

Like Water in Water

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Published in *Hermeneutic Circular*, October 2017, pp. 13-15

To my mother

Come from forever, and you will go everywhere

(Arthur Rimbaud)

Between religion and secularism

At eighteen, one of my favourite novels was Pasolini's *Teorema*. I remember reading some of it in a hospital room during visits to my mother. It must have been January or February. A lukewarm sun through the window made me wary as I'd heard that sunrays through glass give you cancer, and that cancer kills you – both sayings accepted as gospel.

As soon as my mother, exhausted from her illness, would fall asleep, I'd go back to the book and learn of Angelo – a handsome and mysterious stranger who shows up from nowhere into a middle-class Milanese household. He spends his time moving about freely, reading Rimbaud and seducing first Emilia, the maid, and then each of the self-absorbed family members: son, mother, daughter, and finally the factory-owning father. They are all deeply affected by the encounter and undergo a sexual and emotional awakening, for the Visitor's seduction has poignant undertones: he saves Emilia from a suicide attempt, comforts the son Pietro, acknowledges and reaffirms the perturbed longings of the mother Lucia, helps the daughter Odetta overcome her timidity towards men, and cares for the father Paolo when he is ill. When he unexpectedly leaves, they are left bereft and go through a transformation that, apart from the maid's, is devastating. The son grows into a tormented, self-belittling artist. The mother tries in vain to repeat her experience with the Stranger by having sex with young men. The daughter becomes catatonic and is taken away. The father runs naked into a train station and then relinquishes his factory. The maid, who had not partaken of the family's elegant neuroses, goes back to her hometown and becomes a saint-like figure, performing miracles.

In my youth, I now realize, I detected one aspect only of the parable, namely the liberating and disruptive presence of eros but did not know what to make of the maid's peculiar

trajectory. Why is Emilia the only one who does not get destroyed by the Visitation but rises instead to spiritual heights? There is no easy answer, I suspect, to this simple question. A novelist, poet, essayist and filmmaker, Pasolini was forever poised at the cusp of religion and secularism, reluctant to join either. He pushed the boundaries of orthodoxy and upset many people on both sides of the ideological divide. Originally conceived for the stage, *Teorema* was made into a film in 1968, with Terence Stamp in the leading role. On his release, the Catholic Church took umbrage at the sex and got mad at Emilia's dubious and 'impure' source of sainthood. People on the orthodox Left allied to the PCI, the Italian Communist Party, whose cause Pasolini ambivalently espoused, disliked the Biblical imagery interspersed in the film as well as the divine whiff radiating from the Visitor. Pasolini's ambivalence towards secularism is evident in his tribute to Antonio Gramsci, a key European intellectual of the twentieth century and founder of the PCI. *Gramsci's Ashes*, Pasolini's matchless poem (Pasolini, 1957) is fierce and tender, poised between religion and engaged secularism.

*The shame of contradicting myself, of being
with you and against you; with you in my heart,
in truth, against you in my dark inmost feelings.*

Emanation and Immanation

An updated version of the 'theorem' presented in the novel could be posed as follows: 'Can someone who has fully bought into the neoliberal values of status, self-identity, wealth and property really ever want freedom? Isn't it more likely that he or she would dread it as one dreads failure, catastrophe, or a fall from grace?' Conversely: 'What does it really take to become freer, or, if you prefer, more congruent, more creative and individuated?'

Emilia too experiences a crisis after meeting the Visitor. Unlike the rest of the bourgeois family, however (to whom she does not belong), her crisis is not a fall but an opening onto *a more expansive way of being*. Several readings emerge: even before 'the poor will inherit the earth' to which Pasolini certainly subscribed, the most immediate interpretation is that, unlike the others, Emilia succeeded in working through the transference: though affected and mesmerized by her contact with Angelo, she comes to realize that the same numinous power emanating from the Visitor is also present within her. This ushers in another reading whose implications are, I believe, significant for the existential practitioner. The family members experience *emanation*: their emotional/sexual awakening – is born out of a separate cause, namely the luminous 'presence' of the Stranger. They see themselves as separate from

Angelo in a hierarchical setting of cause *over* effect. Emilia, on the other hand, experiences *immanation* – a non-hierarchical *co-existence* of cause and effect. For her, Angelo's angelic (and daimonic?) glow does not turn into an aura (the latter needs distance and separation) but is apprehended instead as *remaining within* the very same world they both (and everyone else) inhabit. A slight correction is then needed to the statement made earlier: her 'ascension' is an opening onto a more expansive way of being *in the world* – a thoroughly existential statement. What makes this possible? In one word: *affect*. Emilia's implicit understanding is that, affected, she can affect others, affect the world and – wait for this – affect God, who partakes of the same world and who affects and *is affected* by his 'creation'. Or, in the words of Gilles Deleuze (1990):

God produces an infinity of things which affect him in an infinity of ways" (p. 102).

Immanence and Transcendence

Emilia's meeting with the Stranger can be read in many ways: as meeting with the other, god, eros, soul, the existential unconscious, spirit, actualization and so forth – depending on one's worldview. Whatever it may be, what matters is that it prompted in her the realization that she is made of the same stuff as the Beautiful Stranger; and it is here that things start to get interesting. She is made of the very same stuff: like water in water, she is part of the same reality, of the same world.

The ancient word used by philosophers and theologians alike to describe this across the ages is *immanence*, whose Latin origin means *remaining within*, i.e. within this world. And what is the enemy of immanence? What is the opposite of remaining within this world? The answer is *transcendence*, a word whose meaning is to climb (*scandere*) over (*trans*). Whether dealing with a particular religion, a philosophical system, an aesthetic, a way of practising therapy, the fundamental question is not whether these are secular or religious but whether they are immanent or transcendent. The fundamental opposition is between remaining within our everyday, imperfect world and attempting to climb over it. Religion (as well as theology and spirituality in general) has long been associated with transcendence: God and the divine have long been linked with otherworldliness and the eternal, i.e. with a dimension beyond the everyday, separate from the impermanent world of phenomena. But this categorization is too simplistic: it does not recognize the presence of religious instances that are free from transcendence. It also wrongly assumes that a secular worldview – at times characterized, for instance, by excessive trust in science and/or logical reason – is automatically free of

transcendental or metaphysical claims. A case in point is existential phenomenology, whose avowed secularism is infused with (often unchecked) transcendental beliefs.

For instance, phenomenology thinks of experience in relation to ‘presence’ (Derrida, 1989) and in so doing fails to think experience. But experience is more than presence. Presence emerges on account of ‘absence’: something becomes present to experience because linked to its previous absence. Similarly, the ‘needle’ in the compass of the phenomenological investigation (description, horizon-making, bracketing) points unerringly to the north of the Subject. The transcendental presence of the Cartesian self surveys the unfolding of experience; the self, a mere construct, is confirmed as ‘really’ existing; in the process, the intolerable exuberance of the world is made to fit within geometrical outlines.

The Post-secular Condition

In a witty appendix to a recent paper, Spinelli (2017) assured his readers that despite the lengthy discussion of controversial biblical themes, he hasn’t “in his old age turned to religion” (p. 299). The problem, however, lies not with religion but with transcendence: the two are not necessarily synonymous. It is enriching when existential practice draws from outside its frame – from artists and thinkers whose work manages to *re-express* our being-in – the-world. Where I draw the line is with narratives that ask me to climb over, or transcend, the world. I honour, with Levinas (2003), our profound human need for escape. What is objectionable is not the flight from the world *per se* but the looking down on the world from on high, its categorization as *evil*. For transcendental thinkers like Thomas Aquinas, in whose reflections Aristotle, Plato and Christianity all converged, the world is good and true not in essence, but only *indirectly*, by “analogical participation” (Barber, 2010, p. 431) in a transcendent God. For transcendentalists of all persuasions, this world is not good enough: too imperfect and samsaric; an unfair world of blood, sweat and tears. This world is too much to bear: it is “too unjust”, yes, but at times “also too beautiful” (Deleuze, 1989, p. 18).

What I am effectively advocating is *immanent spirituality*: a mode of being in the world that surpasses the obsolete division between religion and secularism. Does immanent spirituality imply passive acceptance of the world? No. Transformation is possible without resorting to transcendence. As with Emilia, the maid in Pasolini’s *Teorema* (1992) who recognizes her own creative participation in the world of the Stranger, transformation comes not from comforting representations of transcendence but from a worldly concrete perception of an *outside* that challenges and disrupts what Deleuze calls *diagram*, our “fixed set of relations that determine the world” (Barber, 2014, p. 47).

In short, the time-honoured conflict between religion and secularism has become obsolete. Espousing the latter is no guarantee of open-mindedness. *Laïcité* is now synonymous in France with accepted forms of Islamophobia that ignore the shadowy backdrop of colonial France and the Algerian war of independence. In the US, ‘new atheism’ has almost become synonymous with the ‘alt right’ that helped the emergence of Trump (Torres, 2017). And in the UK, secularism is strongly associated with the thriving ‘god delusion’ industry after the book of the same name (Dawkins, 2006) by a man whose knowledge of theology is, in Terry Eagleton’s words, akin to that of someone “holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject is the *Book of British Birds*” (Eagleton, 2006, p. 32).

More importantly perhaps, the conflict between religion and secularism ignores the underlying *continuity* between the two and their shared concern in preserving the status quo. For Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo (2004), secularism in the West represents an essential *working through* of religion and of Christianity in particular. The very future of transcendental narratives in the West depends on a “secularization of the sacred” (Zabala, 2004, p. 2). The merit of some of the most intelligent sectors of secularism consists in recognizing that, when push comes to shove, we are in fact very attached to the transcendental tales we grew up with *despite* our existentialism or whatever brand of secularism we may be endorsing. The deeper aspect of this attachment consists in realizing that religion has been, rightly or wrongly, at the heart of civilization in the western world. The problem with this stance is that it implies, alongside a surpassing of Christianity, the preservation of the old order.

Difference is a fence

A philosophy of immanence (and an existential therapeutic practice that was to draw from it) would, on the other hand, advocate decolonization of transcendental narratives because they may hinder the therapeutic process. Until that happens, our existential phenomenological practice will be ensnared within the bounds of transcendence. But disentangling from a bimillennial tradition that posits unity before difference (and infinity before the finite) is a difficult process. Transcendence is so deeply embedded in our way of thinking; it is present the moment we say that unity comes *before* difference. Immanence, on the other hand, is affirmation of difference. ‘Affirmation of difference’ means we cannot conceive the new, emergent phenomenon *before* it happens.

If in therapy we are too fixated on a notion of self, person or subject, we will interpret the emergent phenomenon in terms of the existing characteristics of that self. Unity may or may not “imply singularity” (Spinelli, 2017, p. 296), but it will certainly introduce transcendence, confirmed by those “many traditions that point out the unity of polarities ... how contrast and contradiction may be ... a necessary aspect of unity as ... sameness and accord” (Spinelli, *ibid.*). Embracing contradictions and paradoxes is a chosen trope within transcendental narratives, a point stressed by Derrida (1982). This is a shrewd operation in that it misnames *discontinuities* by calling them ‘contraries’, then “lumps them together in a ‘mystical unity’” (Bazzano, 2017, p. 122).

Ernesto Spinelli’s cogently argued critique of some recent scribbling of mine rightly points at my “insistence in favour of difference and fragmentation and the modern ontological condition of exile” (Spinelli, 2017, p. 296). My stance on this occasion was defensive, and literally so: it aimed at affirming what is often forgotten and neglected in the name of generalities – the ‘ontic’, in Heidegger’s parlance; the particular, the existent, e.g. *you and me and them and how we all affect one another*. Affirmation of difference is an antidote to the transcendental narratives that constantly overrun existential phenomenology. I do recognize, however, that it is only a temporary fence; it works at keeping transcendence out for a while (Barber, 2014). What is really needed – and what existential phenomenology patently lacks – is a coherent philosophy of immanence.

A sad and beautiful world

Relatedness is not enough. Immanence is more than relatedness: within the counter-traditional philosophy of Spinoza, Nietzsche, Deleuze and others, immanence is *differential*. It is not immanence *in relation to* a thing or an object, nor is it immanence between one thing and another, one person and another. This is because “before there are things there are differences” (Barber, 2014, p. 16). Even to say ‘immanence’, as if it were a ‘thing’, is inaccurate. If one accepts that difference is prior to things, then one can say that every time there is a thing, this has been formed and informed by difference. Immanence is “like water in water” (Bataille, 1992, p. 12). Not only eating ice cream in the sun, feeling smugly ‘one with all things’. It is also akin to the eater and the eaten, the animal who devours and the one who is devoured (Bataille, *ibid.*).

A rivulet of immanent thought mercifully runs through existential phenomenology alongside other strands. What interests me most, when testing a mode of thought, is whether it upholds the world or attempts to bypass it. Existential phenomenology has appropriated Nietzsche, the

most prominent thinker of immanence, but has strangely relegated the latter to cameo appearances. The reasons for underscoring immanent thought are not merely theoretical but go at the very heart of our practice as existential therapists. Therapeutic healing and change belongs to the very same world where anguish and distress emerge. We suffer because the world is too much for us. 'It is a sad and beautiful world' a character played by Tom Waits in Jarmusch's *Down by Law* says. The world *is* intolerable. The immanent perspective reminds us that it is only via an encounter with the intolerable nature of the world (*and* its tremendous beauty) that healing can emerge. It is this world of trees and animals and humans and joys and sorrow.

My mother died of breast cancer in that same hospital room in March in the early hours of the morning, six days before my nineteenth birthday. I was away at University when it happened. Strangely for me, I woke up at the very same time she died, at around 5am, in my student's cell. She was religious, though not overtly so. She was bold, and at home with the things of the world, and taught me swimming when I was little. She swam far, so far from the shore. My father told me that she had sat up in bed and that before breathing her last in his arms looked out of the window and said 'Trees, trees!'

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