

Looking at the Fog

by Paolo Pecere

[preprint]

1.

The sky over the church is pale. A limpid, heavy mantle that weighs on the head like the marble held up by its Atlantes. I am welcomed inside, in the half-light. The first place I come to is a courtyard with a tree stretching its limbs toward the sky. The hallways appear, invaded by weeds. I'm not sure which way to go.

I recognize parts of the Ospedaletto complex that I've seen in Giorgio Andreotta Calò's work *Nebula*, where a solitary sheep roams through these settings. An animal wandering about in a place that was once home to care and pain: inhabited by orphans, the disabled, sex workers, people with addictions, and other socially marginalized figures, before it was turned into a nursing home for the elderly. Across the street, a group home for the mentally ill is still in operation. As I've been informed, the artist became familiar with this place as a child. I've been drawn here by the call of certain themes I've been exploring for years: loss, mental suffering. Something binds them together, but I can't make it out. My motivations are obscure, the destination unknown, although this is definitely a place where I must seek it.

The same thing happened to the land surveyor K. at the beginning of *The Castle*, by Franz Kafka. "There was nothing to be seen of Castle Mount, for mist and darkness surrounded it, and not the faintest glimmer of light showed where the castle lay. K. stood on the wooden bridge leading from the main road to the village for a long time, looking up at what seemed to be a void."¹ Like everyone else, I am a character in a story that others have begun, and about which I am in the dark: over that darkness I cast the net of language, to capture the trace of a trail.

2.

Circumstances make us more receptive to encounters: I came into contact with this work while in temporary lodgings, away from home. I watched the sheep wake up in the church of Santa Maria dei Derelitti; watched it get to its feet, slipping on the marble, and move in the direction of a tinkling bell, the promise of a flock, through empty rooms filled with holy images that mean nothing to the animal. I, too, was disoriented and unsure where to go, contemplating that architecture shattered into image, and decided to explore it in the flesh. I set out with desire and trepidation.

The dichotomic structure of the building seems to unfold along the polarity of human existence: from chapels and music rooms adorned with Baroque flights of fancy, aesthetic divertissements, and metaphysical grapplings—in the historic part that houses the exhibition²—one walks down short corridors and enters the broken-down carcass of

¹ Franz Kafka, *The Castle*, trans. Anthea Bell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.

² This video by Giorgio Andreotta Calò takes its title from the exhibition *Nebula* in Venice's Ospedaletto complex, which comprises the church of Santa Maria dei Derelitti, the Scala del Sardi, the Sala della Musica, and the abandoned premises of the former nursing home [Editor's Note].

an edifice, much of it invaded by weeds, dust, and guano. I look at the crumbling plaster blistered by time, the panels ripped from the white ceiling to expose its metal and electrical veins. Then, as if I'd stepped through a secret passage, the dizzying spiral staircase. Here a paradoxical ascension begins: not up to celestial heights, but down toward the lowest level of mortal life.

I reach the abandoned floors: here I recognize the whitish, yellowish, grayish tint of hospitals, the copper-colored, red-stamped plaques by the elevators, the drab doors, details I've seen in the past while visiting wards that smelled of disinfectant, sweat, and struggle. Here life was administrated, administered according to protocol, the way it is in a public institution or a slaughterhouse. I peer into the empty rooms with peeling walls: they still hold beds for the long-term patients, discarded mattresses, pots that are still sprouting shriveled plants. As soon as I enter I'm struck by a wave of disorientation and loneliness, deafening as a scream, stinging my eyes. Anyone, in a place like this, is transported to another time, past or future, to some desperate day we will be stuck in forever. Here are the chairs where bodies will sit in exhaustion, the beds where bodies will die, the empty spaces they will leave, in the time that eats away at memory. My presence is attached to a particular absence, to an abandonment that determined my existence. All I am now is a faltering gaze, digging into emptiness.

I wander indefinitely. I inspect emptied lockers still bearing the name of the last guest. I find signs of incursion by birds, chairs staring at broken windows, through which I contemplate the hospital wing still in use, as the wind blends with my breath and says many things. There's a cuttlefish bone on the floor.

The woman who speaks at the end of the film might live in a room like this one. She says all she can see is white, and in this glare she believes in God, the **supreme mind**. I'm reminded of Isaiah: *For lo! darknesses shall cover the earth, and mist shall cover peoples; but the Lord shall rise on thee, and his glory shall be seen in thee.*³ A Christian doctrine of pain invites me to think of this place as the calvary of the animal that ascends, led by celestial music to glory, through glittering rooms where the singing of orphans and the art of painters responded to privation. Angelic musicians drift over pastel-tinged vaults; in the shadows one can glimpse the lamb of God. But this framing of things is not enough: moving through the luminous, empty building I do not reach any visionary revelation; instead, like the sheep, I am on a pilgrimage toward fog.

3.

The sheep wakes up alone, cut off from the flock: an unnatural separation. Something similar was experienced by humans during the COVID-19 epidemic, when isolation became necessary to limit its spread. There was talk of *herd immunity*, which would have cost many lives. The choice to temporarily sever social ties was made in the interest of each individual's health. In the case of the sheep, however, it seems like whatever cruel intelligence tore it away from the flock has failed to grasp its nature: this animal doesn't know how to live by itself, its existence is inseparable from that of its companions, on its own it will go mad, will die. The image of its alarmed, wary eyes prompts us to think

³ Isaiah 60:2.

about this difference: what does another animal perceive? What does existence feel like to it?

Over the centuries that the Ospedaletto housed the needy, Europe went through a wave of reflection on mental anomalies. In John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, madmen, brutes, and children form a triad: examples of intelligence that is limited by nature. In contrast, he describes the rational processing of experience, which cultivates the blank slate of the mind and justifies human knowledge, just as the agricultural development of the land supposedly justified the appropriation of the Americas and the genocide of indigenous peoples. Europeans often doubted that savages had a soul like their own. Yet gradually, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, the polarity between reason and its other was destabilized. Thinkers began to explore the opacity of the mind, the *fundus animae* from which unusual ideas and behaviors emerge, the dark realm of the subconscious. The self is just a dam, and life—as Friedrich Nietzsche would write—can overflow it. A journey began that would lead to the acknowledgment that there are different cultures, different experiences, and different worlds; that the world of childhood extends into adulthood, and madmen, who were once locked away in asylums, cannot be cured by isolation: a tortuous philosophical journey, which would lead to Franco Basaglia. And after grasping the diversity of human experience, it has moved on towards that of animals.

4.

The sheep is the meekest of creatures, docile but stupid, a model of morality because it loves its neighbors in the flock as itself: this is how medieval bestiaries describe the animal. I myself say that the sheep wandering around the Ospedaletto complex—as I watch it in the video—is *lost, alarmed, stubborn*. I unavoidably use human words, but I'm not sure how appropriate they are. That wooly body, those spindly legs, that dull, lowered gaze, suggest an experience that is somewhat enigmatic. The difference of the animal body is associated with a modification of mental faculties even in Platonic texts on the embodiment of the soul. Giordano Bruno, who echoed them, wrote that the soul “of man is the same in specific and generic essence as that of flies, sea oysters, and plants, and of anything whatsoever that one finds animated or has a soul,” but differs in “mind and functions” depending on the structure in which it is embodied.⁴ Baruch Spinoza explained that desire will be different in a man and a horse just as their natures are different, and shows how language spins its wheels in attempting to describe this discrepancy: he speaks of the difference between *human* desire and *equine* desire.⁵ Other animals, given that they have other bodies, must have other affects, other forms of intelligence, and there is no longer a scale of values on which these can be arranged. We are all variations on a body that can perceive only a small part of the universe.

When I reflect on these things, I see the lost sheep from a double perspective: observed through the lens that captures its wandering, it is an animal unable to interpret the place

⁴ Giordano Bruno, *Cabala del cavallo pegaseo*, in *Dialoghi filosofici italiani* (Milan: Mondadori, 2000), 717. English edition: *The Cabala of Pegasus*, trans. Sidney Sondergard and Madison Sowell (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 56.

⁵ Baruch Spinoza, *Ethics*, trans. Michael Silverthorne and Matthew Kisner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 140.

it finds itself in, or understand the aims of those who have put it there. But if we widen the frame to include ourselves, who are judging this limited animal, we discover limitations of our own. Our shortcomings have been obvious since ancient times, when tragic heroes bemoaned the blindness that led them to wrong and foolish actions. Two thousand years later, the naturalist Carl Linnaeus—though known for his rigidity in classifying species and races—when trying to indicate the specific difference of *Homo sapiens*, no longer said it was the *possession of reason*, but wrote: “*nosce te ipsum*,” know thyself.⁶ The self, which supposedly distinguishes the human mind from others, is not a given, but an imperative, a task, whose success is not guaranteed.

Psychology has confirmed this: our mind, sealed by that proud word *I*, is a deep well mostly unknown to us. We confabulate explanations for things we have done without understanding the real motives. We continually grapple with the uncertain and the unknown, and the best-trained intelligence lies in recognizing and probing them, rather than basking in comforting stories or fuming at any enemy who makes us doubt our competence.

Basaglia drew on philosophical investigations of the phenomenology of lived experience, in which the worlds perceived by a child, an old person, a schizophrenic, or the average middle-class individual are different and equally valid. The experiences of the patients who left pens and lighters in these rooms, ate on the pull-out trays of their beds, pondered their condition, and perhaps had whispered conversations with God are also mine. They contain my own finiteness, my contingency, my obscurity. The woman who—at the end of the film—expresses her faith in a superior intelligence is not conveying actual knowledge, but challenging reality and its limitations, which also hold true for me.

If there is no absolute privilege of self-control, then treatment that confines the mentally ill without listening to their voices is oppressive. As Franco Basaglia saw it, the rejection of the asylum began with the political revolutions of modernity, when “it came to be seen that the people wanted a hand in the management of power, and above all that the people were not an animal that could be easily tamed.”⁷ The mentally ill would be liberated from unconditional dependence on psychiatrists.

For centuries, sheep have been the very image of a creature that lets itself be controlled and led. And yet its gaze can no longer be seen as pitiable. Three years before the Italian Mental Health Act of 1978 recognized that individuals should be placed at the center of their own psychiatric care, Peter Singer published *Animal Liberation* (1975): even the sentient minds of other animals called for a different kind of treatment.

Perhaps the sheep in the Ospedaletto complex was not imprisoned, but rather set free. Perhaps it is moving through a world beyond the human sphere.

5.

The sheep can glimpse light through the shadows, like a human being on the threshold of a revelation. When the fabric of life rips open, and a person feels in danger of returning to the undifferentiated state from which they were born, the sense of the

⁶ Carl Linnæus, *Systema naturæ, sive regna tria naturæ systematice proposita per classes, ordines, genera, & species* (Leiden: Haak, 1735), [page number].

⁷ Franco Basaglia, *Conferenze brasiliane* (Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 2018), 5.

sacred manifests itself, both distressing and alluring. I think back to ancient and modern tales about animals: Pliny claimed that elephants show “respect for the stars,” when they perform their ablutions, and some, “when exhausted by sickness,” throw grass “towards the sky, as though beseeching the Earth to answer their prayers.”⁸ More recently, Jane Goodall attributed a sense of the sacred to chimpanzees who throw rocks and seem to experience “awe, wonder” when contemplating a waterfall, just as when watching a sunset.⁹ We humans throw words at the sky.

The lost sheep, as it moves from semidarkness into the fog that begins to fill the rooms of the Ospedaletto, now looks to me not like a flawed animal, but a creature much like ourselves, moving on through the mist while clinging to an unproven certitude.

6.

The woman’s speech—in the film—alludes to metaphysical dimensions: “I am a medium,” she says, “I talk to the afterworld.” She believes in a “supreme mind,” in reincarnation, but not in Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary. Ancient Platonic doctrines echo through specific words. The soul is freed of the body, it moves closer to the Intellect from which everything derives, it goes back into another body. As I climb the spiral staircase, I glance up at the oval of light, imagining an ascendent hierarchy: on the ground floor the animal awakens, on the upper floors man arrives, and finally, when the animal escapes its bodily prison, it rises to the state of angels, celestial minds. This image leads to what seems like a valid analogy: just as the sheep does not understand what is going on in this human edifice, people, too, do not understand the universe they inhabit. I reach the terrace and hear flapping wings. These are physical, animal wings: seagulls come in through the open windows, taking the place of human inhabitants and leaving traces of their presence, including that incongruous cuttlefish bone, set on the plaster-strewn floor like a message.

“The sky is black, it’s not blue,” says the medium, defying popular opinion. I can’t see and know nothing of metaphysical transcendence, but this journey has suggested a different kind of transcendence to me, that of life with respect to human consciousness. Unified consciousness, in which we weave our stories, is only an island emerging from the ocean of plant and animal life. Humanity’s disaster makes room for multifaceted life, with its differently formed minds.

As I wander through the Ospedaletto complex—reliving what I saw in the video—I identify with the pure feelings of the other animal, I lose track of my own goals and plans, of the narrative exertions through which I try to link things together. I give up on biography, returning to the pure pulse of life. I am no longer me.

7.

⁸ Pliny, *Natural History*, trans. John Healy (London: Penguin 2004), 108.

⁹ Goodall uses this expression in a filmed interview:

<https://www.npr.org/sections/13.7/2012/03/28/149531687/anti-stress-serenity-injection-the-chimpanzee-waterfall-video>.

The young scholar who's waiting for me, upon seeing how drained I am, says only: "It's a good thing to be moved." When I come out into the Venetian *calli*, the limpid light no longer fools me. A listless rain is coming down. My mind is still a fluid phosphorescence, hanging over the body that follows it, wobbling like a broken bone. As my sense of identity begins to congeal again, I am reminded of the love affair between Giorgio Manganelli and Alda Merini, which overlapped with her confinement in a mental hospital. "Seeing myself as a little girl / he began to tell me," Merini wrote, "that I might come to know / the metal / of a truer, better life. / I woke up in bloom, / suddenly in the asylum."¹⁰ And he wrote, in his introduction to *L'altra verità: Diario di una diversa*: "I think that seldom has anyone more resolutely tested out the empyrean quality of the word in dealing with the exploration of hell."¹¹ Many years before, Manganelli had already joked about the fragile framework of identity: "the self is held together by adjustments to the records, by tricks, dissolves, special effects, a grating soundtrack, a knitting needle used as a seismograph, a poster that reads 'visit Lourdes.'"¹²

As for tricks and epiphanies, I come looking for them on a pilgrimage to Venice. This is a time when the city fills up with simulacra of our invisible search for meaning, which we call works of art. The lagoon becomes a huge prehistoric cave, where humans from around the world have retreated to shake off the obligations and oppressions of the present. They have drawn or sculpted figures, sketches, symbols, which allude to a primal elsewhere. This meditation on the sheep wandering through the Ospedaletto has made me aware of the essential role played by the gaze in making the meaning of objects manifest, and turning them into hints of other senses. To the sheep, the painting of the crucifixion is invisible, whereas the sound of a bell strikes sensory and emotional harmonies that to me are inconceivable.

And so I am caught off guard by a final question: is the fog that clouds my vision just another trick of my nature? Should we believe Paul's rhetoric in his letter to the Corinthians? *For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.*¹³ Is it really conceivable that there is a way past darkness, at the end of which lies full comprehension? Communicating with the *supreme mind*, as the medium claims to do, or even contemplating it *face to face*? Or is the other side of the looking-glass just another mirage produced by our conformation, our own ganglia, the eddies of our minds? Perhaps the glass is an illusion rooted in our form of life, like the idea of the flock to the sheep, who follows the sound of the bell but will find no herd in the Ospedaletto.

The fog is not a cataract that hinders vision, *it is vision*. And in that case there is no end to the animal's wandering between sleep and the revealed light of the other world. Every form of life sees differently, children and adults, sheep and gulls, and every mode of seeing has its haziness. We must go forward through the fog.

¹⁰ Alda Merini, *La palude di Manganelli o il monarca del re* (Milan: La vita felice, 2011), 33.

¹¹ Alda Merini, *L'altra verità. Diario di una diversa* (Milan: Scheiwiller, 1986) 8.

¹² Giorgio Manganelli, *Hilarotragoedia* (Milan: Adelphi, 1987), 52.

¹³ Corinthians 13:12.