

Dissipatio Humani Generis. The Fuga Saeculi according to Guido Morselli

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Abstract – *Dissipatio H.G.* is the last novel by Guido Morselli, written shortly before he committed suicide. In it an unnamed narrator/main character, a former journalist who has left his job in Chrysolpolis – the «Golden City» –, ekes out an isolated existence in the Swiss mountains to escape from a world based on ambition and greed. At the beginning of the novel, his escape from the world, which he refers to as his *fuga saeculi*, is amplified and overturned by a sudden and complete *dissipatio humani generis*: all human beings have disappeared into thin air, and the narrator has become the last man left on Earth. Transporting it into a cosmic dimension, Morselli draws a real anatomy of solitude. However, the protagonist's detachment from humanity affords only partly an occasion for a new and deeper look at society, and at human nature. If the withdrawal from the world connected with more intense spiritual or intellectual experiences can be understood as a form of life, in describing its solipsistic apotheosis, Morselli outlines its bleaker limits, tracing – through a lucid organization of narrative spaces – a passional trajectory that winds its way through euphoric and dysphoric states.

Keywords: escape-from-the-world – apocalypse – mysticism – Guido Morselli – solipsism

1. The Solitude of the Last Man

This essay is dedicated to Guido Morselli, a singular figure in twentieth-century Italian literature, and in particular to his last novel, *Dissipatio H.G.*, written shortly before he committed suicide in 1973¹. The novel is generally considered to be his most personal book, the one that most reflects his existential parable.

In a journal issue like this focusing on the themes of self-reclusion and isolation from the world as a religious and artistic experience, Morselli's

This article is part of the research project NeMoSancti (nemosancti.eu), which has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 757314).

¹ The novel was published by the Adelphi publishing house (Milan, 1977), which edited the posthumous editions of all Morselli's major works. The novel has recently been translated into English by Fredrika Randall (*Dissipatio H.G.: The Vanishing*, New York, New York Review Books, 2020). All quotations from the novel are taken from the e-book edition of the volume. Where page numbers are not included I have indicated the chapter number.

biographical and existential story would already be interesting in its own right. From 1952 onwards, Morselli, in fact, led a reclusive life in a small cottage in the woods and hills surrounding the Lake of Varese, near the small town of Gavirate. In this self-isolation he wrote most of his works, all rejected at the time by publishers, only to be released, with great critical acclaim, after his death².

In his partly autobiographical projection, the unnamed narrator and main character of *Dissipatio H.G.* is a self-recluse. He is a former journalist who has left his job in Chrysopolis (maybe a transfiguration of Zurich) and confined himself in an isolated hut in the Swiss mountains 50 minutes by pathway from the small village of Widmad, just like Morselli did.

At the beginning of the story, the protagonist – who is therefore already a recluse – decides to move further and definitively away from the world by committing suicide. But just before throwing himself into an underground lake deep in a mountain cave, he changes his mind and goes back home. In that short interval, all mankind has mysteriously and completely disappeared, as if evaporated. Everything else has remained intact: animals, trees, things etc. It is the *Dissipatio Humani Generis*, the vanishing of humanity, as Morselli defines it.

The theme of the last man on earth has a long tradition, starting at least with J.B. Cousin de Grainville's *Le dernier homme* (1805) and Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1824). It is a particular declination of the broader trend of post-apocalyptic fiction, which – beginning with the novels of Grainville and Shelley up to the most recent zombie apocalypses – has transplanted the apocalyptic tale into secular soil. In fact, in these works the mystical and religious significance is lost, and the catastrophes are no longer triggered by supernatural causes. They are instead described in their concrete occurrence, and the prophecy takes on, if anything, the value of romantic vision or rationalistic admonition, often linked to the risks of progress³. Studying the twentieth-century post-apocalyp-

² On the life and work of Guido Morselli see, among others, V. Fortichiari, *Invito alla lettura di Guido Morselli*, Milano, Mursia, 1984 and M. Fiorentino, *Guido Morselli tra critica e narrativa*, Napoli, Eurocomp, 2002.

³ P. Bertetti, *L'apocalisse quotidiana*, in P. Bertetti - A. Appiano - A. Zinna, *Fine del millennio*, Urbino, Centro Internazionale di Semiotica e Linguistica, Documenti di lavoro e pre-pubblicazioni, 1998, pp. 1-20. On post-apocalypticism in contemporary literature and imaginary see also: F. Muzzioli, *Scritture della catastrofe*, Roma, Meltemi, 2007; M. Lino, *L'Apocalisse postmoderna tra letteratura e cinema. Catastrofi, oggetti, metropoli, corpi*, Firenze, Le lettere, 2014; D. Comberiat, *Il mondo che verrà. Cinque ipotesi di ricostruzione dell'umanità nelle narrazioni distopiche*, Milano, Mimesis, 2021.

tic stories, Gary K. Wolfe⁴ has identified a distinctive narrative scheme, made up of a series of functional elements. Chronologically, the first functional element consists in the experience or discovery of the cataclysm, followed by a journey through the scenario of destruction to learn about the extent of the catastrophe. In most cases the journey ends with a meeting with other survivors, and the subsequent establishment of a new community. The core of the stories is generally centered around a clash with other communities or between rival groups within the community over the founding values of the new society. This is the case, for example, in *Earth Abides* by George Stewart (1947), one of the paradigmatic texts of the genre, but also of the recent television series *The Last Man on Earth* (20th Century Fox Television, 2015-18). *Dissipatio H.G.* differs from the above in that the disappearance of humanity is absolute and definitive, leaving the protagonist utterly alone. This brings Morselli's novel closer to other solipsistic fantasies such as Matthew Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901), which contains some particularly strong affinities with Morselli's novel⁵.

In any case, adhering to the typical narrative structure of the genre, *Dissipatio H.G.* likewise begins with a journey into the scenario of the catastrophe: the protagonist descends from the mountains – just like Ish, the main character of *Earth Abides* – and drives to Chrysolopolis before visiting other places on the plain to find out what has happened and search in vain for possible survivors.

After a first reaction of «thinking, reasoning fear»⁶, and then panic and anxiety when faced with the inexplicable, the return to his mountain hut brings with it a temporary acceptance of the extraordinary situation, in a pathemic state that we can define curiously *aphoric*.

It may seem strange, but in apocalyptic literature, the pathemic state of the last survivor is not necessarily dysphoric: rather we have an intersection of dysphoric and euphoric states (you can «have the whole world to yourself», or «start from scratch»). This is what happens in *The Purple Cloud*, in a sort of dream of omnipotence by the sole survivor, or in a

⁴ G.K. Wolfe, *The Remaking of Zero*, in E.S. Rabkin - M.H. Greenberg - J. Olander (eds.), *The End of the World*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1982, pp. 1-19, now in G.K. Wolfe, *Evaporating Genres. Essays on Fantastic Literature*, Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 2011, pp. 99-120.

⁵ F. Sielo, «Niente da ridere»: le apocalissi ironiche di G. Morselli e M. P. Shiel, in «Between», VI, 2016, 12, pp. 1-22, see: <https://ojs.unica.it/index.php/between/article/view/2199/2286> (accessed February 11, 2023).

⁶ G. Morselli, *Dissipatio H.G.: The Vanishing*, New York, New York Review Books, 2020, ch. 7.

sarcastic story by Alfred Bester, *They Don't Make Life Like They Used To* (1963), where the last surviving couple in a deserted New York indulge in a consumerist orgy in department stores and luxury goods boutiques.

There is little of all this in Morselli's novel. The condition of separation – better, of withdrawal – of the protagonist from the rest of humanity is already fulfilled before the Vanishing, consisting in self-isolation and culminating in the attempted suicide:

«A windy morning. The cave of the siphon, June 2, they were still in the future, and I was indulging in my usual pastime: parenthesizing the existence of my fellow humans, imagining myself as the only thinking being in an utterly empty universe. Empty of human beings, that is. Allow me to prettify my interior thoughts with some pedantry: Hegel dreamed of the Real in and for itself; for me the Real was of and for myself, where others take no part, because they don't exist»⁷.

There is no thymic evolution. The narrator's existential condition is not touched – if not accidentally – by the end of humanity. As Michele Mari writes: «For someone who has always been a prisoner of his own solipsism, [Morselli] seems to tell us, the condition of being the only survivor cannot introduce a real change»⁸. In semiotic terms, we could say that the thematic role of (last) survivor overlaps but does not influence that of «solitary».

Rather, the vanishing of humanity almost seems to be reality's way of adjusting to the psychic condition of the solipsistic subject. Note the great irony of Morselli: the last representative of humanity is the one who never wanted to be part of it, who shunned it and sought solitude.

2. The Experience of Solitude

Now, to what extent the narrator's desire for solitude (and perhaps of Morselli himself, if we admit that the work is strongly autobiographical) is connected to religious experiences?

The narrator defines his escape from the world as *fuga saeculi*. This expression is not accidental. It has its origins in the Fathers of the Church. *De Fuga Saeculi* is the title of a sermon by Saint Ambrose. It is an ascetic work that insists on the need to flee the world in order to obtain salva-

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ M. Mari, *Estraneo agli angeli e alle bestie (lettura di Dissipatio H.G.)*, in «Autografo», XIV, 1998, 37, pp. 49-58, here p. 54. My translation.

tion. The idea of *fuga saeculi* is at the heart of monastic life, which begins with a detachment from temporality and a flight into the desert – into the non-world – as a condition for accessing pure prayer and divine contemplation⁹.

However, in the words of the narrator there is no explicit reference to a search for a deeper experience – if not spiritual, at least intellectual or artistic – linked to his voluntary withdrawal from the world. Indeed, it seems voluntarily to diminish and reduce it to a fear of the other:

«I am, on and off, an Anthropophobe, I'm afraid of people, as I am of rats and mosquitoes, afraid of the nuisance and the harm of which they are untiring agents. This is not the only reason, but it's one of them, why I seek solitude, a solitude (in the modest limits of the possible) that is genuine, i.e., extensive and abiding»¹⁰.

If anything, in *Dissipatio H.G.* we can identify another spiritual attitude, which in Christianity – starting from the Middle Ages – is often associated with the *fuga saeculi*: it is the so-called *contemptus mundi*, the «contempt for the world», considered as a place of sin and perdition¹¹.

In this regard, the description of Chrysopolis – the «Golden City» – is scathing:

«I don't like Chrysopolis much, in fact I can't stand it. For me it is the Biblical antitype, the triumphant consummation of everything I scorn, the epitome of all I detest in this world, my negative caput mundi. My fuga saeculi, my flight from this world, was even then an escape from this place, the precise material expression of our century»¹².

The gaze from afar allows the narrator to show the life of the business metropolis in detachment that goes beyond the satirical gaze of bourgeois opulence to become more generally a nihilistic sarcastic criticism of the contemporary western world.

But is it really true that the narrator-protagonist's detachment – by now definitive – from humanity does not involve any inner experience, of an intellectual if not a spiritual nature?

Perhaps we should not pay too much attention to certain statements of

⁹ R. D'Antiga, *Introduzione*, in Lotario di Segni, *Il disprezzo del mondo*, Parma, Pratiche, 1994, pp. 9-24.

¹⁰ G. Morselli, *Dissipatio H.G.*, ch. 7.

¹¹ F. Lazzari, *Il contemptus mundi nella scuola di San Vittore*, Roma, Istituto italiano per gli studi storici, 1965; R. D'Antiga, *Introduzione*.

¹² R. D'Antiga, *Introduzione*.

the anonymous protagonist. Often he seems to be an unreliable narrator: he says he takes little interest in philosophy («it never has interested me much»¹³) and does not read anymore («I haven't opened a book, old or new, for years»¹⁴). Nevertheless, the novel contains many quotes and references to philosophy and literature that are profound. His reflections are actually the result of the type of thinking that belongs to someone who is observing the world from afar.

Throughout the novel, a vein of intolerance towards all intellectualistic attitudes and cultural constructions emerges: in an existential hypertrophy, the narrator repeatedly denies and stigmatizes his own culture at the very moment in which he manifests his erudition and raises profound and perceptive philosophical questions.

It is as if Morselli, in a disconsolate pessimism, felt that the very idea of withdrawal from the world to promote intellectual activity was nothing more than the umpteenth illusion, basically disavowing his own existential choice. Michele Mari perceives in Morselli

«a sort of irritation and intolerance towards his own intelligence and his own culture: like a Vichian dream of barbarism and naivety, in the mortifying certainty (the same that hovers in Pavese's *Business of Living*) that every intellectual refinement involves an impoverishment of vitality, an irreparable loss of meaning»¹⁵.

What the narrator does experience to the full in his solitude, is a broader and deeper experience of nature:

«I had managed to persuade myself that I really was alone. Alone in the world ... I was living this. I got up from the grass and embraced the larch trees, something I used to do as a boy and for the same reason: to allow myself to be penetrated by their life force»¹⁶.

It is an experience that, in the silence of human disappearance, becomes more intense and grandiose:

«The disappearance of the reverential fear that vast, uncontaminated nature once inspired in man is one of the vital impairments our age suffers from. Here there is no one between me and nature; the crags and the ice are sheer solitude and immensity, and I must salvage nature and taste it again»¹⁷.

¹³ G. Morselli, *Dissipatio H.G.*, ch. 7.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, ch. 18.

¹⁵ M. Mari, *Estraneo agli angeli e alle bestie*, p. 50.

¹⁶ G. Morselli, *Dissipatio H.G.*, ch. 7.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, ch. 13.

In the novel, nature and solitude (but also altitude) are closely related and are the basis of a lucid organization of narrative spaces, summarized in figure 1.

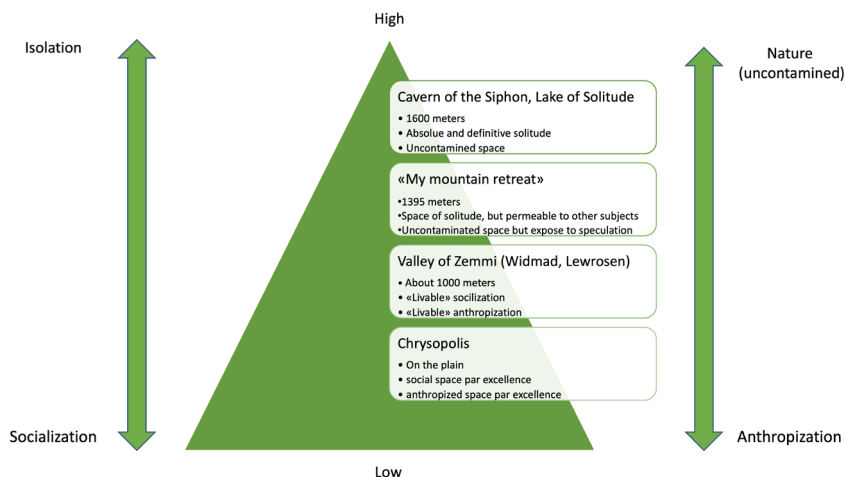


Fig. 1 The organization of narrative spaces in *Dissipatio* H.G.

As we can see the diegetic space is divided into a quadripartite structure, organized around three semantic categories: sociability vs isolation, high vs low, nature (uncontaminated) vs anthropization.

First of all, there are two completely opposite spaces:

a) Chrysopolis: the social and anthropized space par excellence, located on the plain (therefore below).

B) The Cavern of the Siphon (and inside it the Lake of Solitude), high up on the mountain at an altitude of 1600 meters, where the protagonist goes to commit suicide. It is the uncontaminated space of absolute and definitive solitude, corresponding to detachment from humanity through suicide. Or, vice versa, the mysterious disappearance of the latter.

There are two spaces in between. The first is the mountain valley of the Zemmi, «my valley»¹⁸, with the villages of Widmad and Lewrosen, inhabited by «mountain people ... who didn't consider emigrating ..., who were stubbornly loyal to their villages»¹⁹. Undoubtedly a place impacted by the work of man, but nevertheless still «liveable», a place where less «stifling» and more «acceptable» social relations occur.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, ch. 1.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

The second intermediate space is the narrator's house – «my mountain retreat (altitude 1,395 on d.m. level)»²⁰ – at the end of the steepest trail, 50 minutes walk from Widmad) and the huts of its neighbors, such as Malga Ross; it is still an uncontaminated space, but exposed to the risk of speculative development (there is a project to build a highway; and this is precisely what «triggers» the protagonist's decision to commit suicide). It is also a space of solitude, but permeable to the presence of other subjects: «The irruptions of Henriette, my ex; the boys from the school in Widmad out on a Sunday hike; books sent with appeals to review them; checkup visits by Dr. P.»²¹.

Conversely, the Cave and the Lake, as we said, are the spaces par excellence of Solitude. They represent an eminently symbolic space. For the narrator, not by chance, reaching them is tantamount to the disappearance of humanity and the transformation of the whole earth into a place of solitude.

While the Vanishing causes the whole diegetic geography to change from a factual point of view – all earth is a deanthropized place of solitude – the spatial organization we have described remains, thus allowing the only survivor to make sense of his experience. It transfigures itself into a geography of memory and regret: very soon in fact, humankind – now vanished – relives in the mind of the survivor through his memories and becomes crowded with his mental ghosts. In a significant scene, the protagonist fills Widmad's square with mannequins taken from a department store, building the illusion of the world that once was it. Above all, memories of his brotherly friend, the psychologist Karpinsky, run through his mind, he hears his voice, longs for his return.

However, the prevailing sentiment is a «nostalgia for the human», as Cesare Segre defines it²²; «a frantic nostalgia, the harsh privation of and bitter regret for an irreparable loss»²³, as we can read in the novel. According to Greimas²⁴, the mechanism of nostalgia has its origin in the disjunction from an object of value that is now irrecoverable; this disjunction causes a pathemic state, that of regret (whether obsessive or not), which, in turn, causes another pathemic state: wasting, languor, melancholy.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, ch. 2.

²¹ *Ibidem*, ch. 7.

²² C. Segre, *Fuori dal mondo*, Torino, Einaudi, 1990, p. 86. My translation.

²³ G. Morselli, *Dissipatio H.G.*, ch. 18.

²⁴ A.J. Greimas, *De la nostalgie. Étude de sémantique lexicale*, in «Actes Sémiotiques (Bulletin)», 39, 1986, pp. 5-11.

Here there is an evident reversal of the object of value: before the Vanishing the subject aims to disjoin from humanity and to conjoin with solitude; in the course of the novel, however, the axis of desire is reversed: in the absolute and definitive lack of human beings, the survivor realizes that «a man is such only in the relationship with his fellow men»²⁵ («But now that they are playing hard to get, or are trying to, anyway, I'm beginning to reevaluate their importance»²⁶).

The passionate trajectory of the character whose ups and downs take him through euphoric and dysphoric states (memory, loss, nostalgia) has its counterpart in his movements through the diegetic space: at the end of the novel, in an attempt to reunite at least illusively with humanity now lost – the survivor goes backwards through the different diegetic spaces: he leaves his home and moves first to Widmad and finally returns to Chrysoopolis, in the hope of reuniting with his lost friend, Karpinsky.

3. Conclusion

If the withdrawal from the world and its connection with extraordinarily intense spiritual or intellectual experiences can be understood as a form of life – that is, as Paolo Fabbri summarizes, «a cultural model with its own style that participates in the semiosphere»²⁷ – the narrator and protagonist of *Dissipatio H.G.* (possibly Morselli himself) is well aware of how this is a cultural 'pattern' to which his own existential choice cannot fail to relate. Defining his isolation from the world as *fuga saeculi*, he lucidly compares his seclusion from the world with the form of life settled in culture and common sense – almost a stereotype. And he rejects it, just as he rejects any intellectual pose.

If, as we have said, in his now disconsolate pessimism Morselli questions his own intellectual activity – suggesting the emptiness of his own existential choices – even the isolation from the world and the human in his *buen retiro* is nothing but an illusion without meaning.

²⁵ C. Segre, *Fuori dal mondo*, p. 86. My translation.

²⁶ G. Morselli, *Dissipatio H.G.*, ch. 18.

²⁷ P. Fabbri, *Postfazione. Supplemento a Claude Zilberberg*, in C. Zilberberg, *Giardini e altri terreni sensibili. Sulle tracce delle forme di vita*, Aracne, Roma, 2019, pp. 119-126, here p. 120. On the forms of life see also J. Fontanille, *Formes de vie*, Liège, Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2015.

