

## The Geopolitics of Nihilism

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Abstract: Nietzsche, who defined nihilism as “the most unwelcome guest”, traced its origin to Socratic intellectual ethics and Platonic idealism. In the works of some contemporary Italian philosophers, the arcane of nihilism can also be found in the theoretical and geopolitical structure of the Mediterranean: the proximity of the One and the Many, land and sea, the city and the archipelago. Perhaps nihilism is too ingrained in the Mediterranean’s inner structure to be eradicated, yet in the history of Mediterranean civilizations it is possible to distinguish between active and passive nihilism. The active nihilism of Italian Renaissance, with its emphasis on *fortuna*, had had the same energizing effects that the doctrine of Grace would have on the Protestant Reformation. Conversely, the passive nihilism of today’s political, economic, or religious fundamentalism, which reduces human activity to the fulfillment of a totally transcendent and already perfected “plan”, turns the world, veritably, into nothing.

Keywords: Cacciari, fortune, geopolitics, Mediterranean, nihilism, Severino.

There is a sense in which fortune and skill are concerned with the same things, as Agathon says:  
“Skill loved fortune, and fortune skill”.

Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 4, 1140a, 19-20

### 1. *A problem for geophilosophers*

It was November 26, 1881 when Nietzsche saw Celestine Galli-Marié in the Carmen role at the Teatro Paganini in Genova. In the following years, Bizet’s opera haunted him like an African wind over the waves of the Mediterranean Sea.

In 1886, he declared that the South was to him «an immense school for convalescence»; that he was southern «not by descent but by *belief*», and he dreamed about music «being redeemed from the north»<sup>1</sup>.

On May 17, 1888, while living in Turin, Nietzsche had the chance to listen to his fifth *Carmen* at the Teatro Carignano. Moved by neo-Dionysian enthusiasm, he then wrote that he had listened to Bizet's opera *twenty* times, and that Bizet's southern music had definitely healed him from the last symptoms of Wagnerism: «This music is cheerful; but not with a French or German cheerfulness. Its cheerfulness is African [...] *Il faut méditerraniser la musique*: I have reasons for this formula»<sup>2</sup>.

Perhaps Nietzsche never saw *Carmen* twenty times; he nonetheless owned the complete score and annotated it profusely<sup>3</sup>. Either at the piano or in his mind, Nietzsche listened to *Carmen* innumerable times. And if Wagner, as Nietzsche was never tired of repeating, was a problem for philosophers, the musical contrast between the north and the south was a philosophical problem, too. If music must be mediterraneanized, it is because *il faut méditerraniser la philosophie aussi*, philosophy must be mediterraneanized to save it from decadence and nihilism—the European nihilism that Nietzsche never ceased to question, from his early writings on to the so-called *Lenzerbeide Fragment* of 1887. Nietzsche hated the theoretical framework of Wagner's *Parsifal* because of its phony asceticism and sanctimonious sexuophobia. The anti-Semitic undertones of the story eluded him (the final cry, «redemption to the redeemer», can hardly be misunderstood: Jesus needs to be redeemed from his Jewish blood), or, possibly, he dismissed Wagner's vicious anti-Semitism as a byproduct of the negation of life that hovered over the entire opera. His respect for Buddhism notwithstanding, Nietzsche also missed the Buddhist undercurrent of the redemption theme (redeemers too must be redeemed from the cycle of life and death). On one crucial motif, however, Nietzsche and Wagner could have agreed: the weapon that causes the wound is the same one that heals it.

Klingsor, the renegade magician, has wounded Amfortas with the spear of Longinus, the Roman soldier who pierced the side of Jesus as he hung on the Cross. Parsifal, the boy from the woods, grown wise because of his sufferings, heals Amfortas with the touch of the same spear. Repression and castration, symptom and healing are all conjoined in Wagner's cerebral, multilayered retelling of the myth. Freud too, immune to wagneritis as he was, pointed out in his essay on Jensen's *Gradiva* that the force which ultimately brings back repression in the shape of a symptom is the same one that caused the repression

<sup>1</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §255, R.P. Horstmann and J. Norman eds., trans. J. Norman, Cambridge University Press, New York 2002, pp. 147-148.

<sup>2</sup> F. Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner: A Musician's Problem*, §§2-3, in Id., *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, A. Ridley and J. Norman eds., trans. J. Norman, Cambridge University Press, New York 2005, pp. 235-236.

<sup>3</sup> P. D'Iorio, *En marge de Carmen*, in «*Le magazine littéraire*» n. 383, janvier 2000, pp. 50-55.

in the first place<sup>4</sup>. Wounds cut, repression seals off, and castration does both. But it ignites desire.

By means of analogy, we suggest that the Mediterranean Sea was to Nietzsche what Longinus's spear was to Wagner. The cradle of nihilism that from ancient Greece spread all over Europe was also the only *locus* where the West could be healed from the negation of life that in modernity had come to affect the northern part of the continent. The Mediterranean showed its antithetical features on the one hand in the Platonic devaluation of the sensible world and on the other in the sublime riddles of Heraclitus, the poet of becoming, who avoided the traps of nihilism insofar as his thought cannot be crystallized in an opposition pitting the immutable and the transient against each other. A whiff of African wind and the rhythm of *Carmen's* «Moorish dances», as Nietzsche called them, would put the final touch on the exotic ointment easing the pain of the sick, northern soul looking for redemption. (Here we will set aside that *Carmen's habanera* was actually of Cuban origin).

Yet in the medieval sources of the Perceval-Parsifal legend, the life-denier Klingsor was the *southern* magician whose castle was located somewhere near Naples, not far from the Sybil's cave in Cuma. Wagner himself paid homage to the magician's Mediterranean nature when he triumphantly wrote that he had found Klingsor's garden at Villa Ruffolo in Ravello, near Amalfi<sup>5</sup>. Perhaps, in an imaginary Parsifal rewritten by Nietzsche, Klingsor-Nietzsche would be the one to brandish the spear and heal Amfortas-Wagner, mercifully ending the latter's moaning about women and Jews seducing the Aryan men away from their creative spirit. In a similar vein, *Gradiva's* protagonist is a young German man who comes down to Pompeii to face the repression/castration that has dogged his life so far, and from which he ostensibly escapes by *not* letting go of his obsession with a young woman's "sublime" gait (symptom and healing, again or, better, an exemplary case of healing by means of traversing the whole space of his fantasy).

Because Longinus' spear is retroactive immunization (it vaccinates after the disease has taken hold of the body), Nietzsche's belief that the Mediterranean spirit could heal the European soul from the disease of nihilism is, in a way, ontological homoeopathy. It is legitimate to ask whether it is a real cure or mere placebo. But what is this nihilism of which Nietzsche claims to be the healer?

Not a Mediterranean word. In 1799, F. H. Jacobi was the first to give the term its ontological weight *vs.* Spinoza's pantheism, Kant's rationalism and Fichte's idealism – all systems in which either the reality of the world or God's transcendence disappear<sup>6</sup>. Ivan Turgenev popularized the term in his 1862 novel about

<sup>4</sup> S. Freud, *Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's Gradiva*, in Id., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. 9*, J. Strachey and A. Freud (eds.), Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, London 1959, pp. 34-36.

<sup>5</sup> E. Newman, *The Life of Richard Wagner Vol. 4: 1866-1883*, Knopf, New York 1946, p. 625.

<sup>6</sup> «Truly, my dear Fichte, I would not be vexed if you, or anyone else, were to call *Chimerism* the view I oppose to the Idealism that I chide for *Nihilism*». F.H. Jacobi, *Jacobi to Fichte*, in Id., *The*

the Russian anarchists, *Fathers and Sons*. Would Jacobi recognize today what has become of the word he lashed out at Fichte? Maybe not. For the sake of our argument, we will reduce the historical complexity of the term to its strictest, “logical” sense. To do so, we must go back to ancient Greece, knowing well that “nihilism” was then a notion unknown.

In a nutshell, nihilism is the belief that under certain conditions something is nothing, can be nothing, will be nothing, or must be nothing. In our understanding of Plato’s *Sophist*, nihilism is the strategy that the Stranger lays out to Theaetetus to find a way out from the supposedly outdated rigidity of Parmenides’ distinction between Being and non-Being, truth and opinion. The Stranger’s instrumental adoption of nihilism is the assumption that «in a certain sense not-being is, and that being, on the other hand, is not»<sup>7</sup>. The point is not to attack Parmenides. Primarily, the Stranger’s intention is to save philosophy from a fixed dualism that is at loss when confronted with the clever confutations of the sophists. Parmenides is a collateral damage. And what a damage he is.

In *Metaphysics*, Book IV, Aristotle brings back stability to the distinction between Being and non-Being by “logicizing” the Stranger’s argument. «It is impossible for the same thing at the same time both to be-in and not to be-in the same thing in the same respect»<sup>8</sup>. Yet the caveats «at the same time» and «in the same respect» may imply that  $A=A$  only *as long as A is A*. Namely, a certain being enjoys identity with itself as long as the conditions for that identity are kept in place. Once the conditions decay or are modified, the identity of the being with itself no longer holds and, consequently, *we* might say (because Aristotle is far from saying so, just like Plato would never admit to any form of nihilism) that that certain being has become nothing. To our understanding, therefore, the fundamental distortion of declaring Being perishable and therefore equal to non-Being is already ingrained in the very formula designed to avoid it<sup>9</sup>.

To Nietzsche, however, nihilism is the last refuge of those who cannot accept and love their fate. Pity and self-pity, misguided compassion and ultimately *nausea* at the spectacle of man drive the compassionate soul to such “will to nothingness”. «I speak, as is appropriate, of man’s cultural domains, of every kind of “Europe” that still exists on this earth [...] “If only I were some other person!” is what this glance sighs: “but there’s no hope of that...”»<sup>10</sup>. Nietzsche’s assess-

*Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, ed. and trans. by G. Di Giovanni, McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal & Kingston 1994, p. 519.

<sup>7</sup> Plato, *Sophist*, §241, in Id., *The Dialogues of Plato, Translated into English with Analysis and Introductions by Benjamin Jowett, M.A., in Five Volumes, Vol. IV*, Oxford University Press, London 1892, p. 370.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book Gamma, 3 (1005b, 19-20), trans. with an introduction by H. Lawson-Tancred, Penguin, London 1998, p. 126.

<sup>9</sup> We paraphrase here, broadly, Severino’s “strict” notion of nihilism and his critique of Western philosophy. See E. Severino, *The Essence of Nihilism*, I. Testoni and A. Carrera eds., trans. G. Donis, Verso, London-New York 2016.

<sup>10</sup> F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, III, §14, K. Ansell-Pearson ed., trans. C. Diethe, Cambridge University Press, New York 2007, p. 89.

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ment of nihilism revolves around an economics of morality. The merchants of values, otherwise known as priests, assign or subtract moral values because their profession requires that the stocks of the world be adjusted constantly downwards while the blue chips of Heaven are being pushed upwards. As we might say, nihilism is the belief that X is nothing because it is not Y, that X is nothing unless it is Y, or that X is nothing until it becomes Y. The Platonic-Christian man has decided that ideas have values and that appearances have none, that God has value as the Supreme Good, that the old Gods were too flawed to have values and that the eternal life of the soul is valuable while the life of the mortal flesh is not: «The parasitism of the priests [...] takes every natural custom, every natural institution [...] everything *intrinsically* valuable, and renders it fundamentally worthless, of *negative* value...»<sup>11</sup>.

The march of such nihilism, with the luminous exceptions of few great Roman spirits, the Italian Renaissance, and Spinoza, has proceeded uninterrupted from Socrates to Wagner. In the end, it became a German problem.

In the beginning, however, it was a strictly Mediterranean affair, stretching between Athens and *Magna Graecia*. And it was not embraced lightly. In the *Sophist*, the nihilistic stance of the Stranger is a compromise formation trying to contain the explosion of multiplicity that the Mediterranean has become thanks to the expansion of Greek civilization. See how the Stranger explains to Theaetetus the various, endless, contradictory ideas about the origins of all things, the one and the many, unity and difference, which philosophers, poets, and oracles disseminated from the shorelines of Asia Minor to Sicily and from Calabria back to Greece: the Dualists, the Eleatics, the Ionians, the Sicilians, they all have their explanation, none of which seem to hold water<sup>12</sup>.

The scandalous conclusion that «in a certain sense not-being is, and that being, on the other hand, is not» is therefore the answer to a philosophical *and* geopolitical issue, for there is only one small step from geography to politics and from politics to philosophy. (Socrates to Glaucon: «Have we any greater evil for a city than what splits it and makes it many instead of one?») <sup>13</sup>. If we want to understand Plato's move in its own terms – as much as that is possible to us – we must de-ontologize the whole issue of nihilism or at least – in a conscious phenomenological move – put its ontological range in parenthesis.

Plato was facing a gigantic problem: possibly as a result of the fatigue brought on by the Persian wars and the endless strife between Athens and Sparta, the relativistic attitude of the sophists was successful in undermining the mythical-religious foundation of hierarchy, authority, and social institutions<sup>14</sup>. The soph-

<sup>11</sup> F. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, §26, in Id., *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, cit., p. 24.

<sup>12</sup> Plato, *op. cit.*, §243, pp. 371-372.

<sup>13</sup> *The Republic* V, 462ab, trans. with notes and an interpretive essay by Allan Bloom, Basic Books, New York 1991, p. 141.

<sup>14</sup> For the aftermath of the Persian Wars as the cause of a radical rethinking of the issue of One and the Many, and therefore of the whole enterprise of philosophy and politics, see M. Cacciari

ists were the postmodern professors teaching that truth is contingent and no moral, social, or literary canons will ever be free from this or that ideological bias. Plato was the smart reactionary who «beat the sophists at their own game»<sup>15</sup> by incorporating some of their premises into his discourse. His nihilism, if we want to call it that way, was the “active” response to the dispersion of the one into the many, the increasing fragmentation of the body politic, and the degradation of the philosopher to mere speechwriter. Confronted with the sophists who exploited the power of contradiction at the expense of the “incontrovertible” *logos*, Plato threw Parmenides under the chariot and injected a homeopathic dose of nothingness into the philosophical discourse to save what was left of the power of *logos* and the philosopher’s commitment to truth. It was both retroactive vaccination and a cruel move, which he justified with the cruelest words—words that a sophist might have used indeed. After all, Parmenides and all those old, wise men belong to a past generation and we no longer know what they were talking about... «When I was a younger man, I used to fancy that I understood quite well what was meant by the term “not-being”, which is our present subject of dispute; and now you see in what a fix we are about it»<sup>16</sup>.

## 2. *Mediterranean Gnosis*

Plato’s insertion of a middle ground between Being and nothingness was not just a counter-description of the world. It achieved much more than what was within the grasp of a mere compromise. By rejecting Parmenides and playing the sophist’s game against the sophists, Plato literally “created” the world in which the West still lives. Plato’s *metaxy* or participation of Being and nothingness is what constitutes the very notion of “world” that we share, namely, the world as a mix of Being and becoming, a world made of “things” that can appear and disappear, and ultimately the world as the result of a creating (and destructing) activity.

Plato founded not a theory of the “world”, but the “world” itself. Before Plato there was neither “world” nor production and destruction: they had been waiting, in concealment, to be called into the light. For the “world” (the *metaxy* between Being and Nothing) to come to light, Being and Nothing had first to be called forth from concealment. But this is not to say that they *emerge* from a total concealment—since Being and Nothing always already appear: rather, “calling forth” expresses the need to bear witness to that which eternally appears. Parmenides was this witness. Thus only the West was to call the “world” into the light; yet in evoking the “world”, at the

*The Unpolitical: For a Radical Critique of Political Reason*, A. Carrera ed., trans. M. Verdicchio, Fordham University Press, New York 2009, pp. 197-205.

<sup>15</sup> S. Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology*, Duke University Press, Durham (NC) 1993, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Plato, *op. cit.*, §243, p. 372.



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same time it abandoned the truth of Being dawning in the testimony. The “world”, as a middle ground between Being and Nothing, appeared on the horizon only because of the attention paid to Being and Nothing; but with the supervention of the “world”, the *truth* of Being and Nothing was abandoned<sup>17</sup>.

To answer the most obvious objection, yes, there was a world before Plato. There was Homer. But Homer’s world is a world of deeds and passions entirely acted out, a world in which a man is a just man or an unjust one without depending on the idea of justice. And to answer another possible objection, yes, there was world in the East as well, be it the world of Brahma, karma or Tao. The East, however, did not encounter “the world” the way the West did. Historically, the East has inhabited the earth and has looked up at the sky, but it has not singled out and conceptualized its dwelling place as a composite “thing” made of quantifiable isolated pieces (the “ten thousand things” of which the world is made according to the Chinese saying are already one in Tao and do not need to be made One).

In other words, Plato’s parricide of Parmenides was perhaps unavoidable. It was nothing personal, just business. To paraphrase Winston Churchill’s 1947 quip («Democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time»)<sup>18</sup>, Platonism was the worst of all metaphysical systems, except that all the other available systems were even worse. The parricide of Parmenides allowed the determinations to come forward and occupy “the world” as a concrete totality. Yet the equivalence of Being and nothingness, the possibility that one become the other, soon translated into the West’s obsession with creation *ex nihilo*, the world as something that comes out of nothing and can return into nothingness if the One God wants it so or if men are foolish enough to destroy the very world that they have created.

Unlike the East, the West has been incapable of receiving the Sacred, namely, the sacredness of Being, independent from creation. The Book of Genesis, *i.e.* the creation of the world by an external agency, is already a destruction, because the Creator could have decided not to create, just as well as He could decide to destroy. The nihilism of Western metaphysics is inseparable from the intrinsic nihilism of religions based on the narrative of creation, which of course need a narrative of salvation to counterbalance the dread of total annihilation<sup>19</sup>.

It does not matter now that Plato’s intention was not to unleash such destructive force. As it happened, the *metaxy* of creation and destruction culminated in Nietzsche’s overman as the “new” creator who would compete with God and man, defeat God and man, and replace God’s and man’s creating power. As Fou-

<sup>17</sup> E. Severino, *op. cit.*, pp. 151-152.

<sup>18</sup> W. Churchill, *Churchill by Himself: The Definitive Collection of Quotations*, R. Langworth ed., Public Affairs, London 2008, p. 574.

<sup>19</sup> E. Severino, *op. cit.*, pp. 154-157.

cault famously said, «the promise of the superman signifies first and foremost the imminence of the death of man»<sup>20</sup>.

We can argue, however, that the death of man precedes the Christian, theological systematization of a God who can create from nothingness and push back things into nothingness as He pleases. It even precedes the shady dealings between Being and nothingness of which Plato was the middleman. The death of man is already inscribed in the chorus of Sophocles' *Antigones* («of all things is Man the most wonderful»), wondering at the boundaries of man, at what man is capable of, what will bring him an ecstatic frenzy or make him terrified of his own existence. This man already “knows” he comes from nothingness and therefore must “know himself”. He must attain *logos*, before nothingness claims him back. Such man was born on the shores of the Mediterranean, and his destination was Europe.

Europe, therefore, designates neither a physical-geographical reality nor a politico-cultural state. Europe is *logos* in the etymological sense of the word: an idea that gathers in itself different languages and different questions and then tries to express them. The *logos* that is Europe gathers and expresses the different ways through which it has attempted to respond to the enigma: “know thyself”. That Europe has always looked for an identity, for “one” identity, can only be put into doubt by the “nationalist nonsense” which has separated the peoples (and it was Nietzsche who said it!)<sup>21</sup>. But an identity, “one” identity? In what sense? It is only a question of the One that lives in relation to the Many. Once again, philosophy<sup>22</sup>.

As Nietzsche asked, «Nihilism is at the door: where does this most uncanny of all guests come from?»<sup>23</sup>. From which Greek mountain, from which cave hidden in one of the thousand islands of the archipelago? Did Nietzsche, this anti-German who remained a German to the core, know the answer to his own question? How consciously did he look for a recovery from the nihilistic disease along the shorelines of that very sea that originated it?

Europe and the United States of America, whether the most intractable segments of their population are willing to recognize it or not, are ideas, *logos* incarnated, before they are nations, ethnicities, or religions. Europa, the nymph who gave her name to a continent, was a Phoenician refugee who became queen of

<sup>20</sup> M. Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of Human Sciences*, Routledge, New York 2002, pp. 372-373.

<sup>21</sup> «Thanks to the pathological manner in which nationalist nonsense has alienated and continues to alienate the peoples of Europe from each other [...] the most unambiguous signs declaring that *Europe wants to be one* are either overlooked or willfully and mendaciously reinterpreted». F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, cit., §256, p. 148.

<sup>22</sup> M. Cacciari, *Europe and Empire: On the Political Forms of Globalization*, A. Carrera ed., trans. M. Verdicchio, Fordham University Press, New York 2016, p. 45.

<sup>23</sup> “*Der Nihilismus steht vor der Thür: woher kommt uns dieser unheimlichste aller Gäste?*” F. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke Bd. 12. Nachgelassene Fragmente 1885-1887*, 2 [127], de Gruyter, Berlin 1988, p. 125.



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Crete, cradle of the Western alphabet. The peoples of the world perceive that you cannot become Chinese or Indian at will, but everyone can become European or American. Not only that: Europe and America will also be what they make of them. And their perception, regardless of the historical and geopolitical turmoil it generates, is correct. But by becoming European or American one must go through the nihilistic process of “knowing oneself”, of being exposed to the nothingness, void, and lack of substance that is intrinsic to the West. The other nations are too “full” for that, they lack “nothing”. Who has the courage to tell the immigrants that their work permit comes with a certificate of nihilism? Who is the immigrant who will accept it gladly?

The European nihilism whose genealogy tormented Nietzsche is the obverse of the spirit of inquiry that has animated Europe from the onset of its Mediterranean conception. Never be content, always rationalize, always “make it new”, always suspect, always destroy the values (the “illusions”, as Leopardi would say) that the previous generations created, always be equally tempted by totalitarian order and social anarchy, but, most of all, always set out to sea to reach the next island, the faraway Strait of Gibraltar, the unpeopled world behind the sun as Dante’s Ulysses did, or a higher ground from where the future will appear in all its glory, only to be cast away as soon as it recedes into the past. It is no wonder that contemporary Mediterranean thinkers from Camus to Derrida have endlessly asked questions about the nature and implications of Mediterranean nihilism.

In Severino’s words, scattered throughout his body of work, European nihilism stems from the post-Parmenidean “folly” of positing the absolute faith in Becoming and production of beings at the expense of Being. From a different perspective, and drawing inspiration from Hannah Arendt, Cacciari has observed that the predicament of Western modernity may be indeed the ultimate revenge of the ancient Mediterranean Gnosis, which now has touched on the whole world. Namely, the nihilistic assumption that the techno-scientific project will finally “free” men and women from the boundaries of their worldly prison<sup>24</sup>.

Yet, if nihilism is the curse of the West because of its belief that the world can be created, annihilated, and then created again, and because it drives the West repeatedly to the brink of destruction, it also comes with the blessing of change. (No wonder, since according to Severino, the very belief in “change”, namely, that beings can be other than what they are, is the purest form of nihilism). Nietzsche knew that passive, decadent nihilism, of which Romantic pessimism (Hölderlin, Schopenhauer, Leopardi, Wagner) was the highest incarnation, finds its counterpart in active nihilism—the sudden feeling that the world cannot stand the way it is, and it needs overturning.

Passive nihilism is the revolution coming from the past. Active nihilism is the revolution that claims to come from the future. Its trajectory begins with Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire* (the “new” revolution will not restore the golden age) and

<sup>24</sup> M. Cacciari, *Europe and Empire*, cit., p. 51.

ends with Benjamin's *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (the only revolution that is still going on is capitalistic progress, and the angels of history cannot but cry over the unredeemed past). At the top of the arc stands Nietzsche's will-to-power, the permanent revolution that by means of the eternal return appropriates both the future and the past.

Passive and active nihilism have never ceased to fight over the possession of time. Sometimes it is the former that prevails; other times it is the latter. The history of the West is therefore less the history of the different epochs of Being (as in Heidegger's historicization of Being) than the series of different epochs of *nihil*, each one superseding the others. Judaism and Christianity introduced the nihilistic idea that the Creator was independent from its creation (a belief that only Spinoza had the strength to challenge). And the Lutheran-Calvinist Reformation pushed the Augustinian idea of predestination to its nihilistic edge by denying all value to human agency while at the same time proclaiming the lack of agency as the worst sin in the eyes of God.

The contemporary philosophies of immanence have rejected the Hegelian sway of the negative and the Luciferian power of "No!". Their anti-nihilistic stance against transcendence is well meant and perhaps long overdue, but it leaves the knot of time and subjectivity in an inexplicable dark corner. It cannot account for the cognitive dissonance that lies at the bottom of every insurgence of *nihil*: everything and everyone, as Nietzsche had understood, must have a *value*, a *price* to be deemed worthy of surviving the change. But there is no change without change of values, which means that the very values on behalf of which the revolution was initiated (including the shift toward immanence) will not survive its outcome and will be endlessly devaluated and depreciated by new values and prices.

Because of this ineradicable negation of negation, the West has both enjoyed and endured the nihilism of industrial revolution, colonialism, and market economy. The West has also gone through the nihilism of the absolute faith in the rationality of history, shared by Hegel, Marx, Lenin, and countless revolutionaries who gave away their life to become faceless agents of historical necessity. It has faced, and it is still facing, the nihilism of racism, nativism, and religious-ideological fanaticism. A Jew is nothing because he is not Aryan; a Shia is nothing because he is not a Sunni—or vice versa—; immigrants are nothing until they renounce their identity (and for the reasons we have already explained, they remain "nothing" even after that). Conversely, in the eyes of the few disaffected migrants who fall prey to fundamentalism, Europeans and Americans are "nothing" because they have no identity, and what the fundamentalists dread above everything else is that in order to conquer the West they too must become "nothing". And the whole world, not just the West, is now under the nihilistic heel of climate change and catastrophic capitalism, for which life on Earth is indeed "nothing" and its destruction is therefore nothing to worry about.

3. *Fortuna imperatrix mundi*

There is only one *nihil*, yet there are many nihilisms, and each one has its own features. The nihilism of the One (One holy scripture, One history, One ideology, One race, One power, One operating system, One economy, One God) is usually more dangerous than the nihilism of the Many (namely, the sophist's refusal that «many different forms [are] contained under one higher form»<sup>25</sup>). We must admit that at times the Sophists are less scary than the Platonists are. The postmodernists look shallow, but they are not as frightful as the modernists were. Yet, as Plato understood it, nihilism is a corrective. Civilizations may suffer from a deficiency of nihilism as much as they do from an excess of it. Now and then, we may need to enlist "reasonable", homeopathic nihilism to fight off the next dictatorship of the ultra-nihilist worshippers of the One, whose eternal creed is that there is *nothing* outside their beloved One. Parmenides's world looks perfect on paper; everything is clear-cut. Here is Being, here is the non-Being, here is the Path of Night and illusion, here is the Path of Day and Truth. But we do not live in Parmenides's world (which was a totality, but not yet "the" world). We live in Plato's world, through the night and through the day, moving endlessly between certainty and uncertainty, truth and opinion.

One must be wary to "moralize" Being and nothingness. According to the Dionysian legend as told by Plutarch (quoting Aristotle's lost *Eudemus*), the truth of Silenus in his answer to King Midas was that it was best not to be born at all; and next to that, it was better to die than to live<sup>26</sup>. For better or for worse, Christianity rejected this antinatalist wisdom and declared that "to be" was a good thing and "not to be" was not. Yet a world without a shred of nothingness would leave us immobilized. Instead of being prisoners in Plato's cave, forced to look at shadows in the dark, we would be tied up to the same chains, but in the open air. Blinded by the light, never allowed to stray our sight away from the sun of truth, and with a contraption around our eyes to keep them open like in the re-education scene of Stanley Kubrick's *Clockwork Orange*. Ours is Plato's world, the sophists' world, and it is also Mephistopheles's and Faust's. Now and then, all societies decide that they need a shot of «the spirit which eternally denies! And justly so; for all that which is wrought / Deserves that it should come to naught...»<sup>27</sup>. Or, as Mick Jagger puts it succinctly in "Sympathy for the Devil", «I stuck around St. Petersburg / When I saw it was time for a change...».

It all began in that old land pronging the sea, between the city and the islands, the harbor and the ship. Yet we must ask: when Nietzsche mused about the Mediterranean as the cradle of his philosophy of the future, pitted against

<sup>25</sup> Plato, *op. cit.*, §253, p. 386.

<sup>26</sup> Plutarch, *Consolatio ad Apollonium*, §27, in *Plutarch's Moralia in Fifteen Volumes*, Vol. II, trans. F.C. Babbitt, Cambridge University Press-Heinemann, Cambridge (MA)-London 1942, pp. 176-179.

<sup>27</sup> J.W. von Goethe, *Faust*, vv. 1338-1340, C. Hamlin ed., trans. W. Arndt, Norton, New York 2001, p. 37.

the dreadful, nihilistic German spirit personified by Wagner, how deep was his understanding of the Mediterranean cultures and how much was he influenced by a northern bias? To him, Turin was a very southern city—a claim that no one in Italy would accept at face value. It is also ironic that Wagner spent more time in the south, from Naples to Sicily, than Nietzsche did. Was Nietzsche perhaps creating «a secret, interior Orient» for himself, not unlike Wagner?<sup>28</sup> Was he, too, indulging in the arcadization of the Mediterranean, which goes back to the eighteenth century's *grand tours* and finds its last expression in so many works of figurative art between WWI and WWII?

A place, in other words, free from the nihilistic decadence sweeping northern Europe. But the Mediterranean *is* nihilism, it *is* decadence, which did not begin with Wagner in Ravello or Rimbaud declaring «I am leaving Europe. Sea air will burn into my lungs; the furthest climates will tan my skin»<sup>29</sup> but with Callimachus and the Neoterics in the third century B.C. Nihilism, Nietzsche's «most uncanny guest», is the Mediterranean's gift to the world. Every time the Southern European thinkers essentialize the Mediterranean as a space of resistance against Nordic, destructive capitalism, without acknowledging the deep destructive forces that the Mediterranean has unleashed and is still unleashing as we write, they are only Orientalizing itself.

To the extent that the Orientalizing ideologies of the Mediterranean have been developed as a response to Northern Europe, they do not stem from an autonomous thought. By defining the Mediterranean as a mere alternative to Nordic calculating mentality, one has already fallen into a losing mindset. The more the Mediterranean peoples defend themselves from Northern stereotypes, they more they end up reinforcing them. «You don't have the sun, you don't have the sea!», the Mediterranean beautiful soul cries, to which the rest of Europe answers, «Yes, but you don't have a job». A different kind of Southern Thought is required<sup>30</sup>.

The Mediterranean has always been divided between the invading north and the resisting south—or, as it was in the eight and the fifteenth century, between the invading Muslim south and the resisting north, with plenty of local arrangements that complicate the narrative. Sentimental Mediterraneanism is not an answer to this divide, nor is Europe's stifling and inconclusive self-awareness, its Hamletic, pathological indecision, which the current populism is “correcting” in the worst possible way. The Mediterranean alternative is not to be found in the sun and the sea, in slow food or in Nietzsche's imaginary «African cheerfulness»,

<sup>28</sup> E. Bertram, *Nietzsche: Essai de mythologie*, trans. R. Pitrou, Éditions du Félin, Paris 1990, p. 334; *Nietzsche. Versuch eine Mythologie* (1932), Bouvier, Bonn 1990.

<sup>29</sup> A. Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell*, in Id., *Collected Poems*, trans. with an introduction and notes by M. Sorrell, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2001, p. 215.

<sup>30</sup> «You don't have the sun, you don't have the sea» is what the Italian undocumented immigrants forced on a train going back to Italy yell to the Swiss policemen in F. Brusati's *Bread and Chocolate* (1974). They had rather remained in Switzerland. The cry is echoed, with no better results, in F. Cassano's *Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean*, trans. N. Bouchard and V. Ferme, Fordham University Press, New York 2012.

but in the active (better: *productive*) nihilism of Boccaccio, Alberti, and Machiavelli, in the role they assigned to Fortune, which spurred the Italian Renaissance as much as predestination spurred Protestant capitalism.

In *Inferno VII*, 70-90, Dante attempted (in Boethius' wake) to recruit the ancient blind force (*fortuna imperatrix mundi*) as an assistant to the Divine Providence. Yet Virgil, who pronounces the speech, does not sound entirely convinced, and neither does Dante. The very notion of *Fortuna* is uncomfortable within the boundaries of a divine plan. Later, as soon as fortune was de-theologized, it generated an astonishing amount of productive nihilism, the amount of chance, risk, multiplicity, and unpredictability that a society needs to try, fail, try again, and succeed. Fortune's underlying assumption is that the essence and the agency of man are undecided, oscillating, everything and nothing at the same time, and that the world has not been judged yet.

Boethius and then Brunetto Latini had already allegorized *Fortuna*. Dante broke the ground by having a figure from classical antiquity openly praising fortune as an angelic intelligence in an admittedly problematic Christian context. Others followed in their own terms: Petrarch in *De remediis utrusque fortunae* (the pros and cons of good and adverse fortune); Boccaccio in *Decameron*, Day Two, where fortune is the thread that provides an appearance of destiny<sup>31</sup>, and mostly Leon Battista Alberti, whose treatment of fortune paves the way to Pico's *Disputationes* and Machiavelli's *Asino*, *The Prince*, and other texts where fortune is mentioned. In *Theogenius*, written in 1440, the optimism of *Libri della famiglia* seems already a thing of the past, and the question is, how can we defend ourselves from the unfair, mean fortune after we realize that *we* indeed are the first culprits of our misfortunes – because of our ingrained restlessness, never satisfied with the present things and always “hanging on varied expectations” (an anticipation of Cassius, «The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars...»)?<sup>32</sup>

The link that connects fortune and nihilism is less theoretical than practical. It belongs to practical reason and it is a matter of ethics. To be precise, an ethic of the void that opens ahead of our steps every time we try to put the perfect world of theory into practice. “In theory”, everything works fine. In practice, fortune spins the wheel, reducing theory to nothing. Fortune is not nothing; it is present, alive, and active everywhere. It shows, however, the *quantum* of nothingness that is inherent to all human enterprises, the bridge that human endeavors will never cross, lest they fall into the abyss of absolute *nihil*.

<sup>31</sup> See C.M. Radding, *Fortune and Her Wheel: The Meaning of a Medieval Symbol*, in «Mediaevistik» n. 5, 1992, pp. 127-138; F. Petrarch, *Petrarch's Remedies for Fortune Fair and Foul*, 5 vols., trans. C. H. Rawski. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN 1991; F. Ciabattini, *Decameron 2: Filomena's Rule between Fortune and Human Agency*, in «Annali d'Italianistica» n. 31, 2013, pp. 173-196; S. Marchesi, *Boccaccio on Fortune (De casibus virorum illustrium)*, in *Boccaccio: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works*, V. Kirkham, M. Sherberg, J. Levarie Smarr eds., The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2013, pp. 245-254.

<sup>32</sup> “Sempre sospesi a varie aspettazioni”. L.B. Alberti, *Theogenius*, in *Opere Volgari* Vol. II, C. Grayson ed., Laterza, Bari 1966 (Progetto Manuzio electronic edition, p. 17). My translation.



By making nothingness visible, fortune makes it a companion and a corrective to human action, which is successful, when it so happens, precisely by incorporating fortune's unpredictability into its own flat nothingness. Otherwise, why the Romans, tempered in their harsh discipline, would build so many temples to the goddess Fortuna?<sup>33</sup> The expectation that we, humans, can change the fabric of reality is already nihilistic at its core, Severino would argue. It is not necessary to follow his path to the end to see how the destructiveness inherent to human action cannot be reversed into an all-encompassing productivity, which would be another nihilistic myth. This is where fortune intervenes. Rather than just causing human agency to fail, fortune protects the same agency from its own nihilism.

It was in *Momus or the Prince*, completed when Christianity was under the shock of the fall of Constantinople (1453), that Alberti laid out a devastating critique of the philosophers' "plans" and defined with utmost clarity the "proof" of nihilism that the new aristocratic-merchant society of his age required to succeed (I say proof as in the alcohol proof that a good wine needs). Momus, the metamorphic, mischievous son of Night and Sleep, full of sarcasm and mockery, falls in love with Praise, daughter of Virtue. The sex is not consensual, and Praise gives birth to a monster called Fame, who never stops chatting. Even when Virtue tries to crush Fame under her foot, Fame spews out things unacceptable to men and gods alike: «It swore that Triumph and Trophy were not the sons of Virtue, but of Chance and Fortune, and that one of them was stupid, the other mad»<sup>34</sup>.

Fortune, on her part, is utterly hostile to Virtue, whose smugness is well accepted by the gods. She does not dislike Fame, however, regardless of the latter's monstrosity. In the end, Zeus decides to follow Momus' ideas about the best way to rule the world the way a wise prince is supposed to do. The good things are put under the supervision of Industry, Vigilance, Zeal, Diligence, and Constancy. The bad things are assigned to Envy, Ambition, Pleasure, Laziness, and Cowardice. As for the rest, «The things that were neither good nor bad [...] riches, honors [...] should all be left to Fortune's judgment»<sup>35</sup>.

Fortune does not rule all. Alberti, Pico, and Machiavelli would agree that "she" is not the only *imperatrix mundi*. She, or it, takes away, however, the Solid Rock on which the foundation of one's life can stand. Make no mistake, Fortuna belongs to the constellation of death drive. It is, in fact, death drive on speed. Yet there is nothing like a relief from the responsibility of overseeing the consistency of the One (One destiny, One mission, One deal, One God) to unleash the potentialities of the Many. What Fortuna decides is not *up to me*. In Machiavelli's terms, the fifty percent of what I do, whatever the outcome, *will never be my*

<sup>33</sup> For a reappraisal of the role of fortune in Humanism and Alberti in particular, see M. Cacciari, *La mente inquieta. Saggio sull'umanesimo*, Einaudi, Turin 2019, revised version of *Ripensare l'umanesimo*, his introduction to *Umanisti italiani. Pensiero e destino*, R. Ebgi ed., Einaudi, Turin 2016, pp. vii–ci.

<sup>34</sup> L.B. Alberti, *Momus*, V. Brown and S. Knight eds., trans. S. Knight, I Tatti-Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA) 2003, p. 73.

<sup>35</sup> L.B. Alberti, *Momus*, cit., p. 355.



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*merit nor my fault.* (And was not perhaps the supposedly fatalistic abandonment to Allah's will that ignited – to quote Hegel – the most enthusiastic series of conquests in history?<sup>36</sup>) No need to flaunt one's shortcomings either. For every Mediterranean beautiful soul who says, «I am proud of being a Southerner» («You don't have the sun, you don't have the sea!»), no one in Berlin is saying, «I am proud of being a German hedge-fund manager». Pride is for losers. Fortuna is for winners.

In Ramon Llull's *Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men* (1274–1276), the sweetest parable of a supposedly non-nihilistic quest (possibly echoed in the Melchisedech tale, *Decameron* I, 3), a Christian, a Muslim, and a Jew explain their theologies to a doubtful pagan<sup>37</sup>. When he announces to them that he has finally decided which religion to embrace, the three wise men do not want to hear his choice, fearing they would lose the pleasure of meeting again to resume their conversation. There is no doubt that this is the thought that Europe needs (Mediterranean Europe as well as Northern Europe). It is within its grasp and it still could be its destiny. But it harbors a secret, and until that secret is recognized for what it is, the dreadful moment when the true religion is announced, and peoples are called to arms to impose it or defend it will rear its ugly head again. The secret is that the three monotheistic religions might be united less by their faith in their own God than by their specific nihilism, which resides precisely in their passion for an infinite quest which inevitably will bring them to devalue their current values to instate new and “truer” values.

And yet, this very splitting which cuts through the three religions also unites them, making communication possible insofar as the “priests” acknowledge that their doctrines are in themselves split and the crack of *nihil* has already created a gap, a cognitive dissonance in their contradictory tenets. (Such as: God's creation is perfect yet tainted by sin; we the sinners are worth nothing, yet we must save the world from perdition; we can do nothing on our own yet if we do not act everything including our God will be lost). «The common ground that allows cultures to talk to each other, to exchange messages, is not some presupposed shared set of universal values, etc., but rather its opposite, some shared *deadlock*»<sup>38</sup>. The three wise men will resume their conversation insofar as they do not have full access to the truth of their own desire. Their opponents from other confessions guard the truth they are looking for. Like the Fathers of the Church who defined themselves against the heretics (like the merchants who defined themselves against the blows of chance), the wise men's only hope is that they will receive the truth about themselves from their own infidels.

<sup>36</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, prefaces by C. Hegel and J. Sipree, trans. J. Sipree, Batoche Books, Kitchener, Ontario, 2001 (reprint of Colonial, New York 1899), p. 376.

<sup>37</sup> R. Llull, *The Book of the Gentile and the Three Wise Men*, in Id., *Selected Works of Ramón Llull (1232-1316)*, Vol. 1, A. Bonner ed. and trans., Princeton University Press, Princeton 1985, pp. 93-305. See also M. Cacciari, *Europe and Empire*, cit., p. 55.

<sup>38</sup> S. Žižek, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

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When we have nothing in common, we still have nothingness in common. Cultures that refuse to come to terms with their intrinsic *nihil* become suspicious, paranoid; ultimately, psychotic. For nihilism is a *pharmakon*. It can be poison or medicine. A preventive or retroactive vaccination is recommended now and then. No heavy dose is necessary. When the weight of the all-existing, all-encompassing, all-eternal One becomes too heavy, it is wise to stop and murmur the prayer of the old Spanish waiter, «Our *nada* who art in *nada*, *nada* be thy name...»<sup>39</sup>. Like an exorcism, but in a low voice, lest the priests of the One might hear you.

<sup>39</sup> E. Hemingway, *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*, in Id., *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway. The Finca Vigía Edition*, Scribner, New York 2003, p. 291.