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Symbol and Origin
in Komar and Melamid's *Symbols of the Big Ban**

Komar and Melamid's new exhibition, *Symbols of the Big Ban*, is quite surprising in that it manifests a decisive break with their previous *oeuvre* and re-introduces a topic long banned from the lexicon of modern art—the “symbol”. The advent of modern art was associated with a radical elimination of symbolism and the affirmation in the 1920s what of was called “material aesthetics”. Material aesthetics emphasized the importance of material in art and rejected any transcendence in this materiality. Kasimir Malevich was declaring in 1915: “The state of objects becomes more important than their essence or meaning”¹—and this was the general feeling of many artists of the time.

One of the reasons why pictorial modernism barred symbolism was the conviction that symbolism had been added to art *a posteriori*—that it came as a later supplement to something phenomenologically primordial—space, form, color. Symbolism was rejected as a literary adornment of the underlying primordiality, which tended to eclipse the primordial phenomenon itself.

Komar and Melamid have gained international recognition by working with an art heavily loaded with symbolism, namely, with the art of socialist realism. Their manipulation of socialist realism was highly complex, but it typically involved a dismantling of the symbolic elements of Soviet official art. A typical socialist realist painting was always the symbol of a new social reality, or at least of social utopia. Komar and Melamid treated this art as if it made no symbolic reference to anything—as if it were made up of self-sufficient objects without any external reference. This isolation from referential reality, this systematic destruction of a symbolic dimension, has enabled the two collaborators to freely manipulate their models, inserting them into the most fantastic contexts or even treating them as elements in a personal nostalgia.

* The artists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid were born in Moscow in 1943 and 1945 respectively. In the late 1960s and early 1970s they together founded the Sots Art movement, which combines the principles of Dadaism and Socialist Realism. They collaborated on projects ranging from painting and performance to public sculpture, installations and photography. In 1974 their work was destroyed along with that of other underground artists at the notorious “Bulldozer Exhibition” in Moscow’s Izmailovsky Park. They have lived in New York since 1978. Some of their 1990s projects involved statistics (*People’s Choice*) and ecology (a collaboration with animals—*The Asian Elephant Project*). Their most recent exhibit, *Symbols of the Big Bang* (2002-3), has been recognized as a radical departure from their previous artistic practice. It explores the two artist’s personal spirituality and experiments with ancient symbols through large-scale paintings on canvas and drawings on graph paper. Komar and Melamid’s works can be found in New York at the Guggenheim Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art, and also at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the Albertina in Vienna, the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and elsewhere.—*The editors*.

¹ Kazimir Malevich. *Sobranie sochinenij v piati tomakh*, t. 1. Moscow, Gileia, 1995, p. 30.

The return to the symbolic is no doubt a very significant event, a kind of declaration. It marks a decisive change in tone. The ironic tone that used to be Komar and Melamid's signature is no longer found in this new exhibition, which comes across as a serious enterprise without any possibility of a mocking escape.

What kind of symbolism is explored here? At first glance it is a symbolism of a very traditional kind. Symbols are usually seen as necessary replacements of a direct expression or representation of things that lie beyond representability. Symbols are usually used where language reveals its limits, where the only way to express or designate is through metaphor.

In the case of an absolute beginning, a Big Bang, non-representability is also absolute. This sort of beginning requires symbolic expression *par excellence*. In the case of a Big Bang, which is the hypothetical event of an absolute beginning, there is practically no way to describe the moment itself, because the density of matter in its primary mass was presumably so high that no known physical laws are applicable to this primordial state. Steven Weinberg's famous book, *The First Three Minutes* (1977), offers an account of the beginning of the Universe—but not of the enigmatic beginning itself, starting rather as it does one hundredth of a second after the moment of creation (when the primordial nucleosynthesis had come to an end)—and covers the next 3 minutes and 46 seconds. It means that the first one hundredth of a second remains pure mystery—and presumably a time packed with events of utmost importance.

Thus, the Big Bang is fundamentally non-representable. It is a state beyond our cognition and the limits of our imagination, and it occurs when time and space as we know them—as the Kantian *a priori* of cognition—do not yet exist. There is no way to deal with it except through symbols.

But why should we be interested at all in this moment of unimaginable primordality, the quasi-theological moment of creation? For one reason: because human culture is fundamentally dependent on this non-representable “beyond.” This point of origin is an obsessive element of Western scientific tradition. Karl-Otto Apel explained its importance in terms of an “ontic reduction,”² i.e. the explanation of every “existent” by reference to another, preceding existent. This kind of thinking is well exemplified by logical induction or by the analytics of causal relations; it consists in a desperate search for the beginning of each series of facts and events. We live under the spell of the idea that the origin is the keeper of a “true identity” that is defined by it.

Freud's early thinking exemplifies one typical manifestation of “ontic reduction.” However, Freud introduced an unexpected twist into this speculative tradition. As early as in his theory of seduction, he moved the origins of personal constitution and of psychic trauma to a time before consciousness, radically removing the beginning from the scope of cognition. Freud wrote in a letter to Wilhelm Fliess (Dec. 21, 1999):

Buried deep beneath all his fantasies, we found a scene from his primal period (before twenty-two months) which meets all the requirements and in which all the remaining puzzles converge. It is everything at the same time—sexual, innocent,

² Karl-Otto Apel. *Transformation der Philosophie*. Frankfurt a. M. , Suhrkamp, 1988.

natural, and the rest. I scarcely dare believe it yet. It is as if Schliemann had once more excavated Troy, which had hitherto been deemed a fable.³

Scenes from the primal period (Freud called them *Urszenen*) were somehow resurrected by the neurotic later and reinterpreted, reelaborated a second time. Lacan designated this secondary reelaboration as *symbolization*.

Symbolization is an all-embracing process of reelaboration of the surrounding universe in terms of human signifying systems; it is a self-expanding process of the appropriation of the world by a human being. Ernst Cassirer, an authority on symbolic forms, wrote:

Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man's symbolic activity advances. Instead of dealing with the things themselves man is in a sense constantly conversing with himself. He has so enveloped himself in linguistic forms, in artistic images, in mythical symbols or religious rites that he cannot see or know anything except by the interposition of his artificial medium.⁴

But symbolization, as Freud has shown, is not a simple process of exclusion of the pre-symbolic from our consciousness; it is a process triggered by a repressed source, by a "beginning" that is eliminated from consciousness, but preserved hidden as generator of symbols, an invisible *causa efficiens* of symbolism as such.

The relation between the non-symbolic source and a symbol could be illustrated by the phenomenon of so called negative hallucination, discovered in 1895 by Hippolyte Bernheim. This kind of unusual hallucination consisted in an absence of perception of an object present in the perceptive field. Freud, who at certain moments was very interested in this phenomenon, called it *Verneinung*—negation, and in some cases *Verleugnung*—a denial of an object of perception. Edouard Pichon published in 1928 an article about this phenomenon, where he used the term *scotomisation* to designate an area of blindness in the perceptual field. He also referred to it by the legal term *forclusion*, designating facts that from a legal point of view are considered non-existing. This term was used by Lacan in his discussion of symbolization.⁵

According to Lacan, when something is rejected by an individual, it is not necessarily repressed and stored into an unconscious: it can be foreclosed, i.e. it is accepted neither into the symbolic order nor into the unconscious, but rather returned into the real as a hallucinatory phenomenon. Psychosis, as in the case of Schreber for instance, can be a loss of symbolic reality, of symbolic communication with others, and the complete inundation of the psychotic by hallucinations that replace the (symbolic) reality.

Foreclosure is the rejection of certain signifiers that are transformed into a pre-symbolic reality, a primordial origin, an eliminated beginning. The beginning is in this context not something that precedes symbols, but something that is created by the failure

³ The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess 1887-1904. Ed. By Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson. Cambridge, Mass.,—London, The Belknap Press, 1985, pp. 391-392.

⁴ Ernst Cassirer. *An Essay on Man*. Garden City, Doubleday, 1953, p. 43.

⁵ The history of this notion is studied by Elisabeth Roudinesco in her: Jacques Lacan. *Esquisse d'une vie, histoire d'un système de pensée*. Paris, Fayard, 1993, pp. 368-374.

of a symbolizing process. It is itself a product of symbolization. Also important to foreclosure is the fact that the negation in it is not simply an elimination of something, but a strange *positive presence*, a blind spot that is somehow perceivable. It is a positive, affirmative negation in the form of a hallucination.

I have made this long digression into the psychoanalytic vision of symbolization because Komar and Melamid are, obviously, not simply transposing the non-representable into symbolic images; rather, they obsessively explore the situation of negation or foreclosure. Two symbolic figures recur in their attempt to deal with the symbolization of origins—the Star of David and the Swastika. Many of their paintings represent the Star of David interwoven with the Swastika. As Komar has explained in an interview with the exhibition’s curator, Reba Wulkan,

We discovered for ourselves that if one meditates while looking at the intersection of lines in the Star of David, one suddenly sees a spiral that is reminiscent of the swastika. This implied to us that the Seal of Solomon miraculously contained an enigmatic prediction of the Holocaust, foreseeing a fatal clash of these two symbols (...). For us, today, the Star of David is a symbol of light, while the swastika is a symbol of darkness. This is why some of these visions of the Big Bang represent the initial point of division of light and darkness when the two are still intermixed as a visual pun.”⁶

The revelation that Komar describes is a moment when meditation discovers behind the recognized and appeasing symbol of the Star of David the vision, almost the hallucinatory presence, of a foreclosed swastika. The entire explanation, dealing as it does with an *ad hoc*, invented symbolic meaning of the Swastika as representing darkness, is of course an attempt to soothe the trauma of discovery (historically the Swastika is associated with images of the wheel, rotation, and cyclical creation). Rather than a symbol, the Swastika emerges as a foreclosed hallucination, as the beginning of a whole symbolizing process edged out of the world of symbols. Komar and Melamid persistently repeat the same image of a swastika emerging from the outlines of a Star of David, as from a symbol that hides its presence. The beginning is discovered not in a Gnostic struggle of the two symbols, but in a rediscovery of something buried, of something repressed. (Symptomatically enough, “bang” can be a slang term signifying sexual intercourse—an erotic meaning concealed behind a cosmological symbol).

The Star of David, as Gershom Scholem has shown, was not originally a Jewish symbol.⁷ To prove his claim, Scholem, interestingly enough, refers to the Synagogue of Capernaum in the 2nd-3rd centuries AD, where “the same frieze displays a swastika right next to it, and no one will on that account claim that the swastika might be a Jewish

⁶ Komar & Melamid. *Symbols of the Big Bang*. New York, Yeshiva University Museum, 2002, p. 12.

⁷ “The hexagon is not a Jewish symbol, much less “the symbol of Judaism.” None of the marks of a true symbol nor its manner of origin... apply to it. It expresses no “idea,” awakens no primeval associations which have become entwined with the roots of our experiences, and it does not spontaneously comprise any spiritual reality. It calls to mind nothing of biblical or rabbinical Judaism; it arouses no hopes. Insofar as it had any connection at all with the emotional world of pious Jew it was on the level of fears which might overcome by magic.”—Gershom Scholem. *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*. New York, Schocken, 1971, p. 259.

symbol.”⁸ The Star of David was borrowed by the Jews relatively late from a hermetic tradition of amulets and talismans that had used the hexagram and the pentagram for centuries. This tradition of magic identified the Star of David with the “Seal of Solomon,” which much later became associated with David in the so-called “Shield of David.” The usual symbolism of the hexagram (where one full triangle represents fire and the other water, the truncated triangles representing air, earth, and so on) comes from this hermetic tradition. What is interesting here as regards Komar and Melamid’s work is, first of all, the stable association of the Star of David with an apotropaic function, with a mechanism of protection. The Star of David is precisely the symbol that protects by foreclosing the swastika.

Scholem tells the curious story of Rabbi Jonathan Eibischütz, a follower of the apostate Kabbalistic Messiah Sabbatai Zevi. It is precisely in the Sabbatian context that the Star of David was first employed as a symbol of messianic redemption. Jonathan was accused of Sabbateism partly because of his extensive use of the Star of David in a messianic context. “Jonathan tried to hide behind a purely magical interpretation of the amulets; he denied both their Messianic symbolism and that his cryptograms could be deciphered as Sabbatian confessions,” writes Scholem.⁹ The Star of David in this story also works as a *seal*, a talisman foreclosing an enciphered inscription of redemption.

It is important that in Rabbi Jonathan’s case the amulet, an immobile defense,¹⁰ veils a meaning related to temporality, namely, redemption, the end and transformation of time. The same repression of the temporal dimension is visible in the relation between the Star of David and the Swastika, the latter being an incarnation of movement and of the cyclical organization of time.

In general, symbols often conceal their relation to temporality. And this relation is of capital importance. Symbols are human constructs, and as such represent an outer reality in terms of personal experience. Symbols are often genetically related to deep emotions that are resistant to representation. They are external images of human experience, which are obviously related to time. Andrei Belyi—an important Russian writer and a leading theoretician of Symbolism—claimed, for instance, that the literary symbol unites the objectivity of space perception with an internal feeling of time. It creates a link between the internal and the external.

A great expert in Jewish symbolism, Erwin R. Goodenough wrote about the death and rebirth of symbols, thus radically denying any kind of symbolic eternity inscribed in signs. Incidentally, he also speaks of a degeneration of the symbol of the cross in purely ornamental uses of the swastika (prior to the cross being resurrected by the Christians) and of the resurrection of the swastika itself by the Nazis: “...the four-point rosette, within a circle or abbreviated as the swastika, had come in the pagan world to have no special significance, so far as I can see...”¹¹

However, a symbol usually masks its own temporality and mortality, as well as its link to subjectivity. This is why an expression of personal anxiety often presents itself as

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

¹⁰ The Star of David was used, for instance, as the allegory of God as a fortress in the hermetic writings by M. J. Ebermeier (1653) and Robert Fludd (1619).

¹¹ Erwin R. Goodenough. *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1988, p. 47.

the symbolization of a cosmological event, i.e. of something fundamentally non-human. The theme of the beginning plays a crucial role in this strategy of concealment. The beginning, as a foreclosed element in a psychological experience, acquires the appearance of a cosmological beginning. This strategy of substitution is often based on a denial of temporality. The atemporal seems non-subjective, transcendental. Komar explains the specific choices of symbolic figures:

At this exhibition there are two types of symbols. One type is figurative, and closer to the surrealism of ancient myths. The other is abstract and closer to geometric archetypes. The transition from co-authorship with the elephants to Symbol of the Big Bang became a nostalgic gesture, a regression, a return to personal history, because today, animal art cannot avoid becoming abstract expressionism and, at the same time, cannot become geometrical abstract or realist paintings [*sic.*]. Geometrical figures and realistic images only exist in the context of human history.¹²

The strangeness of geometrical figures lies precisely in their ideality, which seemingly transcends any subjectivity, humanity and historicity. Komar is unambiguous about their magical impact:

I have always believed that, unlike sculpture and cave painting, the miracle of a traditional picture lies in the fact that a fragment of life is bound by the outline of a geometrical symbol: a rectangle, a circle, an arch, and other geometrical forms of canvas, paper, wood, etc.¹³

The miracle stems from a magical transition: “Images of love easily became symbols of the beginning of the universe.”¹⁴ Freudian symbols of a personal past blend with the cosmological symbolism of an absolute beginning (Komar talks of a fusion of the impressions of personally experienced electroshock with the imagery of a cosmic catastrophe.) This amalgamation is based on changes in temporality. Something personal (impressions, emotions) is symbolized by something that is ultimately impersonal and eternal—a circle, a hexagon, *etc.*

There is, naturally, a fundamentally paradoxical aspect to the symbolization of a *moment*, of a *beginning*, by geometrical figures that are not bound by any temporality. This paradox is reflected in a picture where that famous symbol of eternity, Ouroboros—the serpent biting its own tail—is combined with hourglasses—symbols of time, transition and vanity.

The enigma of ideal geometric figures lies in the fact that they have no apparent origin, no history. This is best expressed by Husserl in his famous work, *The Origin of Geometry*:

¹² Komar & Melamid. *Symbols of the Big Bang*, p. 20.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

...Geometrical existence is not physic existence; it does not exist as something personal within the personal sphere of consciousness; it is the existence of what is objectively for “everyone” (for actual and possible geometers or those who understand geometry). Indeed it has, from its primal institution <Urstiftung>, an existence which is peculiarly supratemporal <uberzeitlich> and which—of this we are certain—is accessible to all men, first of all to the actual and possible mathematicians of all people, all ages; and this is true of all its particular forms. And all forms newly produced by someone on the basis of pregiven forms immediately take on the same objectivity. This is, we note, an “ideal” objectivity. <...> The Pythagorean theorem, indeed all of geometry, exists only one, no matter how often or even in what language it is again the same, no matter how many times it has been sensibly uttered, from the original expression <...>. The sensible utterances have spatiotemporal individuation in the world like all corporeal occurrences, like everything embodied in bodies as such; but this is not true of the spiritual form <geistige Gestalt> itself, which is called an “ideal object” <ideale Gegenständlichkeit>.¹⁵

The ideal geometrical figure has completely repressed its origin. Its non-temporality and non-historicity are its defining features. However, geometrical figures do not arise out of nowhere; nor do they arrive ready-made into the domain of mathematical thought. There is a history to their constitution that is completely repressed by their ideality. Merleau-Ponty dedicated a special seminar to the elucidation of the Husserlian problematic. He stressed that “there has to be an investigation of sense or of essence which no longer reverts to an atemporal ideality which would dominate genesis and engulf it, an investigation which would be the unconcealment of sense, of a *Sinn genesis*”¹⁶. Husserl wrote of the necessity of a history—not in a historical-philological sense, but rather of “an inquiry <Rückfrage> back into the submerged original beginnings of geometry as they necessarily must have been in their ‘primally establishing function’”¹⁷.

The matter is complicated by the fact that the meaning of geometry, as historically constituted, is precisely a foreclosing of its origin, of its historical constitution. This accords extreme significance to the choice of geometrical figures for a symbolization of the beginning. The beginning—as something forever foreclosed, repressed, denied—is justifiably symbolized by a figure of such an annihilation. The beginning is symbolized by a figure that has no beginning.

Phenomenological studies have shown that geometry, as an ideality, is grounded in language, a bearer of ideality *par excellence* (Merleau-Ponty). Derrida’s solution to this paradox is well known. According to him, the groundless ideality emerges in writing.¹⁸ It is writing that transforms a sense from something grounded in the individuality of a speaker into something supratemporal, eternal and separated form

¹⁵ Edmund Husserl. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1970, pp. 356-357.

¹⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology*. Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 2002, p. 28.

¹⁷ Edmund Husserl. *Op. Cit.*, p. 354.

¹⁸ Edmund Husserl. *L’Origine de la géométrie*. Traduction et introduction par Jacques Derrida. Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1962.

subjectivity. Writing is thus the origin of Geometry. Writing, as we have all learned from Derrida, presumes the death of the author, the foreclosure of physical origin. Symbols repress their origin in writing just as strongly as writing denies its relation to its physical author.

Komar and Melamid stress the man-made character of their symbols. Most of these are drawn on ruled paper and expose the work of their geometrical construction. They exhibit their roots in writing, in crafty construction. Komar proudly declares that the two artists “have found methods of composing a six-pointed star not just out of triangles, but also out of squares and circles...”¹⁹ Here symbols exhibit the methods of their own crafting in stark contrast to their more traditional uses. The letters of Hebrew alphabet appear in some of Komar and Melamid’s works as emerging from or dissolving in a circle, or as sand in hourglasses that form a Star of David. We can probably interpret such imagery as a symbolization of passing time, that is, as a symbolization of the genesis of symbolization itself, as the movement of a sign toward an illusory eternity and ideality. In his interview Komar associates the symbols with the loss of speech that he experienced in early childhood. The eternity of a symbol emerges out of the repression of communication. Strangely enough, symbols must signify where communication and signification (speech and writing) are excluded (foreclosed). Personal experience, personal history is involved in their creation as a lost origin hidden behind a geometrical supratemporality.

Many of Komar and Melamid’s paintings represent elongated rectangles composed of two squares. The upper square is usually occupied by a symbol (e.g. the Star of David) in a state of self-assembly or self-decomposition, while the lower square typically remains black. The canvases are constructed in a way that suggests seeing the upper part as a symbolic diagram that represents something unrepresentable, signified by the black square below. The black square itself may stand for the primordial night or primordial matter, but it is also an obvious homage to Kazimir Malevich.

Malevich’s *Black Square* is itself a symbol of a radical break with a preceding pictorial tradition and of a new “absolute beginning”—modernist art. The *Black Square* captures the modernist Big Bang precisely because a geometrical figure can have no ancestry, no antecedents by dint of its eternity and immutability—but also by virtue of being a purely mental construct that requires no antecedence. It can be built rationally from scratch. Descartes already used geometry and mathematics to assert his absolute independence from any preexisting authorities, and thus from tradition and prejudice. Paradoxically, the symbol of a fundamental break, of an absolute beginning must make claims to its own eternity (it is always equivalent to itself and therefore cannot be borrowed from anybody) and at the same time to its own construction from scratch (it is rationally thought into being and consequently not handed down from the past).²⁰ The same quality of primordality is easily ascribed to the square’s color, a deep black.

Thus, the upper square in many of Komar and Melamid’s *Big Ban* works comes across as a symbolic vision of something that is also represented differently in the lower part. The upper images of light are obviously symbolic; however, the lower part is much

¹⁹ Komar & Melamid. *Op. Cit.*, p. 22.

²⁰ This paradox is analyzed in: David Rapport Lachterman. *The Ethics of Geometry. A Genealogy of Modernity*. New York-London, Routledge, 1989.

more enigmatic and less liable to simplistic interpretation. Is it symbolic or not? On the one hand, a black square is certainly a geometrical symbol,²¹ but at the same time it stands for pure negativity, the total absence of any visibility. In other words, it is a symbol of a beginning that is absolutely non-representable. The impossibility of pinning down the symbolic dimension of the black square—at once a symbol and a negation of the symbolic—is of great importance to Komar and Melamid’s entire project.

The representation of non-representability is deeply contradictory and troubling. It is as if the paintings invited us to compare two kinds of symbolization of the non-representable—through visible figures and via a square frame that bounds a total blackness, an invisibility. In some of the paintings of this kind, a lower square is, however, not completely black: we can sometimes discern some geometry in the blackness (e.g. black squares in black circles), executed in a way reminiscent of Ad Reinhardt.

The black color too, in spite of Malevich’s attempt to make it stand for an absolute beginning, is itself already constructed and hides the history of its constitution. We know that in Sufi mysticism, for instance, a distinction is made between two kinds of blackness: the lower one is a blackness of matter, of a black body that doesn’t reflect light; and the higher blackness of the so-called “black light” that pervades empty space, the blackness of interstellar space itself. According to Henri Corbin: “In mystical terms it corresponds to the light of the divine Self in-itself (*nur-e dhat*), the black light of the *Deus absconditus*, the hidden Treasure that aspires to reveal itself, ‘to create perception in order to reveal to itself the object of its perception’, and which thus can only manifest itself by veiling itself in the object state.”²² There is similar distinction in Neoplatonism. Hans Blumenberg writes: “There is an autonomous, ‘romantic’ darkness [*Dunkelheit*] of the dark, and there is a darkness [*Dunke*] that lies under the light and in the light.”²³

The paradox here is that the blackness of “black light,” its invisibility, equals the visibility of the *Deus absconditus*, a *hidden* God. To become perceptible, the black light must be symbolized, and this symbolization (that is, its revelation) proceeds precisely in terms of “veiling”, destruction, disfiguration. In this context the invisibility, the blackness is obviously the most direct and adequate manifestation of what must be revealed (the situation of concealment itself). In painting, however, black light is given not as “light,” but rather as its direct opposite—as a black body (of paint). Surprisingly blackness itself can be the symbol of another blackness, but also the symbol of a foreclosure: a symbolized, invisible God returns as “reality” (the material darkness of a body).

But what is a meaning of this veiling, of this paradoxical manifestation through self-destruction? This meeting of light and matter is a *topos* in the Gnostic mythology concerning the creation of a material world by Sophia. It occurs, for instance, in the famous Gnostic cosmogonic text *On the Origin of the World*. This myth talks of creation as the separation by a veil of the immaterial world of light (*Pleroma*) from the world of matter and darkness. “As an image of the upper world, the veil contains the types, the models, the archetypal principles from which the lower cosmos can be formed. Sophia’s task is to transmit to unformed, dark matter those luminous seals, those ideal traces of the

²¹ Komar claims that the simple rectangular frame of a painting is already symbolic.

²² Henri Corbin. *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*. Boulder-London, Shambhala, 1978, pp. 100-101.

²³ Hans Blumenberg. “Light as a Metaphor for Truth”—In: *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*. Ed. By David Michael Levin. Berkeley, University of California Press, 1993, p. 33.

Pleroma form which, by a sort of inverted law of example, by the play of distorting mirrors, our world will be generated, an abortive cosmos, a pale image, a distorted reflection of the harmonious beauty of the pleromatic world.”²⁴

Filoramo, whom I have quoted above, describes the creation of our world in a moment of meeting between light and matter, as a catastrophe of distortion and disfigured reflection, which is precisely the way in which symbols are generated. This is why they always remain a distorted “pale image” of the non-representable. Our world is born in a contortion that makes symbolic representation and temporality possible. Time is a mode of existence of symbols. Neoplatonism, which postulates a primordially of darkness and claims the identity of being not with a revelation in light but with the enigmatic plenitude of the potentiality of the dark, understands radiation as a degradation of darkness: “Being is no longer the self-presentation of beings; it has become something ‘formless that cannot be glimpsed’; it doesn’t open eyes but shuts them. Absolute light and absolute darkness collapse into each other”²⁵.

Unrevealed matter in its primordial darkness is unknown and hence unchangeable, non-temporal. The advent of light brings on time, because the first moment of visibility is the first moment when the state of matter acquires form and is inscribed into a chain of changes and transformations. Time is constituted by the advent of light. Phenomenologically, the world is given to us by light. Light reveals the world to us as a multiplicity of visible forms. The light is therefore a condition of the appearance of the world, but at the same light is an object that can be seen, that can become visible itself. Interstellar darkness shows the invisibility of light, which requires a body to become visible. In this context a body is the condition of light’s visibility, but light is a condition of visibility of bodies. One must precede the other, must constitute the origin of the other, but in relation to light the question of primordially cannot be resolved, because the light is not divided into two—into a light as a phenomenological condition of appearance and as an object that itself appears. The light is one.

Light’s strange duality within its singularity can be formulated in terms of temporality or of origin. In the words of the French philosopher François Wahl,

We can ask: at what moment of representation, around what point the light ceases to give itself as something that allows to see and starts to present itself as something to be seen? Ceases to give itself as a milieu enveloping the appearance and starts to become a measure of a multiplicity of what is appearing? Ceases to give itself as texture of the appearance and starts to present itself as an index of the real?²⁶

²⁴ Giovanni Filoramo. *A History of Gnosticism*. Cambridge, Mass.—Oxford, Blackwell, 1990, p. 74.

²⁵ Hans Blumenberg. *Op. Cit.*, p. 34. This idea of light as blinding and related to the origin was later elaborated into an opposition between invisible *lux* and visible *lumen*. Philo talks about two kinds of light—invisible and visible. The former is the origin, the latter the creation.

²⁶ François Wahl. *Introduction au discours du tableau*. Paris, Seuil, 1996, p. 96. [On redemande donc: à quel moment de la représentation, autour de quel point, la lumière cesse-t-elle de se donner pour ce qui fait voir et vient-elle à s’exposer comme ce qui est vu? Cesse de se donner comme le milieu enveloppant l’apparaître et vient faire critère de la multiplicité de ce qui apparaît? Cesse de se donner comme le tissu de l’apparence et vient à s’exposer comme indice du réel?]

Wahl's answer is obvious: there is no such "point" or moment. That moment is one of a phantasmatic origin; it is a phantasm of the origin and nothing else. This phantasm of origin refers, not to the phenomenological aspect of visibility, but to the need for a structure able to constitute and organize a sense before any phenomenon arises in our perception, i.e. in our consciousness. Laplanche and Pontalis, in their classical study of the originary phantasm, discuss "Freud's need to postulate the significative organization's anteriority with respect to the event's impact and to the totality of the signified."²⁷ From this point of view, an event must invent its own mythical prehistory, which is a signifying pre-structure capable of organizing the event's cognition. This mythical anteriority as such is inaccessible to the subject and plays the role of a primordial Origin.

Wahl ponders along similar lines the necessity of the (non-existent) moment of reversal. The postulation of this moment, of this turning point is, according to him, that moment of absence in which the subject makes its appearance. Roughly speaking, the split of light into two different hypostases is necessary in order to introduce a structure of signification into the purely phenomenological experience of appearance. Signification, as we well know, relies on a system of oppositions, i.e. on symbolic dualities. Therefore, we incorporate these dualities into our intuition of appearances as a reference to a mythical origin where the imaginary split occurs.

We are dealing here with the fundamental mechanism of symbolization, which is intimately connected to the notion of Origin. The Origin here should be distinguished from the Beginning. The Beginning is defined by my Webster's dictionary as "the point at which something begins." It marks the first moment of existence. Before its beginning, the object or phenomenon was not. The beginning is thus an absolute boundary, and that is why it is unreachable. It belongs to the realm of Zeno's aporias: you can't reach a point because any amount of space, even a point, can be infinitely divided into smaller ones. This is why the Big Bang as the absolute beginning cannot be reached.

The origin is something very different. First of all, it exists before the beginning of a phenomenon. When we talk about an origin we usually refer to a precondition of an appearance of something. We are looking for an origin in times preceding the beginning of something. This means that the origin is not "the point at which something begins": it must be situated before the beginning.²⁸ The origin of a crime always precedes the crime itself. The origin is not really temporal; it is a state rather than a moment, and this is why it easily lends itself to representation by atemporal images. However, because the origin is not part of the phenomenon itself, it is separate from the phenomenon and thus cannot be deduced from it. The origin is always constructed after the phenomenon as a source of its identity, i.e. as the source of a meaning that we project upon the phenomenon. Light may strangely be conceived as an origin of itself, as a precondition of meaning and of the

²⁷ J. Laplanche, J.-B. Pontalis. *Fantasme originaire, fantasmes des origines, origines du fantasme*. Paris, Hachette, 1985, pp. 61-62. [...la nécessité où se trouve Freud de postuler l'antériorité d'une organisation signifiante par rapport à l'efficacité de l'évènement et de l'ensemble du signifié.]

²⁸ According to Maimonides, Peripatetics but also Averroes argued that the possibility to exist (an origin, in their case—the matter) should exist before the beginning of the world, "therefore the world existed before it began to exist". This paradox is refuted by Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologica*, Part I, Q. 46, Art. 1. One of the ways of refutation is to claim the eternity of God radically distinct (as the Origin often is) from the World.

appearance of light as an object. This strangeness makes light completely unique. The Big Bang shares with light this peculiarity of being the beginning and the origin at the same time. This is what makes its presentation so complex.

Lévinas describes this situation as follows. He defines light as a precondition of the world's appearance, of its givenness to us. This light gives us the world as a pure surface, i.e. as a pure exteriority. But it also has the magical ability to reverse this exteriority:

Light makes possible the envelopment of the exterior by the interior, which is exactly the structure of the *cogito* and of the sense. The thought is always clarity or the dawn of clarity. The miracle of the light is its essence: thanks to the light an object coming from the outside is already ours, inside the horizon that precedes it; it comes from the outside already grasped and becomes as if coming from inside us...²⁹

Levinas describes the same turning point that creates the illusion of anteriority. An object of perception is always already “inside the horizon that precedes it,” i.e. inside the signifying system, the *cogito* that is preconstituted as its origin. Wahl even invents an image for this phantasmatic moment or point of reversal. He speaks of a “point of rotation of light,” of a “*foyer*” of light, meaning a focus, a seat, a source, a nucleus.

On several of Komar and Melamid's canvases, whose organization is significantly dual (two squares), the upper square reveals the emergence of symbols as a kind of pictorial vortex, which I am tempted to call with Wahl “the point of rotation of light.” The swastika as a figure of rotation plays an important role in this imagery.

The symbolic situation explored by the two artists goes to the very heart of painting as aesthetic activity. The very overcoming of symbolism by material aesthetics and by abstraction is radically questioned here, because symbolism emerges from the figure of foreclosure of the origin and of its postulation, and is thus presented as the phantasmatic precondition of painting as such. Komar and Melamid's latest work is a reflection on the origins and ontology of the fine arts, which are seen in our culture as emblematic of the entire phenomenon of appearance and visibility. The artists' answer to the issue is obvious—you can't overcome symbolism because, as the mythical origin of painting,³⁰ it precedes any pictorial objects that try to foreclose it. Malevich's case offers a supplementary confirmation of this claim. It is a radical attempt to kill all pictorial symbolism and to restore phenomenality as the primordial pictorial dimension. It is not surprising, however, that Malevich's “Black Square” has itself become one of the great symbols of modernist painting.

²⁹ Emmanuel Lévinas. *De l'existence à l'existant*. Paris, Vrin, 1981, p. 76. [“La lumière rend donc possible cet enveloppement de l'extérieur par l'intérieur, qui est la structure même du *cogito* et du sens. La pensée est toujours clarté ou l'aube d'une clarté. Le miracle de la lumière en est l'essence: par la lumière, l'objet, tout en venant du dehors, est déjà à nous dans l'horizon qui le précède; vient d'un dehors déjà appréhendé et devient comme venu de nous...”]

³⁰ This purely mythical dimension of the Origin is reflected in an earlier Komar and Melamid painting, *The Origin of Social Realism*, which shows a Muse drawing a profile of Stalin on the wall by contouring his shadow.

I opened my essay by claiming that modernism rejected symbolism because it was considered secondary, coming after the phenomenon. What Komar and Melamid try to show is completely opposite. Symbolism is not secondary to painting but rather its origin—but as such it must always be constructed after the appearance of the phenomenon, as its precondition. This means that the posteriority of symbolism is nothing other than a condition of its primordality.

The primordial element in painting is obviously a trace left by a brush on a surface. This trace is a kind of pictorial writing that immediately conceals the beginning of the work by its sheer ability to exist without any direct physical connection with an artist (Derrida has shown this convincingly enough). The Beginning is thus suppressed and the path to the construction of the Origin is open (the artist himself is transformed into an origin).

Komar and Melamid's meditations on origin and symbols confront the limits of representability. Symbols are only reminiscences of the unreachable origin. So it may even be misguided to think of them as pictorial objects per se. They are concepts that reveal their own historicity (the two artists make the manner of their construction perfectly explicit) and reveal Komar and Melamid's affinity with conceptualism. In some of these recent works, however, "pure geometry" emerges surprisingly dressed in flesh. Circles are transformed into serpents, the Star of David into a bird, and so on. Geometry acquires here certain dramatic features of an archetypal bestiary. To my mind, these transformations are akin to how the first geometries of ancient ornaments (which were already symbolic) moved toward figuration, which at certain stages was strongly associated with the imagery of origins.