

Appearing in Fragility, the Fragility of Appearing

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There is in all beauty a forbiddance to touch,
From which emanates I don't know what of sacred
That stops the movement and puts the man
On the point of acting in fear of himself.

Paul Valéry, *The blank sheet*¹

What is the meaning of looking *today* for a meaning of the “sacred”? What is the place of this question in our today? These questions attempt to address problems that arise from our today based on theoretical perspectives we already have or are on the quest for. We could start asking if we today need such a question, if it is merely a scholarly question or a question of theoretical curiosity or occupation.

We have inherited a certain theoretical discourse about the sacred. The sacred has also a history of its naming. The name of the sacred is a poetical gesture and shares with poetry the secretedness of its offspring. A beautiful testimony of it can be read in an Elegy attributed to Xenophanes, edited by Diels and Kranz as the first fragment.² The sacred has been named as the place and the time in which abyssal differences and identities appear. Its

¹ “En vérité, une feuille blanche/Nous déclare par le vide/Qu’il n’est rien de si beau/Que ce qui n’existe pas./Sur le miroir magique de sa blanche étendue,/L’âme voit devant elle le lieu des miracles/Que l’on ferait naître avec des signes et des lignes./Cette présence d’absence surexcite/Et paralyse à la fois l’acte sans retour de la plume./Il y a dans toute beauté une interdiction de toucher,/Il en émane je ne sais quoi de sacré/Qui suspend le geste, et fait l’homme/Sur le point d’agir se craindre soi-même.” Paul Valéry in “*La feuille blanche*.”

² Hermann Diels, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Bd 1 (Zürich-Hildesheim: Weidmann, 1989), 126–127.

archaic and historical way of being named, invoked, situates the sacred as the place and time where the difference and identity between life and death appear.

We know about sacred places—places that cannot be occupied, into which one shall not enter. St. Augustin talks about the sacred in terms of the ambiguous feeling of both feeling horror and fascination. “*Et inhorresco, et inardesco.*”³ He explains it as the awareness of both the absolute difference and the absolute identity between the divine and the human. Rudolf Otto in his famous book *Das Heilige*,⁴ (The Sacred) will also insist in this ambiguity of *tremendum* and *fascinans*, tremendous and fascinating. In this way of naming the sacred for the sake of defining it, the sacred appears not only related to the cult and the abyssal realm of death but also to the mysterious dimension of birth. The sacred appears as abyss and mystery.

In this vocabulary that expresses awareness about the sacred, the contrary of the sacred is the profane, *profanus*. The word “sacred,” comes from *sacer*, that beholds the ambiguity of both sacred and sorcery, good and evil, *s-acer*, separated from the *acer*, the field of the common. Profane is in its turn a strange word, thus it does not deny the sacred. It denotes a direction and a position, *pro-fanus*, beside the *fanus*, the temple. Profane means in the near of, beside and hence outside the sacred but necessarily in relation to the sacred. The profane is thus profoundly connected to the sacred rather than the other way around. Summarizing anthropological, historical, theological views for the sake of finding a concept of the sacred, Roger Caillois, in his book from 1949, *L’homme et le sacré*, defined it as: The sacred is what gives life and gives vivacity to life, it is the source from where life emerges, the place in which it vanishes, “*le sacré est ce qui donne de la vie et la ravit, c’est la source d’où elle coule, l’estuaire où elle se perd.*”⁵ He follows meanings intrinsic to the Latin semantic of the “sacred” and the “profane,” affirming that common life, the usual, everydayness is related to the sacred. He follows the view that institutional life, the life of the city and the singular was organized in primitive and ancient societies from the point of view of the sacred, experienced fundamentally as the abyssal and

³ Augustine, *The Confessions*, book 11, translation Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁴ Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (Munich: Verlag C. H. Beck, 1931).

⁵ Roger Caillois, *L’homme et le sacré* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), 184.

mysterious difference and identity of life *and* death. The threat of the sacred does not lie only in the separation of life and death but above all in their union. Although the ancient vocabulary of the sacred underlines the sacred as the place of an abyssal difference, as birth of hierarchies, of separation between the pure and the impure, the belonging and the non-belonging, the divine and the human, the threat lies in the danger of contamination, of fusion and con-fusion of life and death. This threat is so strong that the images of the sacred present it rather as absolute “other” than as fragile “sameness.” The sacred presents the “fragile sameness” of life and death, sameness that is fragile insofar as it only appears in its differentiation.

In this heritage of names and practices, and of anthropological, theological and philosophical descriptions of the sacred, we recognize the prevailing discourse on the difference between the sacred and the profane,⁶ between the uncommon and the common, between the uncanny and the familiar, between transcendence and immanence, between death and life. What falls into the shadows in this heritage or “memory” of the sacred is the fragile sameness of life and death—the threat, the tremendous mystery of this contamination. This shadow of “fragile sameness” of life and death is however what might show us the difficulty of addressing the question of the “meaning” of the sacred. Indeed the meaning of the sacred undermines the sacred and the sacred undermines its own meaning.

Listening to and reading of narratives about sacred practices we can talk about forms of consecrating and even of desecrating places and events. It seems that it is something we humans can do or not do. But if the sacred is a name for the abyssal and mysterious difference and identity of life and death, we would have to admit that the sacred cannot be chosen because we are already in it. And we are in such a way already in it that we can neither step into it nor step out of it. The dual relation between life and death, abyssal difference, tremendous identity, is given. It appears in this situation a “no way in and no way out.” The sacred cannot be chosen. It cannot be a need. It cannot be something to be wanted or rejected, thus the sacred is nothing, being a non-thing. George Bataille has shown how the sacred, as source for religious sensibility, is fundamentally anchored in the experience of viewing not the nothingness of life but the non-

⁶ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane, the nature of religion* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961).

thingness of life *and* death.⁷ In this sense, the sacred is profound ambiguity, *Zweideutigkeit*, the expression of a double meaning, life *and* death. The ambiguity of the sacred appears in this “and,” that separates and unites at the same time and at once.

The topology and chronology of the sacred—its “religious aesthetics” so to speak—the places and times of the sacred seem to demark very clear and hard separations. They ground hierarchies. But these separations are demarked in such a manner that what most appears is the difficulty of stepping into and stepping out of these places and times. The difficulty points towards this strange no-way-in-no-way-out from the “fragile sameness” of life and death. Rather than building separated places for the sacred, the landscapes and architecture of the sacred show the impossibility of getting into and getting out of the sacred, thus we are already in it. Places and times of the sacred reveal—in the photographic meaning of the term—this no way in and no way out of the sacred. We can interpret therefore rites of initiation, of consecration and even of desecration as rites of initiating and consecrating this no way in and no way out of the sacred, in the sense that the gift of life *and* death—within which we are always already immersed—has still to be received. That can perhaps explain why consecration implies desecration. No way in, no way out of the sacred—this is a way of describing the way the sacred is given. It is given as a gift that is always already given, but that has still to be received. To be received here means—to be discovered as a gift. The word sacred is therefore intimately related to sacrifice, the gesture of offering, giving what has always already been given—the abyssal and mysterious difference and identity of life and death—the sacred. In this sense, it would be possible to say that we—the people of today—have never lost the sacred. We are today completely lost in the sacred. We are today completely lost in this no way in, no way out of the sacred difference and identity of life and death.

No way in, no way out is indeed the way we feel about our today as a whole. It is the way we feel today the whole as the global, the planetary: no way in, no way out, nihilism and boredom, absolute immanence and messianisms without future. But the no way in, no way out shows how the today appears sensible, sensitively and sensuously for us. Beyond possible meanings and values we can give to it, the no way in, no way out shows an

⁷ Georges Bataille, *Théorie de la religion* (Paris: Tel Gallimard, 1973).

appearing. It does not indicate how things appear but how the appearing from which things appear appears itself to us. We cannot “see” the appearing as we see things, entities, and “realities.” The appearing withdraws in what appears. There is not first the appearing and then what appears. There is therefore no sequential logic of time. Time does not go by for the appearing appears in its own dis-appearing. The appearing as such is not a space, but the impossibility of escaping from it. If there is space it is a space of perplexity.

No way in, no way out—describes not when and where things appear but the overwhelming of an appearing. The appearing as such overwhelms insofar as it shows itself as an *event*. As event it is what is happening and not what has happened or would happen. Different phenomenological names for it, “apodictic evidence,” “self-donation,” “self-affection,” “Ur-impression,” “*Es gibt*,” “il y a,” “radical immanence,” despite their different degrees of stringency and perspectives, they are all trying to name this “is-being” of the appearing that eludes temporal and spatial determination of things. The appearing appears as such as meanwhile, as in-between. (In my native language, Portuguese, we use a different present participle of the verb to be than *ente* (ens, étant). We use above all the poetical *sendo*, in the sense of being meanwhile, being in-between). No way in, no way out describes sensibly, sensitively and sensuously the in-between and meanwhile of the appearing. The appearing as such is already appearing in everything that appears, but it appears withdrawing itself in what appears. The appearing as such cannot be seen but it can grasp us, can take us with the same intensity that we cannot grasp or seize it.

What kind of sensibility enables us to be grasped by what has always already grasped us? What kind of perplexity is demanded in order to seize what has already seized us, the appearing as such? Ferdinand Solger, the forgotten romantic philosopher, author of *Erwin*, or four dialogues about the beautiful and art, spoke about the “*Hinfälligkeit des Schönen*,” the fragility of beauty, to indicate the way the appearing as such appears in its own dis-appearing.⁸ The fragility of appearing is beauty. Beauty here has

⁸ K. W. F. Solger, *Erwin. Vier Gespräche über das Schöne und die Kunst* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1950). Oskar Becker, the phenomenologist, wrote about this concept of Solger in the aim of developing a phenomenological ontology from out but beyond Husserl and Heidegger at the basis of aesthetical experience. See “Von der Hinfälligkeit des Schönen und der Abenteuerlichkeit des Künstlers. Eine ontologische

nothing to do with harmonious or pacifying forms. Beauty means here unconcealment of the fragile sameness of life *and* death, revelation of the fragility of life as life's most intense strength. Solger described it in the image of someone at the top of a mountain from where one can see the whole at the same time as one can fall down in the most profound abyss. The top is a *Spitze*, a peak, the needle point of uttermost fragility thus whatever tiny step can lead into death. At the top of the mountain, in this *Spitzezeit*, all and nothingness, life and death touch each other showing their fragile sameness. Solger's Erwin describes this solitary view of the encounter between all and nothingness at the top of the mountain as the vision of an appearing as such—a vision of the fragility of beauty. It has nothing to do with alienation from the world insofar as the top of the mountain and its distance grows from profound depths of the common ground. Solitude and immensity, heights and depths, the unique and the common, sky and earth show their fragile sameness, all and nothing, life and death at once. Romantic views, we may say. Word realisms, we could also say. But in this vision of beauty as the fragility of the appearing, Solger touches on the sense of perplexity in which the appearing appears as such. Beauty means here to break down the thinghood of things, giving back to things their value of enigma, as Paul Valéry once said. Beauty means here the breaking through of wonder, silence rather than words.

“Fragility of beauty,” *wonder* is the feeling or better the attunement in Heidegger's sense in which the appearing as such appears, in which the already being grasped grasps us. The wonder is the feeling for the sacred, thus the sacred perhaps is nothing but the appearing of the appearing. Wonder breaks down the contingency or everydayness in which “we make our griefs and afflictions the measure of things.”⁹ Wonder breaks down modern man's “intoxication with lived experiences”¹⁰ because it gives us the “*Es gibt*,” the “*Il y a*.” In Bataille's terms, this means that wonder destroys

Untersuchung im ästhetischen Phänomenbereich” (Pfullingen, Neske 1963). Maurice Boucher wrote a book about Solger to situate him as a proto-phenomenologist of presence. See K. W. F. Solger, *Esthétique et Philosophie de la présence* (Paris: Stock, 1934). See also the study of Manfred Franck on Solger in *Das Problem “Zeit” in der deutschen Romantik: Zeitbewusstsein und Bewusstsein von Zeitlichkeit in der frühromantischen Philosophie und in Tiecks Dichtung* (München, Winkler verlag 1972).

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Grundfragen der Philosophie: Ausgewählte Problem der Logik*, GA 45 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1984).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

the thinghood in things. It destroys different levels of reification that structures theoretical and practical life, the life of everybody and every "body." Wonder attunes us with the appearing as such, with the fragile sameness of life and death. Wonder attunes us with the sacred. The sacred appears. That is why the terms *hierophany*, *epiphany* and *theophany* are so central in the vocabulary of the sacred.¹¹ The appearing as such is pure fragility, insofar as it shows itself in its own withdrawal.

Wonder is however also how the Greeks defined the breaking through of this strange life, called Philosophy, the strange life of a questioning, that questions insofar as the fragile sameness of life and death questions and compels the one who asks these kinds of questions. In lectures held 1937-38, titled *Grundfragen der Philosophie: Ausgewählte "Probleme" der "Logik,"* Heidegger discussed in several sessions philosophical wonder. He made here a phenomenology of wonder as the attunement in which philosophical inquiry breaks through. He begins by making a distinction between admiration, astonishment and wonder and thereafter proposes thirteen different dimensions of wonder. He defines admiration as relation to what appears as outstanding, admirable, remarkable, exciting. Admiration is connected to amazement, incapacity to explain, as being taken by the inexplicable, a displacement from the ordinary and familiar. Admiration is also understood from the perspective of the one who admires, showing this act as self-referential and an act of taking position, insofar as the one who admires feels him/herself capable to judge and even as superior in relation to that which is being judged. Admiration is defined by who admires and what is admired. It is in these senses that the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, the religious and the secular, is usually discussed.

Heidegger then describes astonishment as suspension of position taking, a separation between the usual and the unusual. Astonishment is astonishment with or in relation to something, being an unconcealment of something. Something new appears in astonishment.

As the attunement that "compels us into necessity of primordial thinking" wonder is in its turn never related to something in particular. Wonder is never attached to something. Wonder opens the whole in everything. Wonder breaks down precisely the order of things in the middle

¹¹ See here Walter Otto, *Theophania Der Geist der altgriechischen Religion*, second edition (Hamburg: Rowholt, 1956).

of things. If we follow Heidegger here, we could say that unlike admiration and astonishment that are always related to a subject and an object, wonder is the attunement where the appearing as such appears, insofar as it opens the whole and all in and within everything—and not beyond things. Heidegger insists that wonder differs from admiration and astonishment precisely because it does not separate the common from the uncommon, the usual from the unusual, the visible from the invisible. Wonder is the discovery of the extraordinary within the ordinary, the unusual within the usual, the uncommon and uncanny in the common. We could say then the sacred within the profane, life in death, death in life.

Wonder, *thaumazein*, is the attunement in which the sacred and the philosophical inquiry of beginnings touch each other. The relation between philosophy and the sacred could be understood as another sense in which the sacred and the profane touch each other, showing their affinity. At stake in the relation between the sacred and the profane is the overwhelming experience of, on the one hand, the abyssal difference and mysterious identity of life and death and, on the other, the gift of the whole in everything. Both experiences: fragile sameness of life and death and the all in everything, are related and even correlated in ways that are still to be deepened and discussed. The affinity between sacred and profane philosophy appears in the everyday relation and correlation between the sacred and what we could call tentatively “cosmoaesthetics,” the feeling of world’s immensity. I am using the term “cosmoaesthetic” to sum up the being grasped and touched by world’s immensity in which the “world” appears not only in an existential-phenomenological perspective but even in a cosmic dimension.

Talking about the sacred—from mystical African-Brazilian experiences of the sacred to the extreme rationalism of Spinoza, from animism to rational cosmology, in these most discrepant discourses about the sacred, the sacred is recurrently pronounced in relation to the power of “nature,” of world’s immensity, of the all. I am not denying crucial differences here but just pointing out how naïve both everyday representations of the sacred and theoretical accounts are. They both articulate the sacred through the “cosmic,” that is, with a sense of the world that exceeds the innerworldly togetherness of man and things, and exceeds intersubjective relations. Something in the vague and diffuse ideas and representations about the sacred articulates it as cosmic nature, to the play of forces between day and night, heaven and earth, the elemental, etc. What the articulation between

the sacred and the cosmic shows is perhaps something other than a possible relation to magic powers, irrational forces, unconscious energies. At stake here is a certain sense of togetherness that can show why the question of the sacred—as source for something like religion in both senses of *religare* and *relegere*—seems to address the question of how to live with others.

The connection between the sacred and the cosmic all, and world's immensity¹² indicates another sense of togetherness, of living with otherness that departs from an experience of existence as being in itself beyond and out of itself. This corresponds to a certain extent to the ek-static meaning of human existence described by Heidegger in *Being and Time* and later works. The experience of the sacred as connected to the experience of the “cosmic” expands however the ek-static meaning of existence insofar as it seems to bind human existence to the whole of cosmos. The philosopher that tried to develop this expanded meaning of being-in-the-world was Eugen Fink.¹³ In Fink, Husserl's notion of the earth¹⁴ complement Heidegger's notion of the play of world and earth. Here the play of day and night, of diurnal and nocturnal, heaven and earth, sleeping and awakesness, Eros and Thanatos, feminine and masculine, are seen as “existential,” that is, fundamental structures of human life. The sense of togetherness is not the one of being-with others, with otherness or even with the Other. As I would like to formulate it; togetherness appears here as *being-other-within* the self, in the sense that existence is nothing that is and further is in relation to other things. Existence, being, is relatedness as such, in-betweenness. Existence is con-fusion.

Understood as the abyssal difference and mysterious identity between life *and* death and, in this sense, as the “place” and “time” we already are and from which we cannot step out, the “sacred” can be seen as source for religion and philosophy, but also for secularization. In most part of contemporary discussions about secularization, post metaphysics, religion, etc. a question is still missing. Religion, the sacred, etc. used to be considered as the presence of a past—a past that we can see either as

¹² See my article “On Immensity” in *Phenomenology and Religion: New Frontiers*, eds. Jonna Bornemark and Hans Ruin (Stockholm: Södertörn Philosophical Studies, 2010).

¹³ See Eugen Fink, *Existenz und Coexistenz* (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 1987).

¹⁴ See Edmund Husserl, “Grundlegende Untersuchungen zum phänomenologischen Ursprung der Räumlichkeit der Natur” in *Philosophical Essays in Memory of Edmund Husserl*, ed. Marvin Farber (New York: Greenwood Press, 1968).

something we need to keep and develop or as something we do not need at all, but anyway as presence of the past in our today. In this sense, religion is usually related to institutions, to forms of common life, to cultural and traditional heritages, etc. Secularization means in everyday discussions modernity, an inexplicable moment or event in history where a separation from the sacred, from the religious, (rather than from religion) happened, the cutting of the bound with tradition, disenchanted autonomy, etc. But what would happen if we did not read history in this historiographical meaning, in terms of episodes in successive or linear time, but as an appearing in history of how the sacred and the profane relate to each other? The sacred and the profane could then be seen as “historical names” for the abyssal difference and mysterious identity of life and death, and for the whole in everything. In this sense, we could say that secularization, the desecrating of the sacred belongs to the sacred. This cut from the whole of life—I mean the cut or treat from the whole of nature that we call modernity, the discontinuity that modernity seems to have installed in the course of history, would appear no longer as the opposite to historical continuity but as the way life lives continuously. This would also mean to discover how the opposition between continuity and discontinuity is too metaphysical, too logically oppositional in order to clarify the relation between the sacred and the profane. Bataille’s way of describing what Aristotle already saw very clearly, in his works *On the parts of Animals* and other “biological” writings, is very inspiring since he showed how individual existence—of a singular or of a historical moment—is the discontinuous continuity of the whole of life. In other words: if the sacred indicates the ambiguity of life itself—life as birth and death—the in-betweenness after death and before birth, the presence of the dead and of the unborn in present life, and therefore the existential peak where logic of oppositions, dual systems break down (we call this irrationality), then what would happen with the oppositions we are dealing with here if we were to see these experiences from the point of view of their ambiguities?

But today, why should we discuss those things? What is our today? Is it not a situation of historical no way out thus how could we go back and how could we step out of it? How do we experience our today? The today is an experience of a no way out. The no way out of a today is experienced today as loss of grounds and roots, as a *no longer belonging* to earth and nature, and neither to history nor to man. It appears as a no longer belonging without, however, arriving to another ground or heaven. The *historical*

sensation is the one of having departed without return but also without arrival. The historical sensation is the one of a historical exile in the in-between. Our today is such that an existence in exile is not only an individual or collective experience but also an epochal one, something like an age or era of exile.

A life in exile is a life in exile from life, choosing not to live for the sake of not dying (as Seneca formulated in his dialogue *On Consolation*). It is a life in continuous estrangement, a life where one becomes a stranger in one's own home and never feels at home in strangeness. It is a life living as illegal in the disquiet of the in-between. It is a loss without return but also without arrival insofar as the natural identity with the self is broken and the identity with the other can never become natural. A life in exile has in fact no time and space because it exists in a space- and time-between. It is a life in which one experiences at once a suspension and an intensification of proximity and distance in time and space. A person in exile is never here nor there, being always here and there, in the presence of the no longer and of the not yet. In the exile of the today, we are with and without the past and the future. In English, we can simply say we are *with-out*. We are with-out the past and the future as we are with-out our deads and unborns. Assuming the exilic nature of the today, it becomes possible to assume another sense of community that is not solely restricted to the living beings, but includes our deads and unborns, dimensions of an after death and a before birth. Here another meaning of difference emerges, the meaning of difference as non-otherness. In the exile of the today, overwhelmed by the no way out, we experience primordially the fragility of the singular. A life in exile is a life exposed to its own fragility, to its being with-out a home and a beyond both at home and beyond. In our today, we experience in different levels of existence the fragility of the life of the singular in the middle of the gigantism of the exploration of our world. We experience further the fragility of life in nature and in history. In these experiences where the fragility of the life in nature, in history, in human existence becomes exposed we experience the fragility of the today. In it, we discover how fragility is the point where nothing and everything coincides.

Exile is life in the fragility of being with-out the self and the other, the familiar and the strange, suffering and joy, life and death. It obliges a strange learning. Rather than learning new commandments, it demands to "learn to dis-learn" as the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa phrased it. Life in exile asks for what could be called a *negative pedagogy*, a learning to

dislearn, showing what kind of distance is at stake in the thinking-feeling of a today. Philosophy is commonly defined as critical and self-critical thinking. By critique is meant on the one hand *reflection*, i.e., moving back thoughts to their ground and presuppositions, and, on the other, *separation* from given states of facts and statements in order to see their limits and contradictions. Today, this sense of self-critical critique may be necessary but it is not enough. We live in a moment where there are too many words, thoughts, references, information, activities, ambition, productivity, where knowledge, critique, reflection, feelings, ethics and politics are consumed as merchandises. Urgent is to learn to dis-learn in the sense of placing philosophical inquiry in the risky point of today's fragility, in which we abandon what is our own, dare to remain in this point where we no longer have something but neither have something else. If our today is experienced as the today in which, paraphrasing some verses of T. S. Eliot, "the lost word is lost, [...] the spent word is spent, the unheard, unspoken word is unspoken, unheard; still is the unspoken word, the Word unheard, The World Without a Word, the Word within the World and for the world." Still is the fragile existence of life *and* death in nature, in history, in the human. The task today is to think carefully and to care thoughtfully for this fragile sacred "still" of *life and death* in our today as the place and time of the sacred, as the sacred place of life and death.