

Giornale di **Metafisica**

Fondato nel 1946 da Michele Federico Sciacca

2
2015

L'annuncio

MORCELLIANA

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Antonello da Messina, *Annunciata*

Annunciation

A strange Annunciation. Just the young woman, no angel. Foreground without background. No doves, no rays of light, no columns, no lilies. No celestial sky or gilded halo. Only her and us. At the moment.

Antonello da Messina's painting embodies Luke's phrase about the girl at Nazareth – she «was troubled and pondered (*dialogizomai*)». Here she ponders. See her face: in two minds between yes and no. *Voglio, non voglio*, as echoed by Zerlina. Or *trasi e nesci* as they say in Sicily where the image hangs today in the Palazzo Abatellis in Palermo. She hovers still on the threshold, passing to and fro, hither and thither, fore and aft.

Look at the line running from the top of her blue mantle along the bridge of her nose straight down the V of her shawl through the knuckles of her hand to that light/dark dividing edge of the lectern. The lectern with two sides, one illuminated, one shadowed, bearing the book with a single lifted page opening and closing in an “anatheistic instant”. *Ana-theos*: after God and before God. Too early and too late. What is she pondering? And why must it wait – suspended in mid air – as she responds to what calls her, in the flesh, from writing to touch, from parchment to skin. Infinitesimal suspension mirroring, in turn, her hands. Ambidextrous. One hand opening towards the viewer – the stranger, the painter, you and me? The other closing her mantle, protecting, hiding, withholding. And look at those eyes – riddling as Mona Lisa's – averted as they “ponder”: the right turning inward, withdrawing into shade, as the left brightens slowly, maybe, into a smile of “yes”.

Luke's Gospel tells us little. Which is why we need painters and poets. Painters like da Messina, Botticelli, Raphael, who dared imagine. Poets like Levertov, Hudgins, Semonovitch, who dared speak. They let us look and listen again:

«God waited
She was free
to accept or refuse, choice
integral to humanness».

(Denise Levertov)

«And though she will, she's not yet said,
Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord...
(as she) refuses, accepts, refuses, thinks again».
(Andrew Hudgins)

«She hears a flutter of wings. His coat hits the floor...
He said, Imagine
How it will be when you are with me...Who'd touch
A girl like that mid-day. Mary chose grace over fear. Not to call it – but
Joy. Not to call it but God. Strange. Not to call him
Known but not...And that was God. So perhaps,
It was always so? She's half thinking now, only half, the white wine lily
Door open drapes
Refolding gasp through me down the day is cool...».
(Kascha Semonovitch)

Like the poets, da Messina invites each of us to be an *angelus* – a messenger where human meets divine (from the Hebrew meaning “one going” and “one sent”). The *Annunciata* captures the Nazarena on the threshold, oscillating between light and shade, declining and consenting. I call her the Nazarena because Mary is too late (she has left the girl behind) and Madonna is too soon (she is not yet the Mater of all men). Neither daughter nor mother, neither servant nor spouse, she hangs between. Nazarena is her middle name. Nazareth her home without home. Her most familiar place of strangeness. Ravishing far near. Nazareth from the verb *nasar*, to keep secrets, as in Isaiah's “secret things” (*Is* 48,6).

My God, what *is* she thinking? What is she imagining as the page turns? What story from Torah or Talmud has lit her mind and body and prepared her for the message? Is it Eve possessed by “the lust of the eyes” as forbidden fruit is offered? (Augustine's *cupiditas oculorum*). Is it Sarah receiving strangers who promise an impossible child? (The same words uttered by Sarah's visitors at Mamre – «Nothing is impossible to God» (*Gen* 18,14) – are used by Luke (1,30) to describe the announcement to Mary). Is it Rachel courted by Jacob at the well? (Same place where the Samaritan woman would play guessing games with the Nazarena's son). Or Susanna surprised by lusty elders in her solitude? Who knows what thoughts passed through her soul? The Nazarena never tells. She never wrote it down, in book or diary or letter or note. She only reads, pages and faces – pages as faces, faces as pages. Carnal hermeneutics of hand and scent, of ear and eye. Making sense of her senses. Faith beyond words, faith as *fiançailles* and *fidens*. Trust over terror (Rilke is right: every angel *is* terrible). Grace over fear.

Nazarena is neither first nor last. After Sarah and the biblical matriarchs and before Saint Teresa and the theoerotic mystics (Margarete Porete, Margaret Mary Alacoque, the Beguines, Ety Hillesum), this maiden from Nazareth is always too early and already too late. Her time is out of time, before hours and after hours, uncanny, traumatic, ana-chronic, ana-theistic, *nachträglich*.

The Nazarena's double response – to hosting the stranger's impossible love – is perhaps our condition too? Is she not telling us that we also dwell in a moment of A-N-A where the first "A" of a-dieu (withdrawing, abstaining, absenting) passes through flesh into the second "A" of a-dieu (opening up, reaching out, attending). Suspended between the double A of *ab deo* and *ad deum*, hovering in the interim, the no-mans-land of neither here nor there. The "N" at the heart of A-N-A is the Nazarena herself, in flesh and blood, in cloak and book, in hands and eyes and mouth and look. She is the "N" of the *Nunc* between before and after. Our lady of mi-lieu, inhabiting the space between here and there. She dwells amongst us. Between the two A's of already and advent. Between the *deus absconditus* and the *deus adventurus*. The now of the Nazarena. Ever presencing. *Hic et Nunc. Nunc aeternus. Verbum caro factum est.*