

For an Anthropology of Permanent Risk. Madness and Crisis of Civilization in Ernesto De Martino's Research

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Abstract

My contribution intends to present an analysis of the relationships that exist between the anthropology of Ernesto De Martino and some of the most important currents of psychology and psychopathology of the twentieth century. De Martino's anthropology is characterized by total attention to the problem of the risk of slipping into mental pathology, which corresponds to "naturalization". The crisis can affect both the individual (the "presence") and an entire civilization and is a constant element of human experience, because we find it in the most primitive and rudimentary forms of life, as well as in opulent societies such as that of the Contemporary West. In the contribution we follow the evolution of the concept of "crisis" starting from De Martino's writings dedicated to the primitive world, to then move on to the works in which he analyzes the religious magical institutions of the popular world of Southern Italy. In the last part of the essay, however, the declination of the concept of crisis applied to European bourgeois society is analysed. Over time the reference to some important authors of psychopathological science (Janet, Freud, Jaspers) remains constant. With my contribution I want to try to demonstrate how, from De Martino's, or of losing the cultural references of civilization.

Keywords: *Ernesto De Martino; anthropology; crisis; psychopathology*

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Introduction

In 1964, only a year before his premature death, Ernesto De Martino, ethnologist and historian of religions, published one of his most important works, *Apocalissi culturali e apocalissi psicopatologiche*. This essay somehow anticipates the research De Martino was conducting, which he would have liked to entitle *La fine del mondo. Contributo all'analisi delle apocalissi culturali*; an uncompleted essay, published posthumously in 1977. As the title suggests, *Apocalissi culturali e apocalissi psicopatologiche* is a reflection on the problem of the end of cultural worlds, or on the crisis of civilization in the broadest sense. This reflection is conducted through a constant reference to the psychopathological element and to the most significant authors of the psychopathological culture of the twentieth century.

De Martino is an ethnologist who trained at the school of the historicist philosopher Benedetto Croce. However, he approached historicism after a series of extremely rich and very heterogeneous experiences (Di Donato, 1990). This variety of approaches is reflected into his attention to issues that go beyond Croce's perspective, including the interest in non-European civilizations, psychopathology and psychoanalysis. These are essential tools to deal with and adequately define the concept of crisis, at the center of De Martino's interests.

A significant example of the rich intertwining of historical interest and psychopathological perspectives is represented by *Il mondo magico*, the second monograph by De Martino, published in 1948*. *Il mondo magico*

was written for the most part during the stormy years of the decline of fascism and the partisan war in Italy (Ferrari, 2012). A gloomy atmosphere pervades the pages of *Il mondo magico*, tracing the history of the arduous beginnings of human civilization and its inevitable twilight. This a book in which the crisis of the human civilization – a possibility that the recent war and the nuclear threat had made frighteningly concrete – is articulated from a double perspective: on the one hand, there is a broad reflection on the end of cultural worlds, concerning historical analysis in its strict sense. On the other, there is the observation of the moments of individual crisis – De Martino would have defined it as «crisis of presence» – whose understanding requires the psychopathological element. In *Il mondo magico*, the themes of madness, human frailties, negativity, need and the irrational part of the human spirit are understood and identified as an element of "risk". The "presence", single monad of the human organism, has to rise above its own natural dimension and create a cultural barrier that prevents it from falling back into such dimension. The plight of the magical world, far from being confined to the depths of an ancestral past, acquires the connotations of the permanent plight of the human presence, always fighting against the forces of disintegration and madness. The risk that man, or an entire civilization, sink into chaos cannot be averted once and for all, because it is a constitutive possibility of the human being.

The theme of the permanent risk that presence and human history sink into crisis returns without substantial differences in the writings that De Martino published afterwards, between the end of the 1950s and the

The English translation of *Il mondo magico*, published in 1972 with the title of *Primitive Magic: The Psychic Powers of Shamans and Sorcerers*, is an invalid translation (Zinn, 2015 and 2016), which the author does

not take into consideration in this contribution. All translations from *Il mondo magico* into English are provided by the author.

early 1960s, on the study of religious cults in the peasant world of southern Italy. The risk of «divide» (*il taglio*), or the risk «of losing culture and receding without mitigation into nature» (De Martino, 2012, p. 435) – De Martino will say in an article published for the first time in *aut aut*, Enzo Paci's journal, and subsequently integrated into the introductory chapters of *Morte e pianto rituale nel mondo antico [Death and ritual mourning: From ancient lamentation to the Virgin's lament]* – is an unavoidable limit of the human condition, which cannot protect itself once and for all against the risk of sinking into madness. Themes and perspectives change, but a close affinity can be observed between the conditions of the peasants of Southern Italy and those of the so-called "primitives" described ten years earlier in *Il mondo magico*. These conditions of existential, psychological, technical economic poverty make cultural life of communities extremely fragile, exposing individual presences to the risk of dissolution, or end.

When De Martino starts *La fine del mondo* (the unfinished book, published posthumously in 1977) further developing his reflection on the problem of worlds in crisis, he focuses on the reasons triggering the crisis of the Western civilization. Despite reaching the apex of its technological development, Western civilization undergoes strong regressive tensions in the fields of politics, art and culture, which find a powerful and effective metaphor in the psychopathological element of the *Weltuntergangserlebnis*. A highly evocative passage of *Morte e pianto rituale: dal lamento antico al pianto di Maria* (De Martino, 2021, p. 20) reads: «However high and humanised a given civilization may be, it always remains [...] a sphere of existential possibilities in which what passes without and

against us is manifested, that is, a sphere that cannot be faced by effective techniques of control and humanization» (De Martino, 2021, p. 20). In the world of the poor classes of Southern Italy, as well as in that of the so-called primitive civilizations, the horizon of the crisis is broad and includes the existential passages of the death of relatives, or of the seasonal cycles that regulate agricultural life and decide the sustenance of the community itself. In the modern Western world, the reasons triggering the crisis are not resolved, but are transformed into the apocalyptic risk – the atomic terror – as a sinister and constant presence, which creeps into the literature, art, politics and high culture of the twentieth century.

Within this framework of problems – so strongly characterized by crisis – the reference to the psychopathological sphere is essential for De Martino, becoming a typical tool of his research. In this contribution, the author would like to demonstrate that the attention to the psychopathological sphere led De Martino to the formulation of an "Anthropology of Permanent Risk", where culture is a system to resolve the danger of slipping into a pathological dimension. This risk belongs to the individual, as psychopathology teaches us (Salvatore et al., 2023; Salvatore et al., 2021; De Luca Picione & Lozzi, 2021; De Luca Picione & Freda, 2016.). However, according to De Martino, this risk can also concern great historical organisms like civilizations.

The fundamental reasons of De Martino's anthropology can be analysed through the concept of «presence», introduced since his first years as a scholar of ethnology. The concept of presence is not identical to that of person or subject. "Presence" can be defined as the ability of the subject to emerge from the naturalistic immediacy of need and to consti-

tute himself as a historical actor, capable of remaining connected to the intersubjective values of history, which are constantly threatened by the danger of disappearing, dragging the individual into crisis.

The concept of presence first appears in a short article dated 1946, *La rappresentazione e l'esperienza della persona nel mondo magico* [*The Representation and Experience of the Person in the Magic World*]. The problem of magic is at the center of the reflection of the young De Martino, and the concept of presence is entirely functional to his desire to formulate a theory and a history of magic. De Martino concentrates first on the problem of the «magical presence», that is, of the presence living in a world historically determined by faith, together with magical techniques and practices.

The main characteristic of the magical world is lability, i.e. the presence's difficulty to fight against the danger that natural events, atmospheric agents, dangerous animals, hunger or thirst, might precipitate it into crisis, i.e. into madness. The importance of the concept of presence is not understood if one does not consider the existence of a constant danger that threatens it and which coincides, according to De Martino, with its naturalization, i.e. its return to an animal, vegetable, therefore in-human dimension. Magic is the cultural institution that allows the so weak magical presence to raise the last cultural defense against the risk of slipping out of the world of human history.

The magical world and, above all, the world of presence threatened by the crisis, is the one to which «we are indebted» because it is placed upstream of the historical process that culminated with the era of the deployment of reason, our era. De Martino often describes the magical world as the cultural struggle from

which the «unity of the person» originates, being therefore the original nucleus of every possible development in human history. This original moment is described through the gloomy hues of the *olon* or *latah* state, a condition of fragility mentioned by ethnologists in which «the indigenous person loses for more or less long periods, and to varying degrees, the *unity of his person* and the autonomy of the ego, and therefore the control of his acts» (De Martino, 2022, p. 73). This condition, to which the magical presence is often faced, is critical because it makes the human regress towards that threshold of indistinction with nature. Indeed, De Martino defines crisis as the moment in which «the distinction between the presence and the world that becomes present collapses: instead of hearing or seeing the rustling of the leaves, the subject becomes a tree whose leaves are fluttered by the wind; in place of hearing the word, the subject becomes word that hears etc.» (De Martino, 2022, p. 73). Presence becomes an «echo of the world» (De Martino, 2022, p.73), unable to rise historically in the human dimension, slipping into naturalness which submerges it again.

The crisis of presence is described by De Martino as a form of pathological relationship with the world. It is therefore in Psychopathology that he seeks references to understand and describe the pathological experiences of presence. *Il mondo magico* is full of references to French Psychology and to the theories set forth by Janet, who was one of its major exponents. De Martino immediately sees a surprising similarity between some ethnographic accounts of the cultural life of the so-called primitive societies, and the clinical data collected by Janet in mental health clin-

ics. He identifies in the theory of *psychological automatism* the spot where Ethnology and Psychopathology seem to converge.

Janet's thesis on automatism was developed in an important book of 1889, *L'automatisme psychologique*, destined to change the studies in the field of Clinical Psychology. Janet traced the "automatic" response - that the patients he observed sometimes provided to certain external stimulations - back to elementary or "lower" forms of the human psyche. More precisely, these were movements which, although produced by the subjects themselves, were attributable to an involuntary sphere of decision: they were unintentional functions of the human activity. In the definition provided by Janet, automatism was a phenomenon running underground along willpower (*puissance volontaire*). From this point of view, any form of action that originates on this side of subjective free will is to be defined as "pathological". Gesture automaticity with which external reality is not understood (therefore dialectically denied and then overcome), but rather "suffered", is the first symptom of the triggering of the crisis (Janet, 2021).

The automaticity of the gesture that repeats and does not go beyond the experience is taken by De Martino as an example of discomfort, of anguished omen affecting the presence. In the presence that «behaves like an echo of the world» (De Martino, 2022, p. 73) the author of *Il mondo magico* sees the dramatic deterioration of his relationship with the object of his representations: when whoever listens to a sound, being unable to place it next to similar ones already kept in his heritage of memories, being unable to recognize the specificity and otherness of the sound itself, then the *presence* disappears and only the hearing

ear remains. The reaction is purely mechanical and the presence is projected within a "very low intensity" historical regime, in which the thread of historicity runs the risk of irreparably loosening.

Like the author of *L'automatisme psychologique* would have argued, in the crisis the «mental tension» between world and presence is dangerously loosened. «Mental tension» is another theme dear to Janet, which is repeated in *Il mondo magico*. Presence is the center of gravity of a system in which past and future intertwine to define what present reality is: the crisis of presence triggers the degenerative process which shatters the balance, which literally prevents any action of the presence through which *being* fertilizes future time with its past. According to De Martino, this process surprisingly resembles Janet's description of psychasthenia, a disease in which «there is a fall in mental tension, i.e. in the capacity for synthesis and concentration with the consequent loss of the functioning of reality, i.e. contact with reality and continuous adaptation to it» (De Martino, 2022, p. 157).

In the years following his research on the magical world, De Martino refined his knowledge of Freudian Psychoanalysis, which became an essential reference to understand the magical-religious cultural elements of the popular classes of Southern Italy (Saunders, 1984, 1993, 1998; Zinn 2015). This is a new area of research on ethnographic experiences conducted on the field, where it is still possible to find very ancient cults, linked to pagan rites of pre-Christian Europe.

In the last work resulting from his field research, the 1961 book, *The land of remorse. A study of southern Italian tarantism*, De Martino sets out the results of his investigation on tarantism conducted in Salento. As a cultural

phenomenon, tarantism had multiple stratifications and levels of analysis, providing him with a test bench of great interest. The study of popular rites allowed for a concrete expansion of contemporary historiographical self-awareness; it also allowed a close observation of the overlap between the dominant religion, i.e. Christianity, and pagan worship, now reduced to a historical "relic". This is due to the progressive disintegration of the social and economic tissue of the southern countryside on which, centuries before, it had thrived.

The land of remorse can be defined as a long reflection on the theme of cultural *symbols* and their function. Function is salvific for the presence, in line with the *magical world* and its themes. One of the most important aspects which, according to De Martino, characterize the symbolism of the taranta, is the so-called *autonomy* of the symbol or, to put it better, its «existentially-conditioned autonomy», which resembles the principle of «culture-conditioned nature» also from a lexical point of view (De Martino, 2005, p. 112; De Martino, 2022, p. 70) by the operational capacity of presence, developed in *Il mondo magico*. However, there is also a notable difference between the two concepts; De Martino has no interest in demonstrating the real efficacy of the magical-religious practice. He concentrates on the social efficacy of the symbol, and on its cultural function as an "release" of existential problems.

A vision of the symbol, and of its function, emerges as a bridge, a transition, between the sphere of nature and the historical and cultural one ("nature and nurture" which instead, in the magical world, seemed rather opposed to *each* other). Tarantism is the perfect example of this vision: tarantism derives from the concrete risk of latrodectism, but it transcends into the symbology of a peasant

culture, acting autonomously with respect to the situations in which it is used and evoked:

Tarantism as a definite mythical-cultural horizon – as the bite of the poisonous *taranta* during the harvest season of summer's fruits, returning each year to act as a bite and poison, to be exorcised each year with music, dance and colors – was not "reducible" to latrodectism, but neither was it "independent" of it, inasmuch as latrodectism had to be considered an important historical and existential condition for the genesis of tarantism (De Martino, 2005, p. 28).

The fact that this symbol fulfilled a function not entirely attributable to the concrete substrate, from which it also seemed to come, is the first step that De Martino takes to clear the field of possible misunderstandings of clinical nature, which might confuse tarantism and disease:

In the perspective of cultural analysis, tarantism did not manifest itself as a psychic disorder, but as a culturally conditioned symbolic order [...], in which a neurotic crisis – again, culturally modeled (the behavior of the poisoned victim) – found its solution. The neurotic crisis could appear connected to a real episode of latrodectism or to other organic illness, but what made up tarantism was the autonomy of its symbol, which gave horizon to unresolved and latent psychic conflicts in the unconscious. Much more often the crisis sought out an opportunity, so to speak, by taking advantage of a "possible bite" situation (the harvest of summer fruits, sleeping in the field, etc.) or perhaps it did not even preserve this semblance of credibility, so pressing was the need to unleash itself (De Martino, 2005, p. 32).

Tarantism could not be traced back to the effects of a possible bite received from a poisonous spider and could not be defined as

a form of "psychic illness" because, in fact, the rite could be staged at one's will, even outside the harvest time (De Martino, 2005, pp. 56-57); with respect to the psychic illness, it was rather a mechanism of "release" and solution, than a symptom.

De Martino often underlines this aspect, and this is not a coincidence: the autonomy of the symbol proves that there is still a cultural space to act; religious *technique* can still operate as an alternative to the *immediate* regularity of the natural fact, leaving no traces for the scholar. The historian of religions has little or nothing to say about tarantism as a "clinical" fact; the opposite happens for the symbol of the *taranta*, "brandished" by the presence against the crisis, which bears the seal of human technical ability. In active religious symbolism, presence emerges and exists beyond suffering the consequences of a poisonous bite or a neurosis; for this reason, its action can be considered as a historical document.

The themes of *neurosis* and the therapeutic value of religious symbols are present in the works of De Martino published between the end of the 1950s and the early 1960s. In the *Land of Remorse*, as well as in the previous *Morte e pianto rituale nel mondo antico*, the atmosphere is full of psychoanalytic content, evoked by the reference to the concept of neurosis, as well as "remorse" or "removal", which De Martino uses to grasp the new nuances of the problem of the «crisis of presence». This problem, not in line with *Il mondo magico*, opens up to new perspectives which include the tragedy of the individual presence, as well as the collective tragedy of the end, or the danger of the end, of entire cultural worlds.

The crisis, which finds a solution in tarantism, is defined by De Martino, on the level of the individual person, as an «unresolved

conflict in which the individual presence has remained imprisoned» (De Martino, 2005, pp. 128-129). This refers to the possible and risky recurrence in the form of *neurosis*, *i.e.* a coded and obscure symptom, a traumatic event which is potentially disruptive for the presence. Roaming through the unconscious, this «unresolved conflict», like the Freudian «repressed experiences», can re-emerge on the surface and attack the presence by crumbling the wall that the presence creates as a defense from the risk. In *Morte e pianto rituale*, De Martino described this risk just as effectively through the theories of two psychologists, Pierre Janet and Freud himself, whose «concept of *complex* refers to an unsolved conflict in which the presence has remained polarized, entering into existential contradiction with itself» (De Martino, 2021, p. 23):

When Freud speaks of the *libido*'s *fixation* at a particular backward stage, assigning to this *fixation* the responsibility for a possible psychoneurotic regression, he confirms within the framework of his theory that psychic illness is a critical content that has not been overcome, that is, not chosen and objectified by the presence, and for this reason it returns as a psychic extraneousness and as an uncontrollable symptom (De Martino, 2021, p. 23).

De Martino credits Freud with the merit of allowing «a glimpse of the important concept of the physiological presence as an overcoming energy» (De Martino, 2021, p. 23), which survives in history in the metabolization of the crisis and in its resolution through the cultural symbol (in this specific case, he referred to the resolution of grief pain in the techniques of cultural mourning).

Reflection on the possible influence of psychoanalysis can provide enlightening re-

sults about the link between neurosis and symbol, or repression and remorse, where the following problem lies: the way in which the transition from “mere suffering”, which is disease, turns into the cultural level of the myth, in which the disease finds its solution. In the Salento symbolism of the *taranta*, as well as in the ritual weeping of the Lucan mourners, De Martino seems to identify the paradigmatic form through which the «power of the negative», of desire, of need, of meaning, which are symptoms of suffering, are transformed into the symbol of resolution. *In the symbol the transition from nature to culture*, from organic to human, or from disease to health is accomplished. De Martino very clearly defines tarantism as a «system of research and configuration of the crisis» (De Martino 2005, p. 127):

On the level of tarantism’s own mythical-ritual symbolism, it is possible to find the existential roots of the symbolic horizon of the bite of the *taranta* bite that “keeps man in his intention, that is, what he was thinking when he was bitten”. In effect, the “bite of the *taranta*” and the “poison” are mythical images through which tarantism gives a symbolic horizon to unconscious psychic conflicts, lost for fertile remembrance and for resolving choice. For this reason (to paraphrase the Vinci’s notes in modern terms), they keep a man tied to a critical unresolved episode, in the sense that the episode returns indefinitely, asserting itself as a ciphered neurotic symptom (De Martino, 2005, p. 127).

On the other hand, the ritual takes place by simulating a sort of «hunt», a « “return” and a “search” wick symbolically mimic bringing oneself back to the beginning of the crisis, in order to reach the conflict and remove the “block”» (De Martino, 2005, p. 127). According De Martino (De Martino,

2005, p. 127) quoting Leonardo: this «keeps the man in his resolution» by preventing him from going beyond the traumatic event. In fact, in no other case as in tarantism or in the rites of condolence, one can so clearly feel the sense of the *technical dimension* of religion, in which contents of consciousness otherwise impossible to master - acquire form and consistency. The fact is that what happens «against man», escaping cultural shaping, is introjected into the conscience anyway; what happens «against man» wanders around uncontrolled, threatening the presence, or making it ill, or again, as he will say in his study on the *Magic. A theory form the South [Sud e magia]*, linking it to «the risk of *being-acted-upon*» (De Martino, 2015, p. 109) by an unresolved trauma. Returning to the moment of crisis to try to resolve it brings the functioning of the religious ritual very close to what Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, defined a traumatic fact as «compulsion to repeat» (Freud, 1955, p. 19). Tarantism, due to its peculiar traits, appears as a form of recalling the *repressed experiences*, according to an operative model considered by Freud as a demonic force of the psychic.

In his important essay of 1920, Freud uses the example of the child’s game, which has become a classic of psychoanalysis, also cited by De Martino in *La fine del mondo*. This is about a wooden reel that the child made appear and disappear (throwing it away and then going to retrieve it), symbolically reliving the trauma of the mother’s departure in a dramatic action culminating in the happy ending of reunion (Freud, 1955, pp. 14-16). Freud considers this game as a way of mastering, through symbolic substitution, a *trauma* of which the child had initially been a passive victim: «but, by repeating it, unpleasurable thug it was, as a game, he took on an *active*

part» (Freud, 1955, p. 16). This fictitious and playful dimension relieves entirely in the Apulian tarantism observed by the Neapolitan ethnologist; it represents the concrete rise of the technical *a priori* on which the foundation of cultural production rests, according to De Martino.

However, what in Freud's eyes was a way through which the "death drive" manifests itself, to which the psyche unconsciously wants to accede in an attempt to dismiss every psychic passivity and return to the stillness of uterine peace, for De Martino is the realization of a different aspect of the human. For De Martino it is the *ethos* that mediates «a desire for history», a «project of life together, a commitment to emerge from neurotic isolation to participate in a system of cultural fidelity» (De Martino, 2015, p. 179). This is a remarkable difference. The mythical-ritual exorcism of the *taranta* gives voice, through the symbols of tradition recognized as valid by the community to which they belong, to needs and impulses which risk remaining unexpressed as inarticulate Vitality. However, such needs and pulses find voice and expression in the ritual and are somehow neutralized. Through tarantism, the community masters the crisis and translates into the words of tradition the trauma that otherwise would have asserted its coercive power over the presence, to the point of disrupting it: cultural exorcism is an elementary form of medicine for the «bad conscience»:

In the crisis of tarantism, remorse does not lie in the memory of a wretched past, but in the impossibility of remembering it in order to settle it; masked as a neurosis, the remorse keeps the sufferer in its bondage. Precisely because of this risky loss of memory and the consequent character of "extraneousness" that the masked symptom assumes for consciousness, the

symbol of tarantism configures as a "first bite" what is actually a "re-bite [remorse]" of a critical episode from the past, of a conflict with no choice (De Martino, 2005, p. 129).

The child's game is the crisis and tarantism is the solution, because it transcends the solitude of the traumatized presence on the community and historical level. The sick presence produces symbols of its suffering, but is unable to openly show them; so, it cannot hope to resolve them with anyone's help.

On the other hand, precisely through the symbol of the *taranta*, such conflict enters consciousness, if only in the alienated form of a *taranta* that bites and poisons. However, it enters consciousness not as a new symptom of the disease, but as a project of evocation and release, healing and reintegration, as a symbolic system of a poisoning, who has rhythm, melody, song, dance, color and can therefore be listened to, sung and seen during the agonistic identification of the dance of the «little *taranta*» (De Martino, 2005, p. 129).

The ritual's public aspect and visibility guarantee its functioning and make the resolution of the crisis desirable: «the single individual crises – De Martino says – are delivered from their neurotic incommunicability» (De Martino, 2005, p. 129) and acquire the "social" character of the «behavior of the poisoned victim» (Ibidem). The individual makes his own plight collective and breaks the self-referential circle of suffering, which is the first symptom of the crisis. At the basis of the "public" and "historical" manifestation of the crisis, through the technical element of the symbol, there is the private dimension of suffering. This indicates, according to De Martino, the existence of a minor dimension of *the*

human spirit, which is potentially pathological. In *Il mondo magico*, such dimension had been defined as a symptom and described as an *olon* condition, associated with Janet's automatism (Maccauro & De Luca Picione, 2021). The importance of reference to «automatisme» now finds further confirmation in the connection with Freud, which allows us to look at the identified problem from a more favorable angle.

The conditions of existential precariousness in which the danger of the crisis of presence lurks do not derive only from the misery in which the lower classes, or some non-European populations, are forced to live in. Risk conditions can also arise in the affluent society (De Martino, 1964; 1964b), such as the modern Western one. The latter is deeply analysed by De Martino since his early works, becoming the object of study in his last years. The problem of the apocalypse of the modern world is included by De Martino in the broader frame of the decline of the European bourgeoisie, which can be observed from multiple perspectives: a perspective on contemporary art, which becomes abstract and loses interest in the representation of the world; on politics, with the crisis of liberalism and the affirmation of the totalitarian state; on culture, which loses any ideological reference to religious tradition, without however being capable of expressing an effective and convincing secular symbolism. Art, literature, politics and high culture are indications of a severe symptomatic picture, which is indicative of a very deep crisis of both individuals and society.

Even technology, with its impressive modern development, becomes an element of danger, which does not protect us from the danger of crisis, but rather amplifies it. The end of the world as a «permanent anthropo-

logical possibility, which torments all cultures» (De Martino, 2019, p. 536), has two main features:

Two antinomic terrors govern the age in which we live: "losing the world" and "being lost in the world". On the one hand, there is a fear of losing, not so much with death but in the very course of existence, the splendor and joy of worldly life, the energy that drives towards the community projects of civil life, towards technology and science, moral solidarity and social justice, poetry and philosophy; on the other hand, the world is considered as a danger that undermines the most authentic human destiny, and therefore as a temptation to be saved from (De Martino, 2019, p. 360).

As a *clinician* of culture (De Martino, 2019, p. 357), De Martino collects an impressive number of «symptomatic manifestations» of the disease of Western civilization in *La fine del mondo*, focusing above all on artistic production, because «art is a way of recovering the events threatened by crisis and chaos, and it is therefore a way of treating and healing the always possible getting sick of objects» (De Martino, 2019, p. 358). This is a modern and secular rite where the risk of regressing and sinking into a coded, autistic and pathological experience is transferred to the collective and historical level. And this is also a rite that, like all religious rites, handles a dangerous and ambiguous matter: the fatal attraction of life for death and dissolution. According to De Martino, this often caused art, culture and even politics of the twentieth century to confuse the time of descent with the time of «liberation» (De Martino, 2019, p. 358) from the danger of the crisis.

De Martino's reflections on the crisis and its representation through the forms of avant-garde art show some similarities with

those carried out not many years earlier by the critic Hans Sedlmayr, author of an important work *Art in Crisis: The Lost Centre [Verlust der Mitte]*, which caught the attention of the Italian anthropologist. This is a peculiar meeting because the Austrian critic, born in 1896 in what was still the Kingdom of Hungary, was among the most concerned observers of the crisis of the paradigm of representation in contemporary figurative arts. A crisis that he read as a symptom of a spiritual disease widespread in the European cultural context and which he defined as a process of *degeneration*; similarities with what De Martino reported will later be noted. In this way, Sedlmayr recalled the rhetoric on *Entartete Kunst* of the German Nazis and their cultural policy. In his essay, Sedlmayr includes a very evocative image, taken from Franz Marc, for whom art is «a bridge thrown towards the realm of spirits: it becomes the necromancy of humanity» (Sedlmayr, 1957). This underlines that, according to modern sensibility, the desire for renewal and the will to destroy – the cult of death – often hold on tightly.

There is a clear perception of how blurry the boundaries were, in times of crisis, between the will to renew European humanism and the temptation to destroy it; so, De Martino only partially agrees with the extremely interesting judgments by Sedlmayr on modern art and its presumed *degeneration*; these judgments are also connoted by a certain degree of «roughness» (De Martino, 2019, p. 357). «In reality, the figurative art of the Renaissance did not need to descend very low [...] to complete the anabasis towards the form». And indeed Renaissance art is the spiritual fruit of a world that still appears to us as compact and centered on solid foundations. The same cannot be said of contemporary art, being the symbol of a world losing compactness and

falling apart, and which for this reason «must reach much deeper levels to attempt catharsis» (De Martino, 2019, p. 359).

In the pages of Sartre's *Nausea*, De Martino provides a fascinating analysis of the precipitous and dangerous drift that modern art, embodying the spirit of time, made in the individual and collective unconscious. «The adventure of Roquentin – says De Martino about Sartre's novel – is an exemplary text for exploring the apocalyptic sensitivity of our age» (De Martino, 1964). There are many reasons underlying the importance of Roquentin's story, at the crossroads between historical, cultural and psychopathological themes, running through all of De Martino's interest in contemporary apocalypticism. Such reasons refer to the single image of an era that perceives the world – understood as a spiritual world, but also as a material one – as a disgusting, indigestible place, moved by mechanisms which make it menacing and bleak.

Roquentin's life develops on the edge of the *Weltuntergangserlebnis*, the "end of the world experience" that De Martino finds meticulously described in one of the masterpieces of the twentieth-century psychopathological literature: Karl Jaspers' *Allgemeine Psychopathologie*, to which Sartre himself drew inspiration for his novel (De Martino, 1964). Life is the paradigm of the era of «the everyday world of routine, domestic, obvious and familiar element» which suddenly turn into a problem. Roquentin's nausea breaks in as a sudden discomfort in carrying out the most trivial actions of the day: turning the door handle or shaking the hand of a friend. His inner world has lost consistency and has suddenly returned to be a hostile, unknown and primitive world. A monstrous and inhuman world, with brutally naturalistic connotations, which Roquentin, looking in the mirror,

is amazed to find even in his image: «What I see is well below the monkey, on the fringe of the vegetable world, at the level of jellyfish» (Sartre, 1949, p. 27).

According to De Martino, Roquentin's experience – who is not attracted by the primitive world, but who nevertheless ends up sinking into it, as happens to those who sink into madness – is very useful to understand the limits of the bourgeois world. It is a metaphor for the cultural limits bringing that world to collapse. The protagonist of Sartre's novel goes mad because the world itself goes mad, in a process triggered by the re-emergence, from the depths of time, of the world with all its load of mystery and enigma. In modern apocalypse, where Roquentin is a tragic hero, the crumbling of the «rock of the obvious» (De Martino, 1964) can be observed; the crumbling of layers of collective memory that have sedimented over the course of entire historical eras. This happens thanks to the patient and largely unaware work of a thousand generations of men: «the living history of others in us» (De Martino, 2019, p. 387). This story remains latent in the collective unconscious, «a domestic background of relationships implicitly admitted in their obviousness, and precisely for this reason they are not emerging in the current consciousness» (De Martino, 1964, p. 567). This becomes a second nature; a form of nature embodied in our genetic program. The world that we reconquer every morning when we wake up, as Proust recalls in a passage from *Recherche* often referred to by De Martino himself: «A sleeping man holds in a circle around him the thread of the hours, the order of years and of worlds» (De Martino, 1964, p. 567). In an instant, the man goes back to «centuries of civilization» (Ibidem) until he rediscovers the balance of

historical time. But the journey from the endless antiquities of the past, which cross us, can also fail. The man may not re-emerge «from the bottom of this existential abyss, in which he found himself «barer than the caveman» (Ibidem).

In this element the risk of the crisis of civilizations lurks, even in case of technologically advanced civilizations, in the ineliminable principle that De Martino defines as the «apocalyptic temptation» (De Martino, 1980, pp. 225-232). This is the impulse to abandon oneself to the "death instinct", to get out of history, to refuse to continue in the ethical effort of transcendence, to refuse conceptual elaboration, dialogue and the construction of collective values. The development of civilization is a process that can be reversed because the reintegration of the existential crisis can fail, thus re-immersing culture in nature. This process can also fail because of the uncontrollable temptation to seek solace in the world of disease, which takes responsibility away from the presence and set it free from the exhausting imperative to remain faithful to the values of society. In magic-religious rites, the temptation of risk – i.e. the temptation to follow a loved one into death, for example – could still be effectively fought by adhering to an institutionalized, solid and socially shared mythical framework. However, what can modern man do, having recognized religious symbolism as outdated?

«The central problem of *today's world* – De Martino argued in a speech given a few months before his death – is the foundation of a new cultural *ethos*» (De Martino, 1964b). This new *ethos* shall restore *telos* to history and the role of ethical guide of processes of customs globalization to the West. In particular, this new *ethos* shall restore the sense of a story yet to be written, indicating a horizon

that transcends the limit of the historical situation and prevents closures on the present. The apocalyptic temptation is fought by collectively planning a future cultural homeland and a horizon of hope to aspire to, without having to go through the mediation of religious symbolism: the humanism of the future – the “total humanism” – puts the *naked* man in the face of risk, with no other protection than his critical capacity.

Weltuntergangserlebnis is always open to the single individual; the "presence" always exposed to the risk of falling ill. This is an extremely problematic step, which however needs to be taken to prevent the apocalyptic experience – the *Weltuntergangserlebnis* – from becoming a collective risk of sinking into 'insignificance' and therefore into the pathological experience of the end of the entire human civilization.

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