

The body wounded by History: Elsa Morante, between western and oriental spirituality.

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In her *Cahiers*, Simone Weil wrote that: «To explain suffering is to console it; therefore it must not be explained. Whence the eminent value of the suffering of the innocent» (Weil 1985: 154).

The fact that suffering can be neither justified nor redressed, especially in relation to the innocent, corresponds for Weil to the idea that «we must leave on one side the beliefs which fill up voids and sweeten what is bitter», like that – for example – of the immortality of the soul or divine providence, «in short, the consolations which are ordinarily sought in religion» (*Ibid*: 37-38). In proximity of the extreme, Weil notes, it is necessary «not to lie, and to survive in a state of non-hope» (*Ibid*: 43)¹, given that «the contemplation of human suffering is the only source of supernatural happiness» (*Ibid*: 158)², that can only be attained by renouncing «the work of the imagination that fills up the voids and the fissures» (Weil 1982: 397-398). According to Weil, «the proper method of philosophy consists in clearly conceiving the insoluble problems in all their insolubility and then in simply contemplating them, fixedly and tirelessly, year after year, without any hope, patiently waiting» (Weil 1993: 363).

The existence of a principle of consolation within a doctrine is, for René Guénon, that which distinguishes western religions – the three great monotheistic religions – from the metaphysics of Hinduism,

¹ My translation.

² My translation.

Taoism and the extra-religious, esoteric aspects of Islam. If, as Guénon asserts, the religious point of view «implies essentially the intervention of a sentimental element, the metaphysical point of view is exclusively intellectual» (Guénon 2005: 78). Thus metaphysics is fundamentally the «knowledge of the universal, or, if preferred, the knowledge of the principles belonging to the universal order» (*Ibid*: 79), from the moment it «depends on pure intellect, whose dominion is universal» (*Ibid*: 84). In Guénon's opinion, the end – intended as a conclusion or final aim – of *Veda*, that is the traditional knowledge *par excellence* of Hindu, is to be found in the *Upanishad*, the very name of which suggests those who are «destined to destroy ignorance, root of illusions that relegates being to existence within conditioned confines, and who manage this by formulating a way to get closer to the knowledge of *Brahma* [the Absolute Impersonal]» (*Ibid*: 198). This is purely metaphysical knowledge, whose final aim is 'liberation', «in that the being that emerges is freed from the ties of conditioned existence [...] through a perfect identification with the Universal» (*Ibid*: 201)³.

As Giancarlo Gaeta has noted, Weil's philosophy

finds its inspiration in "Greek sources" (Platonic and Stoic) in order to formulate a better understanding of the Christian mysteries, particularly the mystery of the Cross. To Greek sources of inspiration, she unites Hindu philosophy, creating a subtle and delicate thread running through her work. From the third Notebook on, it is possible to follow a rapid process of assimilation of some essential themes in the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*, that flow organically into her writing that seems to feed on this vital sap. Weil's first meeting with Hindu thought dates back to the Spring of 1940 with her reading of the *Gita*, which as she herself confessed, left an indelible mark on her mind. But it was from early 1941, when [...] she started studying

³ My translation.

Sanskrit, that spiritual Hindu texts became for her a primary source of inspiration (Weil 1985: 14-15)⁴.

It is known that Weil began to translate some passages from both the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads*, that, as Gaeta notes, concerned «the markedly Weilian theme of ‘desire without an object’ that is, the painful renunciation of all objects of desire (eating, watching) through a process of ‘going down into self’, to the sources of desire, to annihilate every veil of the imagination and to produce that void that God alone can fill» (Weil 1985: 17). Going down into self, to the sources of desire is, for Weil, a process of «stripping the object of its energy». She goes on, «desire is true, it is energy. It is the object that can be false» (*Ibid*: 117)⁵.

One of the passages that she translated from the *Upanishad* that had most impact on her reflections on Hindu philosophy, is that referring to the image of two birds. «Two birds, inseparably united companions, are in the same tree. One eats the fruit of the tree, and the other watches without eating» (*Ibid*: 339).

The question of ascetic renunciation, that characterizes Hindu spirituality, is returned to by Simone Weil repeatedly in her *Cahiers*, underlining the concept of *Atman*, direct experience of which leads to mystical exaltation. The *Atman* is the real Self, the subjective pole of reality, originating from the Universal Spirit (*Brahman*). From Simone Weil’s translation of the passage from the *Upanishad*, a description of the experience of *Atman* can be found that leads to a mystical state:

and it is this state that lies beyond all desire, that abolishes evil, in which there is no fear. Like he who held by a loved woman knows nothing else, neither within or without, so the spirit, held by the spiritual *Atman*, knows nothing else, neither within or without. It is a state in which desire is placated, in which one

⁴ My translation.

⁵ My translation.

desires nothing more than Atman, in which there is no desire; a state beyond affliction. (Ibid: 342)⁶

It is affliction, for Weil, that leads to the necessity of «decreation», *disparaître*, accepting the void that pain has created: «To accept a void in ourselves is supernatural. [...] Yet first there must be a tearing out, something desperate has to take place, the void must be created» (Weil 1982: 384). This void is compared by Weil to the «dark night» (*Ibid*: 384) that produces «anguish, a desperate revolt» which then gives way to 'acceptance' that derives from a process of 'fragmentation' and the «breaking up of time» (*Ibid*: 386). It is due to these limitations imposed on the self, then, «that *Atman* can be found» (Weil 1985: 143), the transcendental self. From Weil's translation of the *Upanishad* we read:

In he who is born, Atman is awoken,
In this clay [the body] buried impenetrably,
He is the creator of all; He has made all things:
The World is his; He is the World.

Alessandro Dal Lago notes that in Weil, there is without a doubt

the memory of a philosophy that renounces the supremacy of the subject that derives, filtered through Schopenhauer and perhaps Goethe, from the Upanishad [...]. The style, on closer inspection, is similar to that return of qualitative philosophies of knowledge, expressed by Bergson or Simmel [...]. The label of mysticism used by rationalist critics to describe these philosophical tendencies [...] do not do justice to their dominant reasoning, that is overcoming instrumental knowledge, thus the de-powering of the subject, the subject's succumbing to the real, de-construction [...] The abandoning to the real also means accepting that balance and harmony are reestablished to the

⁶ My translation.

detriment of man's position in the universe. [...] Succumbing to the real also implies succumbing to its most terrible aspect. (Dal Lago 1983: 109-110)⁷

Dal Lago notes that for this reason the philosophy of Weil, while «out of date in its terminology, deliberately foreign to contemporary philosophical culture, aimed at an archaic order rather than an apology for modern disorder, is seen as a contemporary expression of nihilism» (Dal Lago 1983: 115)

In reality, in Simone Weil, the idea of the need to 'decreate', to renounce gravity, emerges from the knowledge that a wound that can never heal has been inflicted by history on the human world, through irreversible and unstoppable violence. Dal Lago illustrates Weil's notion of 'force' in the following way:

The element that introduces a break into any state of equilibrium, physical, social, human, is *force*. Force is typically irreversible. [...] In the exaggerated use of force there is a precipitation [...] that goes beyond human control, that escapes the laws of gravity. The concept of irreversible force, like that of *pesanteur*, [...] necessity, destiny, does not refer only to the impossibility of controlling the effects of force, but to the illusion of controlling it. Force is irretrievable. (*Ibid*: 96)

Weil refers to the notion of force as irreversible action, as something that introduces excess of the unlimited, when she speaks about the extermination of a race: «There is something infinite about the extermination of a whole race. In a certain sense, it is true, it may appear as a disinterested act as: there is no booty, no slaves, no subjects, no coercion. But there is a sort of omnipotence, the destruction in an instant of accumulated centuries» (Weil 1982: 316)⁸.

In the last years of her life, until her death in 1943, Weil reflected at length on the war and on what was happening to the Jews.

⁷ My translation.

⁸ My translation.

Being Jewish herself by birth, if not a practicing one, she felt personally involved in what was happening, as can be seen in the following passage from *Cahiers*: «A man whose family has died under torture and who himself has been tortured for a long time in a concentration camp. [...] I have not been through such things but I know, however, that they exist; so what is the difference? It is, or must, or should be the same thing» (Weil 1988: 110).

The biographical element of Weil inherent in the idea of the sacrifice of innocent victims, surfaces in this portrait in Elsa Morante's *Il Mondo Salvato dai ragazzini*:

Sorelluccia inviolata
ultima colomba dei diluvi stroncata
bellezza del Cantico dei Cantici camuffata in quei [...] buffi
occhiali da scolara miope
[...]
Lo so
che per una ragazza partita dall'ordalia della Croce
e approdata sola alla colpa delirante dell'esilio
è un orrido labirinto spinato il lettuccio straniero d'ospedale
dove il suo piccolo corpo ebreo si lascia
alla febbre suicida
per consumare in se stesso l'intera strage dei lager. (Morante
2003: 142, 144)⁹

⁹ «Inviolated maid / last dove struck down by the deluge / beauty of the Song of Songs hidden behind those myopic schoolgirl's / silly spectacles [...] I know / that for a girl gone to be judged before the Cross / and disembarked alone to the dizzying shock of exile / the alien bed of the hospital is a hideous thorny maze / where her little Jewish body lets / the fever suicide / burn up in itself all the slaughter of the camps». Translation: Mariangela Palladino and Patrick Hart, *Joker*, 2007: 27, 29.

The centrality of the figure of Simone Weil and her philosophy to Elsa Morante in the 1960s and 1970s, is discussed by Cesare Garboli and, more recently Concetta D'Angeli, who have researched into the importance of Weil's life and the key themes present in *Cahiers* on Morante's novel *History*.

In *History*, it is the figure of little Useppe who most clearly represents the theme of the innocent victim. «The evil of the world that accumulates in the body of Useppe, does not return o the world in contagious form [...], [but] remains within him and destroys his body, [even though] it does not cancel his innocence. [...] It is Useppe, whose body becomes a bloody text on which history leaves its scandalous trace» (D'Angeli 2003: 94)¹⁰.

The story of little Useppe, child of a rape, the violence of a German soldier on a poor Roman woman, who dies from repeated epileptic fits – the *Grande Male* – that began after having seen photos of German concentration camps at the end of the war, recalls for Morante the sacrifice of innocent victims. When Ida Ramundo, the child's mother, returns home to find her son dead, Morante writes:

They say that in certain crucial moments, a man's whole life passes before his eyes with incredible speed. Now, in the prosaic and stunted mind of that poor woman, as she was running like mad towards her house, the history of mankind (History), passed before her eyes, a multiplying spiral of endless deaths. Today, the last of those deaths had occurred, that of her own little bastard son, Useppe. The whole history of mankind, the nations of the world, had got together and decided the end: the murder of the innocent child Useppe Ramundo. (Morante 2003: 1018)¹¹

For Morante, the absolute innocence of little Useppe, the total and unjustifiable violence of human history that the mother Ida perceives as «a multiplying spiral of endless deaths», is denied even the privilege

¹⁰ My translation.

¹¹ My translation.

of becoming the intellectual experience of decreation, the absolute abandon to necessity through affliction. Weil writes:

Sometimes external violence creates a void. Sudden death [...] absence of one we love, sudden loss of something to which our thoughts of the future were linked [...] There is a void because in the soul there is energy without direction. [...] Grace fills empty spaces but it can only enter where there is a void to receive it. [...] Affliction in itself is not enough. Unconsoled affliction is necessary. [...] Ineffable consolation then comes down. (Weil 1985: 107-108, 129)

Ida's experience is «unconsoled affliction», as Morante's description at the end of the novel, after Useppe's death, confirms:

Ida emitted a low and bestial moan: she no longer wanted to belong to the human race. [..] She began to nod her small white head in silence and here the miracle began. The smile, that she had been waiting hopelessly to find on Useppe's face, appeared now on hers. Looking at it, it was no different to that peaceful smile of marveled ingenuity that used to appear on the child's face after days of hysterical attacks. But today, there was no hysteria: Reason, which up till now her thick and fearing mind had with so much difficulty given space, had finally let go of its grip. (Morante 2003: 1018-1019)¹²

Ida's madness, however, does not appear to allow her even the «ineffable consolation» of one who manages to experience the intellectual annihilation of self, decreation. The smile that miraculously appears on her face seems rather to resemble that cessation of affliction due to an abandon of consciousness. Indeed, the nine years following Useppe's death pass «in a flash», as Morante says, given that «she died together with her little lad Useppe»:

¹² My translation.

She was seated, her hands that were folded on her knees, moved sometimes in a playful gesture; her face lit with the surprised and lost expression of the newly woken, of one who does not recognize what she sees. Speaking to her, she smiled softly and ingenuously, a serene smile, almost grateful; but you had to wait for her reply, in fact she seemed to barely understand voices, or language, or even words. Sometimes, in a dreamy murmur, she repeated syllables uncertainly to herself, words that seemed plucked from some dream language, half-forgotten. (*Ibid*: 1020)¹³.

The theme of the human attempt to annihilate existence was explored by Morante in 1965, in a conference paper she wrote entitled *For or Against the Atomic Bomb*. Here she underlined that it is possible to

read the sacred scriptures of all the religions, not just Indian religions, and find that they teach the annihilation of being as the only possible path to beatitude. Indeed some psychologists talk of the 'Nirvana instinct' in man. But while the Nirvana promised by religions is attained through contemplation, renunciation, universal piety, and through the unification of conscience, its surrogate middle-class version, malign in the extreme, is achieved through the disintegration of conscience through injustice and organized madness. (*Ibid*: 1541)¹⁴

The historical and absolute evil of the Second World War takes shape in the novel *History* as a wound that will not heal, that annihilates and disintegrates being without offering any form of consolation, not even 'ineffable consolation', that intellectual and spiritual process explicated in Hindu thought and explored by Weil.

¹³ My translation.

¹⁴ My translation.

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