has been called the "Einstein separability" between different entities is less and less sustainable. In quantum physics we no longer deal with the world as a correlative of experience, much less as *Umwelt*, and the quantum language is not translatable from its own mathematics into a "mortal language" except at the cost of gross reductions or mystifications. The isolation of the competing images of the world makes no sense in this context. Here is where Severino finds company: not just the old eternalism of J.M.E. McTaggart, but also Julian Barbour's negation of time and Gerhard 't Hooft's determinism (Scardigli et al. 2019). And the number of epistemologists and scientists who are very doubtful that time flows endlessly from the past into the future seems to have been growing in the last decades.

## The season of the witch

Back to the father who reads *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* to his eight-year-old son preparing to sleep. As we said, after the story is over, the son recommends that his father take the book away. Why, the father asks. Because the witch could come out of that book, the son replies. But the witch

is dead, his father reassures him. Yes, the witch is dead, the son replies, but the page where the witch is alive is still there.

In the arrow of time (if time is an arrow, which, as we said, is now debatable), the page with the witch has passed and cannot return. But the boy is not afraid that the witch may return; he is afraid that the witch might *stay*, that the witch *might not go away*. For even if the past disappears from the horizon of appearing, the relations and coordinates (the configurations, the interconnections, the networks) that each moment establishes in each of its single snapshots (Severino would call it totality of appearing, C.S. Peirce would call it “sheet of assertion”, Sini would call it “world-sheet”, maybe Deleuze would call it plane of immanence, and Wittgenstein would call it “fact”) cannot fall out of Being. The witch is not alive, but the configuration that unites the witch to her page (where the word cannot be separated from the image) is an event that has nothing to do with time; it is the non-being-past of its being-past. True, it may happen one day that no one is able to interpret the “fact” anymore and the “fact” goes out once and for all from the horizon of appearing. But it will not cease to be non-past, nor will its event cease, even if the page is torn. And like the old Furies of Aeschylus for whom Athena found a place in a maze of caves under the Acropolis, the forgotten event will find refuge in the unconscious, perhaps it will turn into a trauma that will never be acknowledged except as a symptom or a revealing slip of the tongue. The child is right, the witch is gone but the page is still there, it is better to keep the book in a safe place.

If that is the case, however, the entire notion of a destined eternal joy must be rethought. Joy springs eternal in Severino, but so does trauma in Freud. You cannot separate one from the other. Joy deletes the isolation of the mortals, but trauma has never been isolated in the first place. It does not belong to the ego of the mortals; it operates outside the coordinates of space and time. The ego assumes that the location of trauma is in the past, but in fact trauma dwells in its own continuum that *does* interact with the ego's continuum. Because there is eternity in joy as there is eternity in trauma, the end of isolation can only signal the moment when the horizon of appearing will accept trauma by adopting Prospero's words, “This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine”. Until that moment comes, Being needs therapy too.

For the unconscious of the mortals is the unconscious of Being itself. It does not belong to us because it is not “us”. We are the unconscious of Being. Being knows nothing of us and we know nothing of it. But the un-

conscious of Being is not somewhere else, it is in *us*, on the surface of our language. We cannot reach it by introspection, by delving deep into our conscience, because it is the hidden side of each utterance we speak, it resides in everything that remains unsaid or implied in what we say; it's the event of our language. It doesn't matter that the witch exists only as a written text. Because she is made of language, there is enough of it to make her a dangerous presence.

The major question of post-metaphysics is no longer Leibnitz's "Why is there something instead of nothing?" The new question goes back to the early philosophical dilemma of the One and the Many: why are there many things instead of One, namely Being? And who and what are we, asking such question? Not *quid aliquis*, but *quid nos*. We are the disturbance of Being, the splitting of Being, the Being having nightmares about the witch, we are the trauma, we are the witch. And yet Being *needs* splitting, or the temptation to reinstate a metaphysics of presence would be too strong. It is because we have an unconscious, an immanent unconscious that presses against our transcendent, intentional mind that Being is alive. This is how we can rethink the Parmenidean identity of Being and thinking, and this is how the little girl can say to her parents, I've always been there, not in the picture with you, *but outside of every picture*. At the same time, this is how the witch can say, I'll always be with you, but only from inside my page. Without the unconscious that circulates in our language, Being would just be an informal blob. Without the unconscious, which is on the tip of our tongue, Being would have no "place" to stay.

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