

THE COSMIC ELEMENTS IN RELIGION, PHILOSOPHY, ART AND LITERATURE

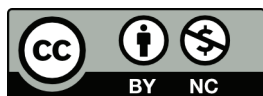
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EARTH. THE INVISIBLE, THE FORMLESS.
(DENKEN NACH DER NATUR,
THINKING AFTER NATURE)

Paulo Barone

1. In his third avatar, as is well known, Viṣṇu takes on the appearance of *Varāha*, a wild boar, in order to defeat the demon Hiraṇyākṣa who has taken possession of the Earth and has dragged it to the bottom of the ocean. The various representations of this episode which are available to us are more or less concordant in showing us the *Varahavatara* standing upright on his hind legs in the waters while holding high on his snout, or possibly on the tip of his tusks, a world just resurgent from a long rise to the surface, sometimes still dripping wet. In the West, incidentally, the equivalent scene drawn from Greek mythology could hardly better stress the substantial difference which separates it from its Eastern counterpart. Here, in contrast, the figure we picture is the Titan Atlas, buckling under the superhuman strain of upholding the world on his shoulders, in atonement for the punishment meted out by Zeus for Atlas' attempt to overthrow the god's rule. This condemnation to shoulder the tremendous burden of the terrestrial sphere which Atlas must bear, the crushing weight of which he must shrug off with every instant—and who would very willingly accept a substitute—stands in clear contrast with the mysterious lightness with which the world remains suspended on the pointed snout which brought it to safety.

And yet, even if the earth is in need of this extra-worldly underpinning, it cannot be said to be safe in any quarter. While on the bent back of a weary Western Atlas, it is all too noticeably in danger of *falling* over—into a sidereal abyss, with no other earth able to break that fall, and thus of disintegrating just like that, like an air tremor sliding into the darkness. Back in the East, in a field not very

far from Kathmandu, Giuseppe Tucci once chanced upon a stone from the late Gupta period which, as it happened, represented Vishnu in the form of a boar emerging from the cosmic waters bearing, in this instance, the Earth in his right hand. Tucci could not help being amazed when noticing how tiny the image of the Earth was, compared to the gigantic figure of the Vishnu wild boar, which almost filled the whole surface of the painting: «This Earth, which to us appears so vast and upon which the tragicomedy of our history is staged, this Earth appears to be a wholly insignificant thing which the god holds in his hand as if it were a mere toy»¹.

At this point, greater acumen and a certain sense of irony are needed to realise that the Earth, which on the Western front is on *the verge of falling*, is here —already minute while it whirls on the fingertips of the divine animal, a carefree oriental Atlas, in a more ambiguous and subtle peril, that of further shrinking and, ultimately, of *disappearing*. Before the irreversible crisis already imposed on its elements, the image of the barely visible Earth which just shows itself as it curves, bounces, recedes and fades away describes well, as a dream or a game may, the insurmountable difficulties our civilisation encounters when, as is the case today, our traditional world representation is crumbling and dying away. Thus, we still speak of hills, streams, seaside, wind and grass; we give a name to the fragrance of a tree in bloom, to the transit of white clouds, to the murmur of a brook, to the birds in the woods, to our walks along a river bank. And yet we know that the Earth is used as a landfill for the toxic wastes of industry, that many aquifers are now poisoned, that the deforestation, overbuilding and artificial lighting of the planet are inexorably proceeding, that global warming is fomenting a catastrophic upheaval of climate cycles, that polluted air leaves the inhabitants of great cities unable to breathe, that living species, including plants and animals, are diminishing every year, that, under these circumstances, new social inequalities arise which force millions of individuals to migrate and that this situation cannot last long. The ‘nature’ we ‘spontaneously’ evoke belongs to a historical *scenery*, a fresco which must increasingly sustain many points of erosion fragmenting into sounds, shapes and colours to let the underlying bare wall emerge: what we call, if we use the inarticulate language of chemical

¹ Tucci, 1989, p. 139.

compounds, water-carbon-oxygen-nitrogen or, in a more opaque way, raw material, to define its use as a 'resource' to be exploited. From spots of 'raw material', a wealth of objects and goods are extracted which rapidly become refuse and rejects for waste disposal, discolouring the Earth *scenery* in which they all merge. The contemporary image of the sea is a clear example of this confluence. From the surface of the Pacific Ocean, an artificial island, a million and a half kilometres square, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch (the Atlantic already has a smaller one) rises, formed out of tons of all kinds of waste which end up in the sea for all sorts of reasons. Similarly, the multiplying of commercial shipping routes, as well as the increase in offshore drilling and explosions to discover gas and oil deposits have shattered forever the silence that reigned on the bottom of the oceans.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration acoustic map, which uses colours to represent existing sound levels, surveys an ocean which is no longer in dark or green-blue tints, as it usually looks, but is now dyed orange or red. These hues have meanwhile deafened, and thereby totally disoriented, at least two hundred and fifty thousand whales. In the midst of the refuse and *remains* which summarise the new and prevailing production cycle, what does remain of the now fading traditional marine *scenery*, if not an ever-shrinking, almost invisible verge?

2. René Guénon reminds us how the duration of a complete world cycle (*manvantara*) is divided, according to the Hindu doctrine, into four ages which define as many phases of a gradual obscuration of the primordial spiritual state². We should find ourselves currently in the fourth, last age, in the fateful *kali yuga*, the *Age of Darkness*, where the visibility of truth is reduced almost to nothing, and thus where disorder and chaos reign in expectation of the fulfilment of the cycle and for an entire cycle to begin anew. To compound what might appear as an overly linear and schematic process of decadence, Guénon recalls that this «moment» has already lasted for more than six thousand years, «that is to say, from times that decidedly pre-date any age known to 'classical' history»³. This means that this low-

² See Guénon, 1927, above all chap. I. For a development of this topic see also Guénon, 1982.

³ Guénon, 1927, p. 25.

visibility regime has always been with us and that today's scenery of the world is, so to speak, a primitive residue and not at all the result of a particular period of decadence. Far from being static, however, this millenarian half-light has changed over time because of small, constant variations of intensity. Thus, when a 'downward' trend prevailed, dangerously speeding up the darkening of the world, an 'upward' counter-trend intervened and was ready to momentarily compensate for the previous fall, and re-establish a certain balance. Viṣṇu's *avatāra* has precisely this decelerating function and acts as a slight, partial brightening up of the framework, similar to the advent of Christianity in Europe, at least during the early Middle Ages. Already with the Renaissance, however, the dense haze of Modernism begins to thicken, an era in which no counter-balancing appears to be possible, where darkness thus intensifies unchallenged, and of which the current historical period would constitute, *a fortiori*, the epicentre of darkness. In the cool-headed estimation of Guénon, which admits of no feelings of discomfort, even a similar situation, however distressing and senseless, must possess characteristics and develop possibilities which, even if of inferior status, may allow it to re-enter the aggregate order of all things, «into this order which, according to a Far-Eastern formula, is the sum of all disorders»⁴.

The fact that tradition attributes to the *kali yuga* the specific trait of using «what was neglected or rejected during the course of the preceding phases»⁵ makes once and for all clear, as Guénon stresses, how the very waste and the residual are the elective ciphers of the modern era, the elements that characterise it, the only standard by which it must abide, its bizarre 'truth' to bring to fulfilment. Thus, the *obscurity* of the world today is defined by the «indefinite multitude of insignificant details», the «fragmented pictures» and, as a consequence, we might add, the diminutive scale of things, the infantile states, the babbling, the syncopation, the hidden anomalies. To set oneself as a target the task of *detailling the darkness* might appear only as a way to consolidate it analytically. According to Guénon, in fact, any phenomenon is by definition «the ambit of the transitory and of the manifold, subject to continuous and indefinite modifications»⁶

⁴ Guénon, 1927, p. 38.

⁵ Guénon, 1927, p. 39.

⁶ Guénon, 1931, p. 48.

and it is typical of «lay science» to wander through «the detail of phenomena»⁷, without ever unravelling them. And yet, it is precisely among the «infinitesimal quantities» of a continuous series of centrifugal variations, when «their point of dispersion»⁸ is at its highest, as with utmost tension in a rope, that the «*passage to the limit*» can be reached, this *special passage* which, although undistinguishable from the last stage of the series, is, in actual fact, external to it and, from this ectopic position, able to suddenly arrest the whole series of intermediate variations, making it go —discontinuously— from a «state of motion» to the higher mode of a «state of rest»⁹. In this way, the «breaking» of a rope will always be an effect «of a completely different nature from the preceding one»¹⁰. Darkness, therefore, evokes the era of waste in which we live, but it is not entirely devoid of purpose, since every «passage» —from one cycle to the next, from one state to another— «can only be achieved in darkness»¹¹. At the same time, darkness is not merely to be acknowledged and contemplated, but to be *detailed* as much as possible, in order to be brought closer to reaching its own breaking point, its own *limit*, and to remain hovering over «the surface of the Waters», on the threshold between form and informal. This threshold, an almost invisible *ruin* point, to which all forms are traceable and from which all originate, is exceptionally brought to light through the work of the Japanese architect Arata Isozaki. Marked as he was by the memory of the destruction of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, bombed in 1945, but also by the particular sense of fleetingness which characterises Japanese culture (where, for instance, the Temple of Ise has been cyclically taken down and reconstructed since the VIIIth Century), Isozaki makes the *ruin* the privileged 'locale' from which existing cities and those yet to be planned should be viewed. This is what he wrote as a commentary to one visionary project from 1962 he called *Future City (The Incubation Process)*, next to a photographic composite where motorways ran among some Doric columns presumed to be the remains of an ancient Greek city, and the columns themselves were used as

⁷ Guénon, 1946, p. 188. I owe Ruggero Aloria the notice of this important guénonian notion.

⁸ Guénon, 1931, p. 91.

⁹ Guénon, 1946, p. 195.

¹⁰ Guénon, 1946, p. 108.

¹¹ Guénon, 1927, p. 39.

uprights for hanging galleries which, in turn, had fallen down at one point along their way (and thus exemplified in this project the dynamic meaning of a *ruin*):

Incubated cities are destined to self-destruct / Ruins are the style of our future cities / Future cities are themselves ruins / Our contemporary cities, for this reason, are destined to live only a fleeting moment. / Give up their energy and return to inert material / All of our proposal and efforts will be buried / And once again the incubation mechanism is reconstituted / This will be the future¹².

Putting oneself in the raw material complex structure of wreckage and rubble, it is possible to observe every single thing because «this is the last stage before disappearance»¹³.

3. «Maybe we are *here* to tell» things, to name them and to celebrate them, because «Here is the time of the utterable, here is its home» and, maybe, disappearing within our own words is precisely the silent appeal the Earth makes to us: «Earth, is it not this that thou willst, invisible / In us to be reborn? —Is this not thy dream, / To be one day invisible? —The Earth! Invisible!»¹⁴ Since the early 1900s, Rilke's poetic vision has become paradoxically prophetic, a programme, as it were, that the last century followed with care and, in the end, carried out. Today, in an about-turn, we are instead experiencing its consequences, under the distorting and traumatic burden exerted on language by the Earth which, by vanishing materially, took refuge in it, «a strange behavioural disturbance which compels us to transform all feelings into words», according to the recently deceased German writer W. G. Sebald¹⁵.

Thus, the most urgent task proves to be inquiring into the significance of remaining «prisoners of a world of words»¹⁶ and of the regime of minimum, residual visibility which this world establishes, in spite of itself, once its «names» penetrate the inner nature of things.

¹² Isozaki, 2006, pp. 87–88.

¹³ Isozaki, 2006, p. 100.

¹⁴Rilke, «The Ninth Elegy», («Erde, ist es nicht dies, was du willst: *unsichtbar* / in uns erstehen? —Ist es dein Traum nicht, / einmal *unsichtbar* zu sein?— Erde! *Unsichtbar!*»).

¹⁵ Sebald, 1998.

¹⁶ Sebald, 1998, p. 13.

A *world of words*, or, why not, a *Bleistiftgebiet*, a *pencilled world*¹⁷, is posited on an unresolvable, fundamental ambiguity. This is, as the emblematic title of one of Sebald's poems reads, *Nach der Natur*, *After Nature*, with the double meaning of the equivalent prepositions, *nach* and *after*, or better, of a world which crops up in the phase that follows the destruction of Nature, temporally speaking, *after* Nature has become «invisible», while we still suffer under the confused process of its 'digestion' and, simultaneously, of a world which, unable to avoid being part of it nonetheless, accommodates itself within Nature and follows, *under* Nature, the process of dissolution to which Nature is subjected in such a way that «It is not primarily that we destroy nature, but that nature, using us as one of its agents, destroys itself»¹⁸. These cases are indicative both of the destruction and of the effective demise of Nature, the earth, water and air and of the crisis and radical laceration of our language, of the gaps in our historical memory, of the disorders of our perceptive faculties and of our narrative abilities. That is to say, the description of nature and the earth undergoing decomposition implies the decomposition of the description itself, following in this the circuitous route already described which finds here its definitive focus, how the fragmentation of knowledge generates darkness, but darkness, in turn, is detailed in the words which reflect it, with the purpose of accounting for the residues that now dwell in it and confer on it a new unit of measurement on the threshold of another cycle. In this sense, we could certainly consider the *nach der Natur*, the *after nature*, as the silent magnet which moves every image of the contemporary world along this ambiguous, circuitous road, from Viṣṇu's tiny sphere to the ocean 'coloured' by noise, from the 'passage to the limit' of the *kali yuga* to the ruined *future city*, from advertising signs to every single word of ours.

Thus, it is as if every word we utter, every image of today's world, were subject to the attraction of a secret gravitational force the formula of which would read: «All was greyness, without direction, / with no above or below, nature / in a process of dissolution, in a state / of pure dementia»¹⁹. Inasmuch as they are moved to reflect their own object with increasingly meticulous detail and, there-

¹⁷ Expression which defines the legacy of Robert Walser, who wrote it by micro hand with pencil, almost unreadable.

¹⁸ Bond, 2004, p. 34.

¹⁹ Sebald, 2002, p. 56.

fore, forced to run through and combine all the usual expressive registers —historical document, academic essay, narrative fiction, biography, photography, or film shoot— these images of the world still manage to contain a core of small «patches of fog that no eye can dissipate»²⁰, minute regions of emptiness and whiteness where states of vertigo and dizziness can be experienced, where «you no longer know if your own eye can still see and if your own hand can still move»²¹, if one is moving forward or if one is already coming back.

It is in these small residual spaces, that Sebald and us put our hopes,: the hope that they may concentrate the nature of everything that is; that they may gather piecemeal what passes and seems to be lost, as the Earth, which has become invisible in words and in images; and that they may, through breaking down words and images and re-proposing this nature now departed and lost to our eye, herald a change in perception, a change in our way of thinking.

A way of thinking, precisely *nach der Natur*, after Nature, free from the presupposition of nature as the source, the backdrop, or as an inexhaustible resource, the fuel for infinite interpretations and manipulations, as it has been hitherto, but which, in view of its depletion and decay into the remains which characterise it today, may adapt to these very same, uncommon characteristics —depletion, extinction and remains— and to the *new life* which may be drawn from them. Maybe it will be a form of thought which goes towards things, instead of distancing itself from them and forever going on to seek new ones, a form of thought that expresses itself through the creation of special geographical maps charting the invisible and the formless, a thought-atlas of 'still life', after nature. As Sebald wrote:

Now I Know, as with a crane's eye
 One surveys his far-flung realm,
 a truly Asiatic spectacle,
 and slowly learns, from the tininess
 of the figures and the incomprehensible
 beauty of nature that vaults over them,

²⁰ «Und manchen Nebelflecken löset kein Auge auf», a Jean-Paul statement, quoted in Sebald, 1992.

²¹ Sebald, 1998, p. 146.

to see that side of life that
one could not see before²².

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²² Sebald, 2002, p. 112, poem 98.

