

## **BEFORE THE CRIB: IMAGE BEFORE THOUGHT**

*Marcello Tari*

I am sitting on a bench in the church of the Augustinian nuns' monastery, with the scene unfolding just a few meters in front of me<sup>1</sup>. Leaning against the altar, now shrouded in a thick cloak of a starry sky, the image seems to rise from the floor while simultaneously gliding from the vault, embodying round simplicity. Like that of all the characters in the nativity scene, my gaze is naturally drawn to its fulcrum: a manger, that in a few hours will host the little body of a newborn baby. Thus, through our shared gaze, I imperceptibly become a character within that crib. The image precedes the thought.

The angel is caught in his steep descent as he gently points to Him; the shepherds, farmers and artisans come from the most diverse directions of the earth and seem both amazed and relieved as they look at Him, each exhibiting their own gesture which, traditionally rough, becomes gentle and caring; Even the ox, the donkey, and the camel, as well as the trees, the flowers and the grass, seem to incline towards Him as if driven by a gentle wind, attracted by a deep and unmistakable voice calling them to Him; Mary, kneeling with her hands clasped on her chest, with Joseph standing beside her, supported by a long stick, delightedly surround the bag from which comes the bread of life. I take a closer look and realise that even the large stones and beams of the hut, framed by a star, seem to be subjected to the same force of attraction. I myself now feel transfixed by that irresistible force. It is that the heavens are storming the earth: reality, the cosmos, life, the universe all contract around that fulcrum, standing still in the moment of wonder. Everything is wrapped in silence in the moment before the explosion of joy.

### ***Overturnings***

In this still image that the crib allows us to contemplate is the beginning of all reversals, of the transvaluation of all values.

Here comes a thought: Platonically, one had to be able to escape from the cave, that is, to reject and escape from our own life made up of flesh and earth and history, in order to contemplate the Light. The soul had to separate itself from the body, which was considered a cumbersome obstacle to the knowledge of the luminous ideal reality of goodness placed beyond matter, flesh and its crude ideas. Yet ancient man, his supreme order, his gods, his philosophy and his Light all remained within the confines of the world. Here, with the Gospel, we must instead immerse ourselves wholeheartedly in the cosmic elements and travel the rough paths of history, we must walk on steep roads, climb along the paths of the possible and then bow down, make ourselves small and finally enter the cave to worship the Light of the world, which, voilà the truth, does not consist of a beautiful idea set up in the firmament like a large lantern, but emanates from the body of a child set down here. Yet everything in this scene, in this defenceless infant, alludes to a *beyond* of this world. That cave, with its "smells" and its poor furnishings, deconstructs every conceit of our culture and civilisation. It is a permanent invitation to pierce the boundaries of the known and the

unknown, and to orient ourselves we have only to follow what is fragile, defenceless, poor, needy. And *therefore* royal. The Messiah comes into the world and is only a child, but he is so perfectly so in his naked poverty that he is the "King of Heaven".

Behind the apparent serenity of the nativity scene, thrones are cast down and proud hearts are in disarray, because here the last, the small, the humble, are the first to arrive. And those who will then spread this good news are "those who have turned the world upside down", as the accusation against St. Paul and the other disciples in the New Testament version of King James (Act 17:6), which gave the inspiration for an old English folk song, *sounds*. But upside down, this scene only appears to those who do not want to fall from those thrones.

### ***Against aristocracies***

As I look at the crib, I think that today, instead of Platonism, there is transhumanism, post-humanism, digital aristocracy and wild gnosis. The Gospel, on the other hand, is always the same Word coming to inhabit the world, always here to tell us of the divine Incarnation. Always that child, always that man, always that Lord who will announce, heal, liberate, sweat blood, be crucified, die and rise again.

The crib allows me to pause before the image of that new beginning and, possibly, have a revelation come to me. The body is not a cursed prison, but the holy habitation of the spirit. Life is not a dark cave to escape from, but the breath of God in the flesh that allows me to know and love. Salvation passes through the earth, men, women, blood and history. Redeemed by that body, flesh of God and man, which unites heaven and earth in itself and whispers "I am". From then on, to see a bit of heaven, it will be enough to look from that perspective at the ordinary man and woman I meet on the way.

To go towards the Light, then, I too must each time set out, dust myself off, strip myself, recognise the right side of reality and become *only* what I am. Make space, make emptiness, "make poverty", and allow that child to be born in the cave of my interiority. Rightly famous is indeed the saying of Silesius always remembered in these days: "A thousand times Christ was born in Bethlehem but not in you: you are lost forever"<sup>2</sup>. And I think: a nativity scene in every heart, thousands, millions, a multitude of nativity scenes "inheartened", in Calais and in Kiev, in Gaza and in Moscow, in Sao Paulo and in Kinshasa, in Oslo and in Sydney, in Jerusalem and in Rome, would be enough to overcome all the evil of the "world", of that land that wants to remain closed in on itself, without heaven, without a child, without mercy, lost.

### ***Stillstands: Benjamin in Bethlehem***

*Stillstand*, which means in German state of arrest, stasis, suspension, interruption, immobility, is one of the most important words in Benjamin's vocabulary. What he calls 'dialectics in a state of standstill', *Dialektik im Stillstand*, lies at the heart of his theological philosophy of history and indeed one could call it, with a hint of irony, his "motionless engine".

History is not a "homogeneous and empty" progressive line, but proceeds by discontinuities, jumps, interruptions and "awakenings", Benjamin argues, and those discontinuities can be described as dialectical frames in which a past is concentrated

and which, coming into contact with actuality, comes to its legibility, thus saving itself and composing each time a new "constellation" of meaning, of life, of history: "image is that in which what has been lightning unites with the now in a constellation. In other words: image is the dialectic in stillness"<sup>3</sup>. But in that encounter/clash of temporal tensions there is also the occasion, the *kairòs* that Benjamin calls "now-time", the *Jetztzeit* through which the image can suddenly signify the redemption of the whole oppressed past in the messianic explosion of actuality.

By sound analogy, it is easy to associate this compound word, *Stillstand*, with that of the festive song *Stille Nacht*, the silent night, the suspended night of the Lord's Christmas, the night when all our talking and gesticulating cannot but come to a halt because it is precisely the Word who became flesh by coming to dwell among us. On that night when the stars move swiftly as if to compose a "new song", history and the entire universe undergo a shock that forces the former to stop and start turning in another direction and the motion of the universe to stop for a moment, immobilised by wonder. Indeed, everyone notices that something is happening. In fact, the Gospel recounts how not only Herod, which is like saying "the power", but the whole of Jerusalem, which is like saying "civilization", is disturbed (Mt 2:3).

The suspension to which the dialectical image bears witness is part of a salvific lexicon, messianic in Benjamin's intentions. The nativity scene, I suddenly realise, is a perfect representation of this, and we can find it fixed in a splendid passage from the proto-gospel of James, which plastically photographs just the instant before Jesus' birth:

"But I, Joseph, was walking, and I was not walking. I looked up to the vault of the sky, and I saw it standing still, and into the air, and I saw that it was greatly disturbed, and the birds of the sky were at rest. I looked down to the earth and saw a bowl laid out for some workers who were reclining to eat. Their hands were in the bowl, but those who were chewing were not chewing; and those who were taking something from the bowl were not lifting it up; and those who were bringing their hands to their mouths were not bringing them to their mouths. Everyone was looking up. I saw a flock of sheep being herded, but they were standing still. The shepherd raised his hand to strike them, but his hand remained in the air. I looked down at the torrential stream, and I saw some goats whose mouths were over the water, but they were not drinking. Then suddenly everything returned to its normal course"<sup>4</sup>.

## **Generation**

The birth of Jesus is a cosmic interruption and a suspension of the time continuum, thus the awakening of the entire creation, a new beginning, the redemptive fulfilment of all previous history and the beginning of its new course. The whole of creation, which "groans and suffers in labour pains" (Rm 8:22), holds its breath for a moment.

The biblical God acts in the world through second causes, that is, through history and nature. His is not a creation that ended once and for all but one that continues always, every day, every moment, and in which men are called to collaborate. And I think it is also this that Walter Benjamin wanted to tell us with his "dialectic in a state of arrest", so that in grasping the intensity of that moment of historical saturation, in which everything appears motionless, we might contemplate, penetrate, know and

participate intimately in the making of the eternal in history, in the generations of nature and God, in the very dynamic of creation. To the very birth of Christ here and now.

Humanity's memories are redeemed in the now of actuality, which pushes towards eschatological fullness. Benjamin said: "The now of knowability is the instant of awakening". It is the now of truth. Awakening, which follows interruption, is the gesture that serves to overcome the dark powers of myth that are always present in the phantasmagorias that enchant humanity, keeping it in a state of narcosis. The past is thus transfigured into the now of knowledge: resurrected in truth.

If we had the ability to grasp and meditate on the interruptions, suspensions and silences that occur in our lives, and the courage to prepare a nativity scene in our hearts, I believe everything would begin to turn differently. Unfortunately, most of the time we are so distracted that if a comet appeared in front of us we wouldn't pay much attention to it and, if we ever noticed it, instead of following it we would probably peek through the phone screen to see what is being said about it on social media. That is why the Light must penetrate the flesh, the interruption happens within, the suspension in life. A young French philosopher, Foucauld Giuliani, effectively illustrates the fact that this suspension is exactly what the coming into contact with the content of faith demands: "The objective of any Christian transmission could be stated in this way: not to rationalise the Gospel, but to lead the neophyte to the threshold of madness, it being understood that the latter does not mean a disorder of thought but the suspension of reason"<sup>5</sup>. It is in this suspension that the *metànoia*, the conversion, is denoted, when life suddenly turns in another direction and, waking up, knows that nothing will ever be the same again. Here, now, in front of the crib, on the threshold of the madness of love.

1. Monastery of Santi Quattro Coronati in Rome.

2. Angelus Silesius, *Il Pellegrino Cherubico* (Milan: Edizione Paoline, 1992), 118.

3. Walter Benjamin, *Opere Complete IX. I "passages" di Parigi*, (Turin: Edizioni Einaudi, 2000), 516.

4. From *The Proto-Gospel of James*, in *The Apocryphal Gospels*, texts and translations, Barth D. Ehrman and Zlato Pleše (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 61.

5. Foucauld Giuliani, *La vie dessaisie. La foi comme abandon plutôt que la maîtrise*, (Paris : Desclée de Brouwer, 2022), 70.

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