

INTRODUCTION

In the beginning: nothing. Darkness. In the beginning: Paradise. This valley of green that is known to us somehow both as a place and a state of being. Oh, but Paradise is lost to us now, Milton's Lucifer has fallen, Eve of the pomegranate, the fig, and the apple has laid her weary bones to rest in dust; a great nuclear sun gazes blindly from above, and we are all of us lost. Dreaming again of beginnings.

The *Book of Genesis* has it that God created the heavens and the earth before all else and that it was his holy word which brought light into being, filling the vastness with visible beauty. *The Prose Edda* recounts that the first of all worlds was Muspelheim, a place of heat and fire, that it was followed by Niflheim, the realm of icy waters, and that the two met in the middle of Ginnungagap, the great abyss, to form the first living being, the giant Ymir. As written in Hesiod's *Theogony*, Chaos rules alone in the beginning, formlessly and without purpose, until Gaia, the Earth, rose and birthed the starry Sky, Uranus. In the Hindu *Rig Veda*, the One rested first in a darkness wrapped in darkness, in an unilluminated water which was and was not, until awakened by heat and longing for the world. In the Mesopotamian *Enuma Elish*, the first gods Apsu and Tiamat were freshwater and saltwater personified – and in them and their son Mummu, the mist, all the early elements of the universe were present. However, it was from Tiamat's dead body the world of mankind was finally created. In the *Edda*, it is wreathed from the giant Ymir's corpse. In the *Theogony*, life springs from Uranus's blood as he lies dying, slain by his own kin. Suffering gives way to life as an echo through the oldest myths of mankind. And often, there is, before anything human, a landscape; deserted except for the elements, rising and falling as slowly as mountains with the dying breaths of great immortal beings.

It is in the primordial landscapes of creation that *Ascend* begins and to those the work returns, taking the observer meanwhile on a journey through the human hope, belief and suffering, through faith and feverish transgressions on a search for meaning, which is itself the goal.

Life experienced can be understood as multiplicitous, its unseen truths lurking under a thin veneer of reality, revealing themselves to us only when we let our guard down, in dreams and visions, in fears and fantasies. We get lost under the surface, we drown, we scramble for something to hold on to; and in the meantime, we manage to forget again what we have seen. After all, who can bear to look upon eternity unblinkingly without distraction? On these pages, the veil is lifted for a while. The realm of the symbolic is in charge, its king a pale-faced figure with no eyes to see, riding invisibly across horizons. Take your seat on the throne of witnessed visitation and let the mind run free.

Ascend is presented as a collection of 16 thematical nodes, which, borrowing from the mystical and sacred of different religious movements, from the Vedic traditions of ancient India to the creation myths of the Mayan K'iche' people, can be experienced as an esoteric exploration of the human soul's search for light in a darkened world. Religious visions of

ecstatic bliss are revealed side by side with hellish transformations, seeming to depict and recreate a universe of contrasts, where everything is all at once in the throes of the movement of mythical time and totally still, where the highest and the lowest are brought together, and where the myth's pursuit of meaning is given form.

The work is published together with Raison d'Être's new album *Cambium*, which draws inspiration from the four vital liquids of Hippocrates: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile – contributing to and taking meaning from the reworking of ancient mystic themes in *Ascend*. There is no one truth at play here, unless it is a new one, inherent to the work, but core themes of sickness and sanctity, the decay of the flesh, and the transcendence of the spirit connect themselves easily to strains of mystical thought developed in Late Antiquity, such as Hermeticism, Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, and later elements of Orphism and Pythagoreanism – all based on interpreting and reshaping religious texts in a mystical manner.

Take, if you will, the perspective of the renaissance alchemist, trained in the traditions of Hermes Trismegistus, the great originator. Working in your chamber in Florence or Vienna, you scribble on parchment and vie for the philosopher's stone and a glimpse of gold. As Europe lies tormented, torn by centuries of famine, pestilence, and war, theologians and philosophers look to the sages of ancient times for signs to follow and interpret. Fantasies of the apocalypse have haunted minds throughout the last millennium, released from texts such as *The Book of Revelation* and the writings of Joachim de Fiore, who has foretold the coming of an age of the spirit where man will finally achieve direct knowledge of God – but not until the Antichrist has cleansed the earth through pain and terror. It is the ages before and shortly after Lutheranism, the word of God is spoken primarily in the Latin tongue, elevated and not understandable to most. Even so, the will of God is felt in every little thing, though found first and foremost in the great Gothic cathedrals, in the warm light of flickering wax candles, lit for the dead; given shape by Michelangelo's *Pietà* and Grünewald's *Crucifixion* and voice by choirs of Gregorian chanters singing "*Te Deum, te Dominum*". It is already known that an inverted image of reality can be made to manifest in the dark by the use of a thin ray of light – though no one yet in Europe has figured out how to bind the camera obscura in lasting form. We are in a time of change, and alchemy is the art of transformation, based on the belief that matter must give way to mind and that the primeval divine truth – which man lost knowledge of when he entered into nature – can be rediscovered and the soul released from the bondage of the material, from death and decay, through the process of theurgy, sacred magic. The experiments which fill the alchemist's days are not just attempts to break down one metal to create another but a quest to bring forth immortality, salvation, from the darkened flesh of man. From the deepest suffering, the greatest sanctity may still be achieved.

Or take the perspective of the Gnostic, to whom the material world, which is in a constant state of decay, is a darkened afterimage of the divine, created by an inferior being, the Demiurge, in an act of rebellion but yet containing the divine spark of God. In the Gnostic worldview, the creation of the world was the fall from grace, and it was this which split and gendered the human soul. Only by awakening the human to the presence of the divine

spark inside themselves, can the suffering of the physical world finally come to an end. To the Gnostic, the flesh is not just lost but evil, and the soul alone is good, imprisoned by being, yearning for freedom.

On the path of mysticism, everything can be said to be connected. Each symbol leads to another. The secret writings of the Rosicrucians are but one sliver of a greater truth, leading to the ancient tablets of Egypt and Mesopotamia, spread out as so many blooming branches of the world tree. The Hermetic idea that all of nature contains immanent divinity with the potential to be found and the Gnostic idea of a sinful mortal plane, which has been parted from the pure spiritual one, come together in the realm of the mystical, leaving space also for the Orphic belief in the soul's transformation through purification and the Pythagorean's longing to finally hear the harmony of the spheres: that great universal music created by the movement of celestial bodies and discernible only to the soul. In *Ascend*, mysticism itself comes to life, mingling horrors and holy things, monstrosity and majesty, to illuminate the mind's yearning search upward and outward, as it dreams of the halls of Heaven, of light in the dark. From "Primordial Waters" to "Devouring Winds" Nihil takes the observer through stages of creation and becoming, through destruction to undoing, revealing how bodies and minds awaken in myth. The human form is deconstructed and made sculptural in his images, underlining the universal nature of the states he depicts. While some artworks in the book are focused on phases of existence – birth, being, decay, and death – others deal more directly with the inner life of the mind, from the experience of isolation to the devotion to divinity. Portraying saints and martyrs, psychedelically distorted angels and otherworldly spirits, Nihil leads us deep into the mythological. Here both prophet and prophecy can be found, both the human soul itself as it is mirrored by depiction and that which it has wrought in the attempt to understand, from the first to the last of all things.

The world ends. *The Book of Revelation* tells us, that the four horsemen of the apocalypse will ride forth, and in their trail, the moon will turn the colour of blood, the stars will fall from the sky, and earthquakes will shake the mountains as the members of mankind hide in the deepest places for fear of heaven. According to the Buddhist *Sermon of the Seven Suns*, the rivers will dry out as the sky will fill with six more suns, until the earth is engulfed by flames. Ragnarok, described in the verses of the *Poetic Edda*, is heralded by mighty storms and a ceaseless winter three years long. The great wolf Fenrir will break free and his offspring devour the sun and the moon, and in the war that follows between gods and giants, almost all will die and the earth will sink into the sea. As the Zoroastrian *Zand I Wahman Yasn* tells it, the earth will become increasingly barren while mankind worships wealth and noxious creatures will rain from the sky instead of water, as war after war plagues humanity. The "Legend of the Suns", from the Aztec *Codex Chimalpopoca*, describes a belief that the world and its people have ended several times before – plunged into darkness and eaten by jaguars, ravaged by a hurricane, destroyed by fire, drowned in 52 years of rain – and that the final end will be an earthquake unlike any other. The world ends in countless ways, over and over again.

But there is almost always a new dawn. A new landscape and a new beginning. A quiet light rising over silent hills. The chosen will wander blessed through the vast emptiness or be reborn to try anew. It ends as it begins: with a silent, windblown world.

FREJA GYLDENSTRØM

Copenhagen, April 2022