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# PROMETEO

LIBERATO

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L. Storm

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*Il passato  
di un'illusione*

L'IDEA COMUNISTA NEL XX SECOLO

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# PROMETEO LIBERATO

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*It is not uncommon for someone to ask me if it is difficult to “make a journal like Prometeo.”*

*The question is simple and involves similar answer: yes, it is difficult. A quarterly like ours is deliberately eclectic, ranging over many fields of knowledge. I did not use this verb at random: in fact, rather than a defined route - a virtue of other titles, more ideological than us - it is a navigation with wide paths. It also depends very much on the proposals that are made. Prometeo is an authorial journal, meaning that the authors, their ideas,*

*their expertise and the way they express them, are really decisive elements.*

*Even in the most doctoral cases, it is always about human material, to be handled with care. And with the awareness that, precisely humanly, there can be defaillances. For example, the processing of the September issue, which falls in July and August, is the most strenuous.*

*If someone does not deliver, it is certain to happen at the end of July, beyond any more than concessive deadlines, for the simple reason that in common perception the real end of the social year falls in early August, when deadlines have thickened and one has failed to fulfill everything. Another feature of summer writing is that it is shorter. With Prometeo writers, usually, the problem is getting the texts to fit into layouts. But not in the summer. After all, it is a well-known phenomenon in book publishing as well: writers almost always write in other seasons, with no anticyclones and no mosquitoes.*

*To return to the difficulties of conception and selection in a magazine such as Prometeo, I must point out that sometimes we allow ourselves “the suggestions of the weather,” that is, the irruption of some anniversary. There are those that are triumphant and universal, but also those that are more searching and subtle.*

*In this September issue, we have chosen one that is certainly indicative of cultural quality but which unveils a scenario that is not at all subtle, indeed deflagrating. As Andrea Masala tells us, sixty years ago, in 1964, a book came out in America that was destined to engrave itself in the collective imagination of several generations, particularly the one commonly referred to as “of ‘68.” Herbert Marcuse, a German philosopher and sociologist naturalized American and one of the most prominent exponents of the Frankfurt School, had written it, weaving a radical critique of consumer society. Happy were the days when an essay could change the world.*

*And still it makes quite an impression to land a few pages later in a great multi-handed service that tries to grasp the nature and reasons for this uncertain present of ours where, to be succinct, fake news, credulity, illusions, as well as widespread stupidity reign.*

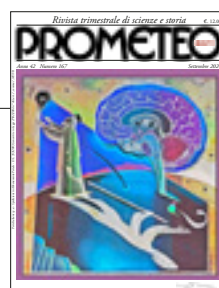
*I don't know about you. I console myself by looking once more at the wonderful Istanbul cats that Stephen Alcorn, our cover artist, has drawn for us. It is a world exclusive, of which we are deeply proud.*

*One last piece of news: starting at the end of September, we will be doing presentations of Prometeo in different Italian realities ((how nice it would be if they called us abroad, too!). On the website [www.prometeoliberato.com](http://www.prometeoliberato.com) we will put alerts to know more precisely the place and date. The goal, as always, is to amplify the notoriety of our paper and, why not, to gain new readers as well. Meanwhile, also on page 171, on the back cover, all the info to subscribe.*

*See you soon!*

*Gabriella Piroli*

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# WE WERE ALL UNDESIRABLES

*But intensely desiring, as was later wisely written. Sixty years ago, the first edition of Herbert Marcuse's One-Dimensional Man came out. A critical essay on the consumer society that has profoundly affected the collective imagination and political behavior of an entire generation of students. A youth rebellion that lasted about a decade and was active on both sides of the Atlantic.*

Andrea Masala

*"A comfortable, polished, reasonable, democratic non-freedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a sign of technical progress."*

HERBERT MARCUSE

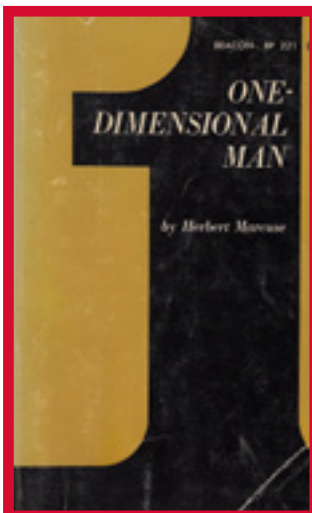
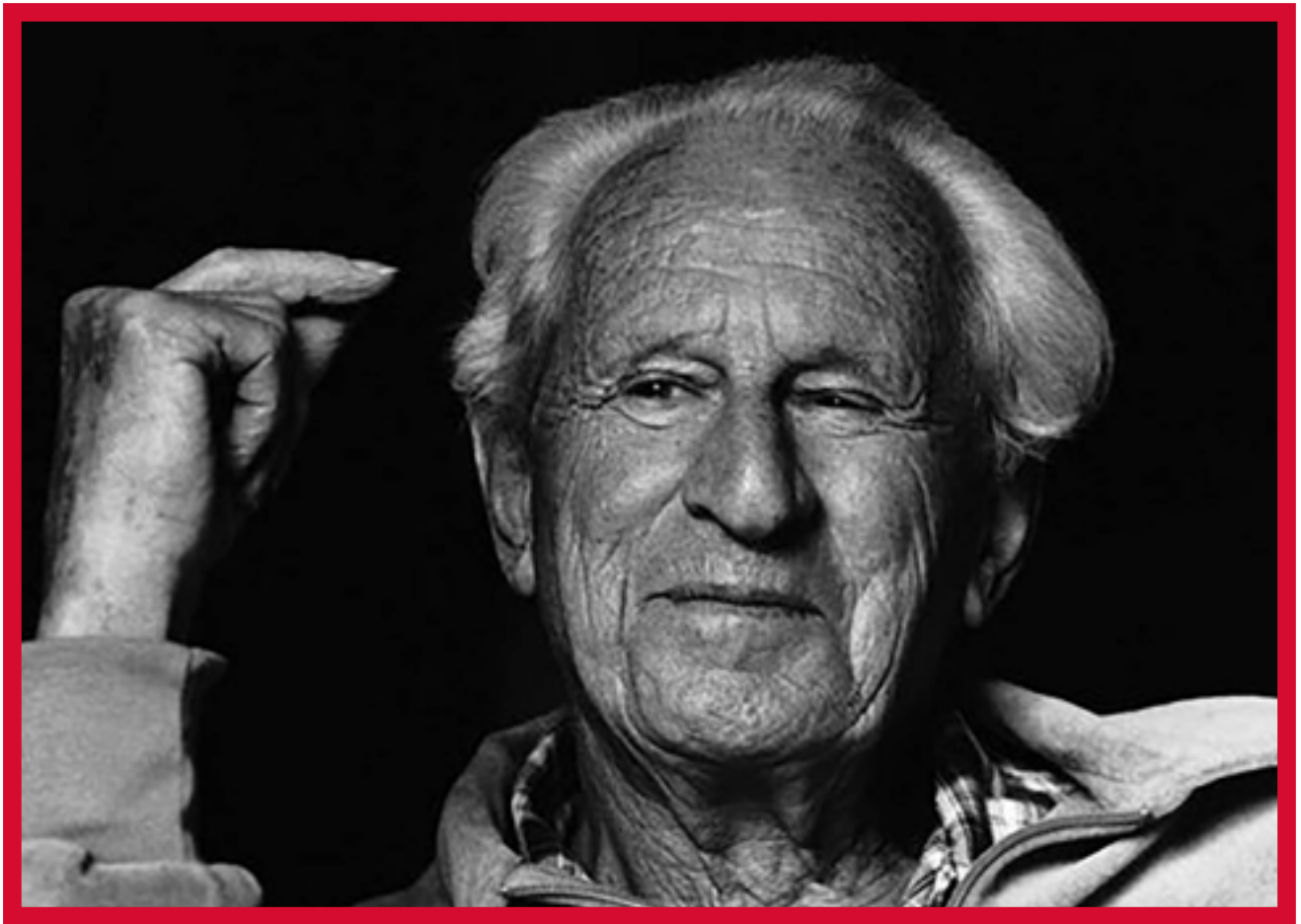
Thus, with a certain boldness, sixty years ago, in 1964, Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* was published. In the incipit, as with all great works, everything is captured: the critique of technology by his old master Heidegger, combined with the dialectic of his great master Hegel; non-freedom as a moment of the negative; and the critique of industrial progress as a progressive alienation of the young Marx.

The book concludes with a direct quote from a fellow Frankfurt School scholar, Walter Benjamin: "It is only because of the hopeless [literally 'the hopeless', ed.] that we are given hope".

As is well known, the book resonated widely among the American movements of the 1960s and in the "World of 1968". Upon rereading the work, *One-Dimensional Man* retains a disruptive power even today. Perhaps, it is even more necessary now than ever. But to reread and contemplate what lies between the beginning and the ending, it is worth taking a few steps back to focus on the figure of its author.

Hegel, Marx, and Freud constitute Marcuse's holy trinity. The dialectical method (Hegel) and the concepts of alienation (Marx), and repression (Freud) form the foundations of his philosophical, social, and political reflections.

Equally important in his intellectual journey is his collaboration with the so-called Frankfurt School and his exile, following the rise of Hitler, to the United States—a society distinct from Europe, where the nexus of democracy, consumerism, and freedom was



*One-Dimensional Man* debuted in bookstores in 1964, but arrived in Europe a few years later (e.g., the first French edition is from 1967). The repertoire of quotations concerning the work and life of Herbert Marcuse (Berlin, 1898 - Starnberg, 1979) is immense. In one of his most remembered phrases, he omits scholarly aplomb and addresses students directly with these words, “Destroy everything you have believed in up to now, throw overboard everything that until yesterday represented the foundation of your life: it seemed to be granite to you and was nothing but pumice stone, it seemed eternal and is instead crumbly and useless.”

more developed than on the old continent.

The Frankfurt School (Institute for Social Research) was founded to document and analyze everything related to the labor movement. It was a powerful vector of mass entry into the public sphere and the main actor in European social transformations. The Institute was therefore close to the trade unions and workers' political organizations (Marcuse himself had been a member of the SPD, which he left after World War I and the assassinations of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht) and was directed by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, the authors of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

This generation of scholars shared with other European intellectuals and militants a double disappointment: the failure of the revolutions in the West and the gradual bureaucratic and repressive involution of the Russian revolution. It is no coincidence that in the countries where the revolution had seemed closest (Germany, Italy, and Hungary), the deepest intellectual consciousnesses developed, each in its own tragic way: Gramsci, Lukács, Bloch, Marcuse, Adorno, Benjamin, and others were forced to reason—some from prison, some in exile—about the defeat and strength of the hegemony of Nazism and fascism as well as the reactionary mobilization of the masses. Alongside this, they also had to confront, with varying degrees of courage and lucidity, the waning of the revolutionary momentum of the October Revolution—not as a historical event, but as a living reality.

However, the thinkers of the Frankfurt School also had the opportunity to analyze postwar democratic societies, starting in the United States. Though, this was impossible for Gramsci who died in 1937 and Lukács who resided behind the Iron Curtain.

All of them, however, recognized that traditional Marxism, both in its European “reformist” and Russian “revolutionary” versions, was no longer suited to the new socio-political conditions of the 1930s, so much so that all of them also sought to re-engage with Marx to explore different developments.

The Frankfurt School thus began an original reading of the European and Western crisis: Nazi-fascism was not the triumph of the irrational but, on the contrary, the high point of technology and rationality applied to destruction and repression. In this sense, it represented a dialectic of the Enlightenment: the overthrow of the Enlightenment, reason transforming from a force of liberation into a powerful instru-

ment of oppression. This theoretical core underpins Marcuse's later reflections, which are essential for understanding his intellectual developments.

It starts from the nexus between Reason and Nature: for them, the history of civilization is the history of domination—domination of class, of man over woman, of the collective over the individual. But the most profound domination is that of Man over Nature: man, a natural subject, alienates himself from nature (he becomes spirit in classical German philosophy) to dominate it. By asserting himself as something other than nature, man struggles against his instincts, repressing his nature, his natural essence. To dominate external nature, he must also dominate his internal nature, his natural essence. This repression, necessary for alienating himself (being other) from nature and dominating it, is doomed to failure because his natural essence inevitably returns; this Spirit, which believes itself to be other than Nature, remains nature. This struggle is autophagy.

By dominating Nature (the irrational world where irrational subjects such as women, servants, the colonized, animals, the insane, and children are to be dominated), Western society produces mechanisms of domination and control under which man himself falls. First through the natural sciences (Darwinism), then through the social sciences (positivism), and finally through administration (bureaucratism), the Western world robs the individual of autonomy and freedom, preventing self-determination. Instead of autonomy, the individual encounters efficient mechanisms that determine his life—mechanisms that are the offspring of a reified logos, of an Enlightenment reason in the negative.

Around the same years, Max Weber reflected on bureaucracy with only partly different accents.

These reflections inform two seminal texts by Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* and *One-Dimensional Man*.

The first was published in 1955, with the subtitle “A Contribution to Freud”, and it revolutionized reflections on the father of psychoanalysis. Marcuse analyzes American society by blending Marx and Freud, particularly the young Marx and the Freud of *Civilization and Its Discontents*. As highlighted in this work, the father of psychoanalysis views civilization as a progressive diversion of sexual, and libidinal impulses into other manifestations: work, art, politics, and law. He regards this diversion as an ineluctable fact of civilization: without the discomfort caused by the repression of instincts, society would be impossible.





Known as “Joli Mai,” French May is an allusion that summarizes in the world the uprisings of ‘68. Contrary to popular belief, they were not just a student mobilization event, as lively as this was, but involved workers and engaged the whole of France in several weeks of all-out strikes. The famous barricades, in response to massive Gaullist police interventions, began on May 10, 1968. In the photo above, a spontaneous gathering: here we recognize Daniel Cohn-Bendit, on whom a government appeal was hanging that sought his removal from France as a “German Jew” and “undesirable.” Below, a procession during strikes: the banner reads, “Workers, students, united we will win.”

For Marcuse, the discomfort stems instead from a specific, irrational organization of society—technical and capitalistic (again, Marx combined with Heidegger). Freud mistook a phase of history characterized by an unequal division of labor and wealth for a structural element. It was precisely on this point that Marcuse distanced himself from the theories of Erich Fromm (another Frankfurt School member who also put Marx and Freud together), which he considered in dialogue as both sought to cure neuroses without recognizing their subversive potential.

Marcuse makes no secret of the fact that a certain reality principle is at least partly necessary as a repression of the pleasure principle (in this, he avoids the simplistic paths of Reich and acknowledges, with Freud, the necessity of the reality principle being structured within the infant psyche to enable coexistence). But he adds the question: To which reality must I sacrifice pleasure? To all of reality as I find it, or can I imagine (here is the imagination in power) altering some aspects of it? In turn, he identifies another level of oppression that is entirely unnecessary: the performance principle, which compels us to conform to social roles even against our desires. The society in which I am embedded expects a specific performance from me for the role I play, requiring me to conform to these roles and repress any alternative drives. Pirandello had already dramatized this insight, conceptualizing it as universal rather than historically determined. If for Pirandello, it is impossible to escape social roles, if for Freud discomfort is structural, then Marcuse sees possible glimpses of liberation: modern society is no longer characterized by the scarcity of resources; we are not bound by this division of labor. The development of the economy and society could allow for liberation. If this does not occur, it is because of the system's capacity to ensnare individuals in the production-consumption mechanism. The reality principle dictates that the repression of pleasure instincts applies to certain fundamental things, but there is an additional repression that serves not the ends of civilization as a whole, but specifically the ends of technical and capitalist domination. It is from this additional repression that Eros can break free and act freely in all human activities. Work, once freed from necessity, would become an activity also governed by the pleasure principle. "The struggle for Eros is a political struggle", he writes in the 1966 preface, after the release of *One-Dimensional Man* looking toward 1968.

This principle of hope, as Bloch puts it, distinguishes Marcuse's work from the more pessimistic work of the other Frankfurters.

Yet it is *One-Dimensional Man* that remains his most pessimistic text. In this work, the human being seems unable to transcend his social dimension. He has become one-dimensional, with no possibility of transforming or attaining depth. Modern industrial societies are, in fact, totalitarianism in disguise. Of the Eros that might have broken free and liberated multiple dimensions of life, there seems to be no trace. We are trapped in a single dimension with no exit.

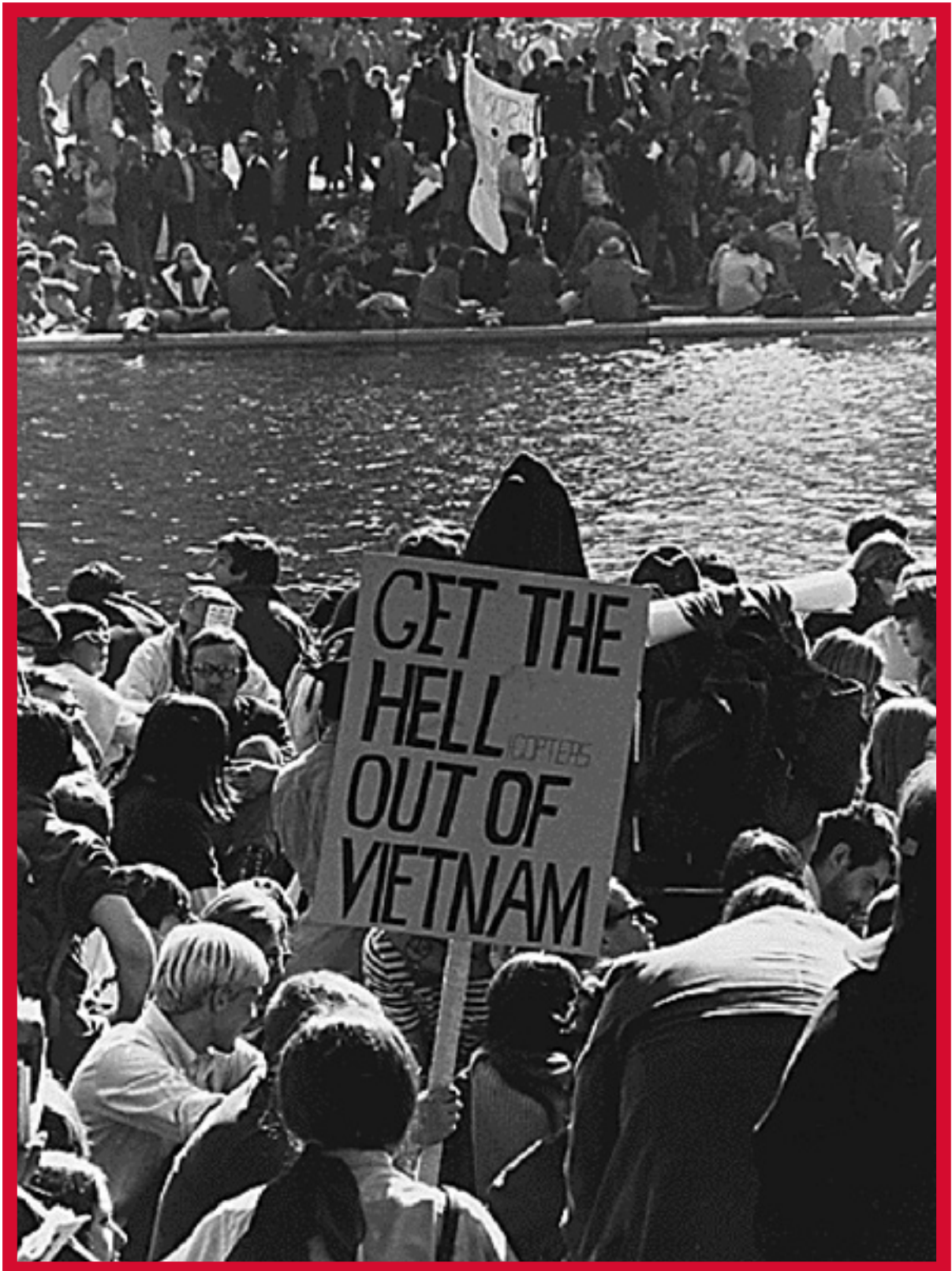
In 1960s American society, Marcuse observes the integrated working class—today's middle class. The anti-system class, according to Marxian analysis, has become part of the system. Technological society has spread a corrupting affluence that individuals cannot renounce. Along with affluence, opulent society has also lightened the Freudian unease of civilization: certain instincts can now be liberated, things are allowed or tolerated that were not before (pornography, drugs...), and enjoyments are possible that serve as forms of repressive desublimation.

We could say that here Marcuse suffuses Gramscian thought with Freud: industrial society maintains its hegemony not only by shaping consciousness but also by influencing the unconscious. Not only are the masses convinced that their condition is acceptable, but they are coerced to perceive it unconsciously.

The eclipse of critique in neo-totalitarian societies, according to Marcuse, is due to this perceived satisfaction: it is impossible to conceive of a different order; there is a "closure of the universe of discourse", so

#### ANDREA MASALA

He graduated with a bachelor's degree in literature with a thesis on the relationship between contemporary music and poetry, holds a doctorate in philosophy, and has various commitments between teaching, social-anthropological research, and social activism. Masala has worked with third-sector associations and promoted and coordinated research on the Roma world, migrant communities in Rome and Italy, conditions of the youth, and suburbs. He is active with Link University in their History programs and works with MA students in intercultural mediation at the University of Roma 3.



Not just America. Protests against the Vietnam War mobilized marches around the world.

that, as Mark Fischer states, “it is easier to conceive of the end of the world than the end of capitalism”.

Marcuse acknowledges that he is describing the American society of the time, which differs from European societies, but he warns that this society is the fate of all industrial societies. Today we know he was right, but at the time many European intellectuals were not convinced.

Under prosperous democracy, there prevails a burgeoning discussion, he says, and within the established structure, there is considerable tolerance. All points of view can be heard: communists and fascists, left and right, black and white, gun advocates and disarmament crusaders. [...] Stupid opinion is treated as intelligent opinion; propaganda rides alongside education, the true beside the false. This totalizing tolerance is justified by the democratic argument that

no group or individual possesses the truth, no one knows with certainty what is right or wrong, good or evil, so any opinion must be subject to the judgment of the people. But this democratic argument, which Marcuse seems to agree with, requires the premise of an informed, educated populace capable of accessing sources of adequate knowledge to make decisions, and at the same time capable of autonomous judgment.

But if individuals are bombarded with an infinity of disparate and manipulated information (not the uniform information of old totalitarianisms), if their repressive desublimations are linked to and dependent on a system of destruction and exploitation, they have no real possibility of free choice. The closure of the universe of discourse is the category under which Marcuse analyzes the complex hegemonic mechanism of advanced industrial societies.





The opposite page shows one of the leaders of the U.S. protests, Jerry Rubin, at a 1970 happening. American mobilizations have had three major, interconnected epicenters: the Vietnam War protest, the civil and economic demands of Black Americans (here alongside Martin Luther King and, below, the March for Jobs in Washington), the need for freedom that was being expressed by the so-called “counterculture.”



And so, we are left with a universe locked in a dimension where there is no conscious critique or unconscious dissatisfaction with the system, where the old revolutionary classes are integrated, and where critique seems to have no more space or need to exist.

Even in the USSR and China, Marcuse sees no alternative; they too are moving towards the mechanisms of neo-totalitarian industrial society. They chase the same model of prosperity and by no means have created an alternative one.

But is everything really closed? Is there no exit?

It is not: we would not be dealing with Marcuse, even though his text certainly is a ruthless, cruel, and analytical one.

These were the years when new movements emerged throughout the West, each differing according to the historical and socio-cultural characteristics of the places from which they originated. But they all sprang forth from the crisis of traditional lefts, linked to the labor movement and its institutions. These new lefts began with the critique, which we have already seen in Marcuse, of the integration of the working class or some of its sectors. While in Italy new workerisms were being sought after, in Marcuse's U.S. the prevailing sensitivity was that of a revolt against conformity, against the roles imposed by widespread affluence, and against old racial and gender hierarchies. It was students throughout the West who energized these new movements. They criticized technology as non-neutral and subservient to exploitation and war, they united minorities, and they subjectivized and politicized the condition of the youth. They had not read Marcuse to think this

way, but in thinking this way, they read him, and in reading him they found Marcuse incredibly relatable and prophetic, as well as very instructive, given that he provided a more systemic and in-depth analysis than their manifestos. The meeting would be fruitful for both sides. In 1965, there were great clashes in Berkeley, the student movement grew and became intertwined with the civil rights movement. Marcuse realized that the universe of discourse was not as closed as he had thought, and in 1966, he wrote that highly political preface to *Eros and Civilization*. The glimpses into the closed discourse were opened by the marginalized: Black people, students, the unemployed folk, the homeless, and the lumpenproletariat. These were not the productive and exploited working class of the Marxian tradition, but the non-productive subjects. From these considerations of Marcuse, many of the new lefts derived the idea that it was the marginal, the lumpenproletariat, who were the new revolutionary subjects. However, Marcuse never explicitly stated this; instead, he viewed those sectors more as vanguards that reopened the discursive universe of critique, but he maintained it equally necessary, on pain of defeat, that they recognized how to involve the old workers' and trade union subjects in an overall social reorganization.

Just as those outside of development could animate critique inside advanced industrial societies, it was the underdeveloped countries and their guerrilla movements that could exercise revolutionary critique from outside. The Viet Cong were the comrades in the struggle of American students. Marcuse was interested in life, in the flow of eros: the daily changes in dress, in creating relationships, in enjoying cultural products; he interpreted them as a critique of social conformity, openness, and a search for something else. Certainly, he found many political claims superficial and primitive, but he nonetheless observed them with interest as attempts to break out of the one-dimensional state.

Counterculture emerged as a rejection of a one-dimensional, conformist society. In this movement, born of beatnik culture, Marcuse showcases the gaze of his first love of letters (philosophy came later): it was imagination that could reopen discourse. If the philosophical logos had become a tool of totalitarianism with the neo-positivist and analytic single-minded thought for which no transcendence of reality was possible, then it was up to the power of imagination to liberate us. ■

### THE ONE-DIMENSIONAL UNIVERSITY?

It was in the 1960s—first in the United States with Berkeley and the large American campuses, then in universities throughout Europe—that universities had also become undisputed spaces of aggregation and political elaboration. The current situation appears rather involuted. In particular, there seems to be emerging a substantial loss of autonomy on the part of academic authorities, which are more exposed to the “conditioning” of private funders: not only as far as research is concerned, but also from the point of view of “public policy.” Evidence that has become explicit with the recent mobilizations of American and German students in favor of Gaza.



Abbie Hoffman, center in photo, visiting Oklahoma City University in 1969. A graduate of Brandeis University, Massachusetts, with Herbert Marcuse, he was an activist of the American New Left and a tireless organizer of protests in the 1960s, particularly against the Vietnam War and the federal persecution of Black Panthers, something he was not forgiven for and resulted in several trials and convictions. He is the author of one of the most memorable phrases about that season of history: "We were young, we were reckless, we were arrogant, we were stupid, we were stubborn. But we were right! I regret nothing."

ASTROPHYSICS

# OUR ENCHANTING (BUT DECEPTIVE) AURORA BOREALIS





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*It has reached our latitudes, causing joy and amazement.  
However, the phenomenon has different scientific explanations.*

**Patrizia Caraveo**



We live with a star that provides us with all the energy we need, sometimes even more than we would like to receive. It happens at times of intense activity of our star, which has an 11-year cycle during which it goes from quiet to turbulent periods. The most obvious telltales of the Sun's activity are sunspots, real dark areas on the star's surface. While huge, these are phenomena that affect only a fraction of the Sun's surface. They are not very easy to observe with the naked eye because it is dangerous, and absolutely not recommended, to look directly at the Sun. However, there are special situations that naturally weaken the Sun's emission and make it possible to see sunspots with the naked eye. This happens when a thick fog or cloud layer absorbs most of the Sun's radiation, or at sunset, when it is our atmosphere that absorbs the Sun's light.

The February 2014 cluster of spots, seen through the clouds, as well as the sunset view of April 2003 big spot give us an idea of what our ancestors could see with the naked eye.

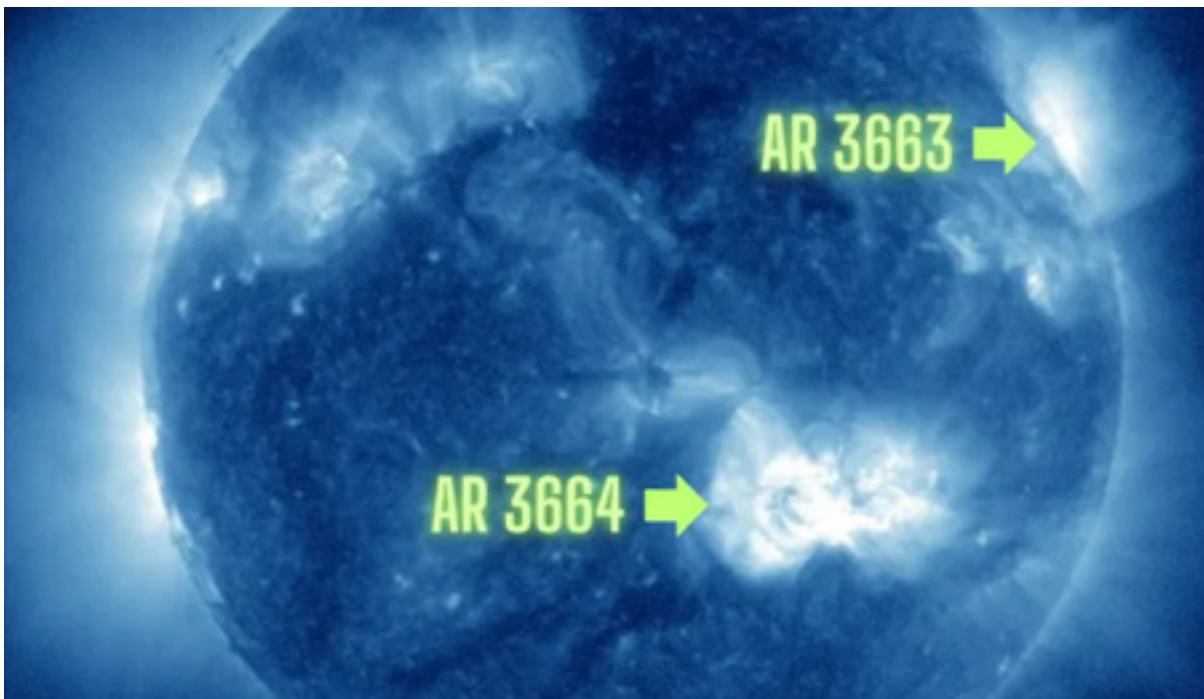
In fact, the phenomenon was known since ancient times. Theophrastus of Athens, a disciple of Aristotle, related them to meteorological weather, going so far as to use spots to make weather forecasts.

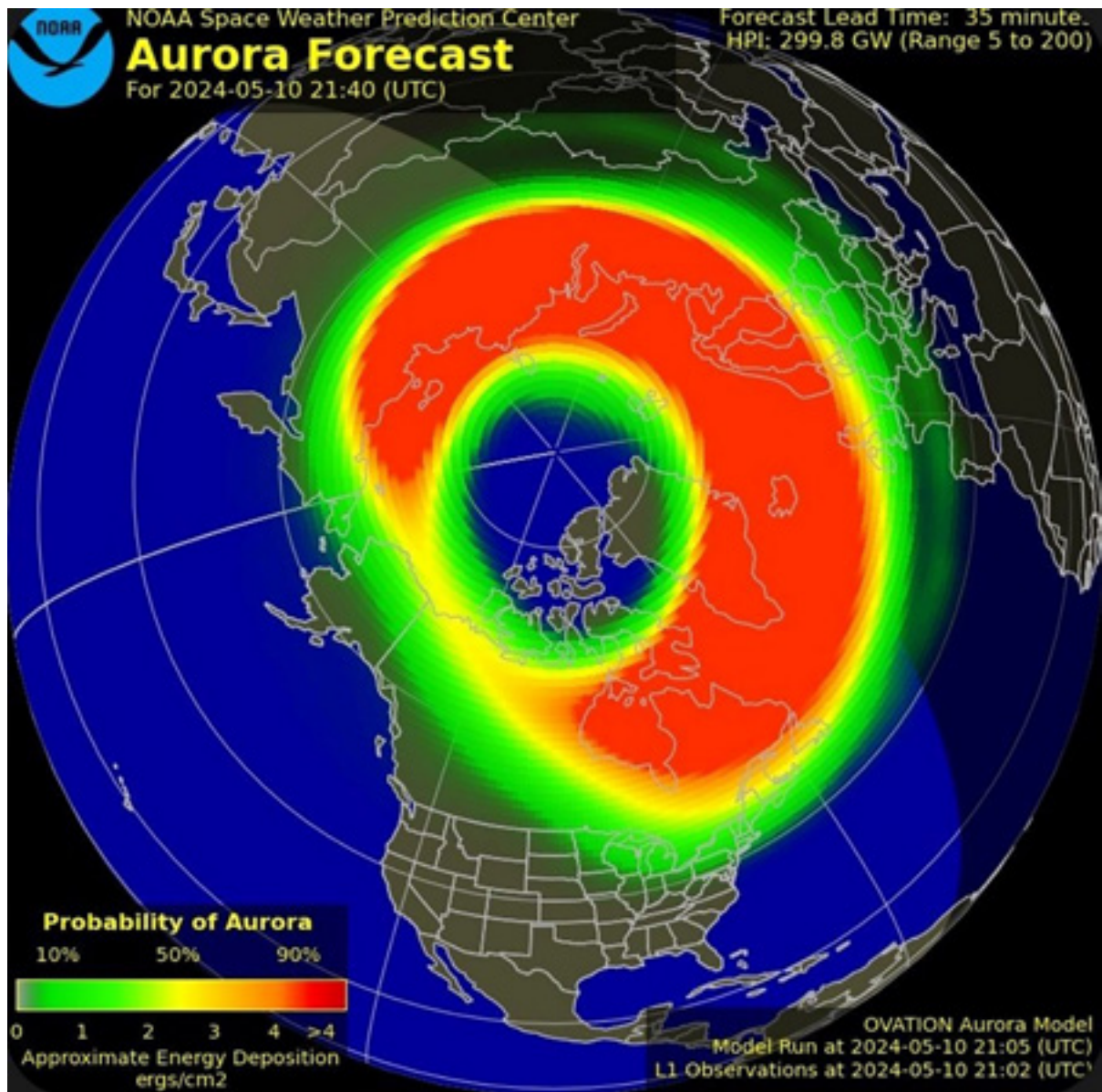
In Europe, there are many descriptions of sunspots seen at sunset but the phenomenon was not understood. After all, the Sun was considered a celestial body and as such Catholic doctrine, based on the Aristotelian view, wanted it to be perfect and unchanging: the surface of a perfect sphere could not have spots. Kepler himself, after seeing a sunspot in 1607 mistook it for the transit of Mercury. Everything changed with Galileo Galilei's *Istoria e dimostrazioni intorno alle macchie solari*, 1613, where he described spots as a changing feature of the solar surface. Noting that groups of spots move from one day to the next, Galileo interprets the shift as evidence of the sun's rotation.

Although the nature of the spots was not understood, very soon it became clear that they constitute an easily measurable indicator of the Sun's activity, since, during the approximately 11 years of a cycle, the number of spots fluctuates between zero and many tens.

The spots are counted continuously and in a consistent manner since 1749, so that we have reached cycle 25.

To get an idea of the state of the Sun in real time, just log on to <https://sdo.gsfc.nasa.gov/data/>, which provides the latest images collected by NASA's Solar Dynamics Observatory (SDO) satellite.





Prediction about the regions where the Northern Lights would occur on the night of May 10-11, 2024. On the opposite page, the SDO image shows the large spot group AR 3664. Credit SDO-NASA. In the service's opening image, the Cassini dome, from the Loiano Observatory, stands out against the red sky on the evening of May 10, 2024. Photo by Albino Carbognani.

We see magnetic arcs that swell and then droop in conjunction with the most intense spots from where originate waves that appear to shake the sun. The arcs also generate spectacular puffs of matter and accelerated particles: these are the Coronal Mass Ejections (CMEs) that propagate through the solar system.

Tracking the evolution of CMEs requires instruments capable of cancelling out the Sun's bright

emission, as does, for example, the European space agency's SOHO (Solar Heliospheric Observatory) coronagraph, which, from its prime location at the Lagrangian point between the Earth and the Sun, has been monitoring on our star since 1995.

Particles accelerated by the magnetic fields underlying CMEs travel through interplanetary space following magnetic "highways" that draw curved trajectories. Not all solar CMEs strike the Earth.

## ■ ASTROPHISICS

By knowing the starting point of the solar particle river and the curvature of the interplanetary highways, we can predict whether Earth will be hit or not. We are aided in this task by the European SOHO eye and the Nasa Stereo A and B satellites, which measure the CMEs' propagation speed and estimate whether Earth will be affected.

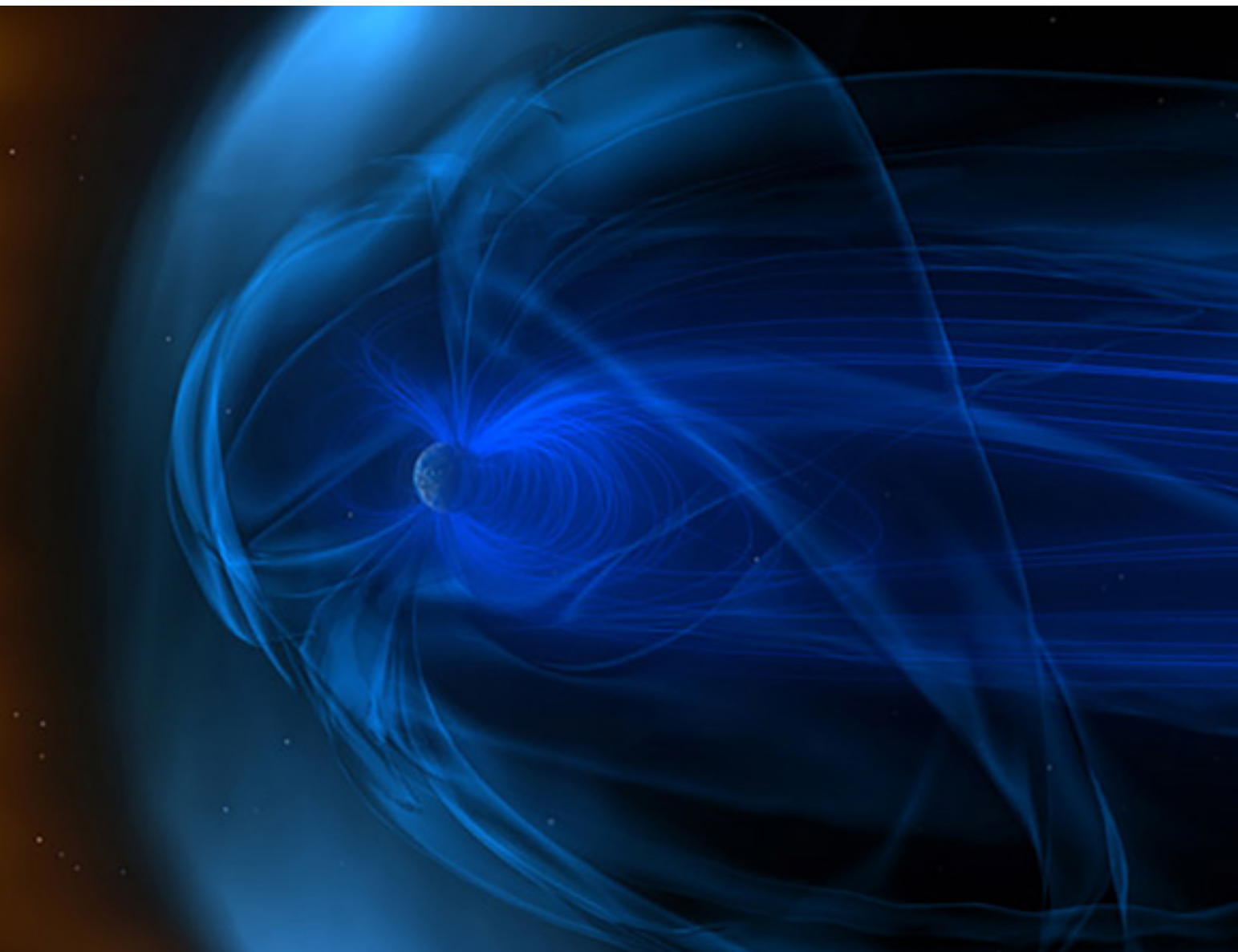
At this time, the Sun is approaching the maximum of solar cycle number 25, and therefore spots are numerous and CMEs are frequent, so it is more likely that the Sun come visiting us.

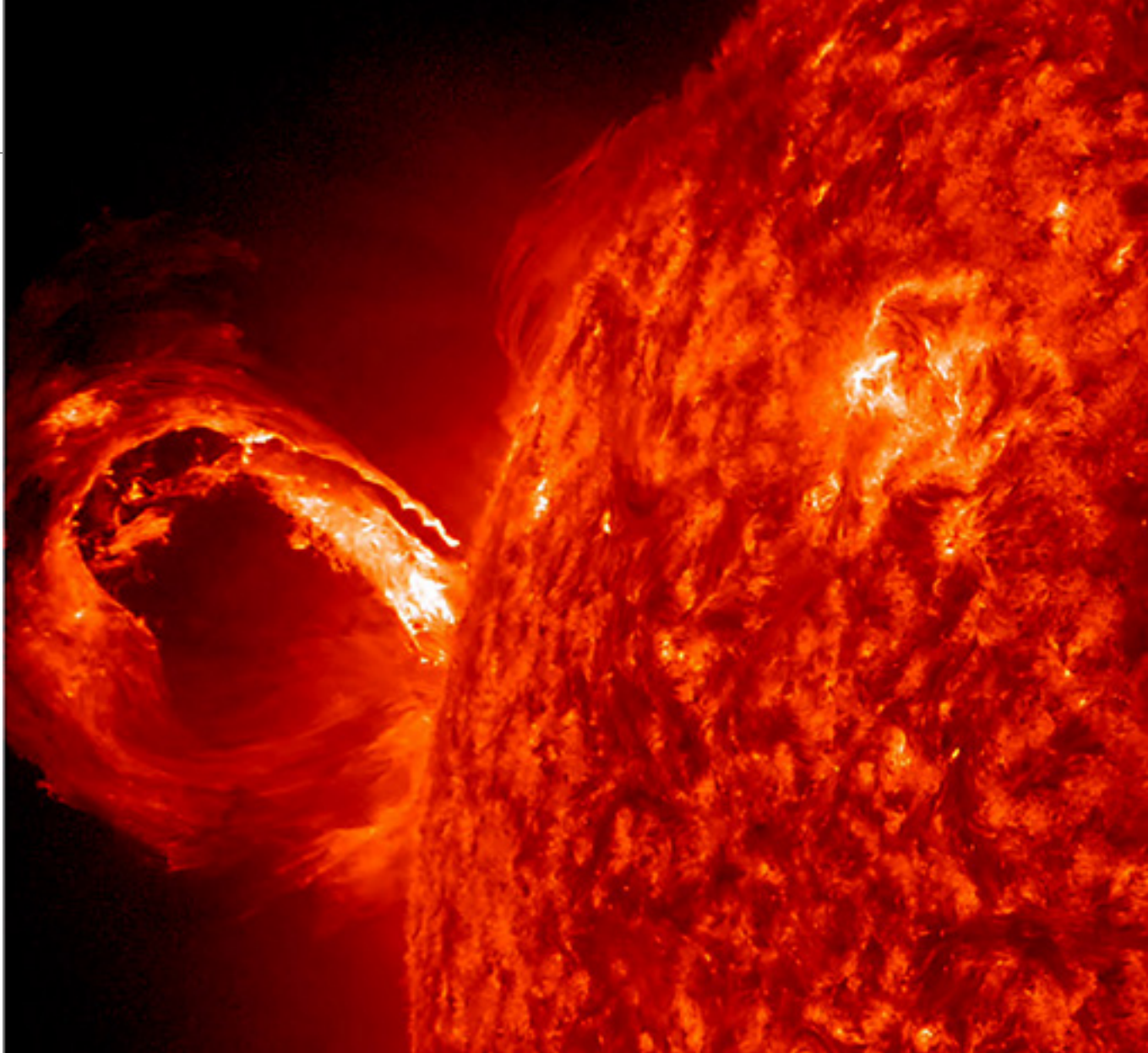
When reaching Earth, CMEs can produce magnetic storms. The effects range from the sublime to the worrisome, from beautiful northern lights to blackouts over vast regions of the far north, in the most extreme cases of very energetic events capable of damaging power distribution systems.

The same particles can damage the electronics of orbiting instruments and are one of the greatest potential dangers to astronauts during future interplanetary travel. A solar storm can deposit 5 times the dose of radiation in the human body that we would consider lethal. Astronauts on the Space Station do not face these risks because they are protected by Earth's magnetic field, the same shield that protects all of us from dangerous radiation from our quiet sun.

CMEs certainly cannot be stopped, but identifying potentially dangerous ones allows precautions to be taken. Even when accelerated to high energies, particles travel at speeds slower than light and take hours to cover the sun-Earth distance. It is therefore possible to see them well before they hit.

A solar storm is unlikely to cause problems for





A spectacular magnetic arc as seen from SDO. Credit NASA.  
On the opposite page, structure of the Earth's magnetic field.

humankind, which lives under the shelter of the Earth's atmosphere and magnetic field. Generally, particles that manage to sneak into the magnetic poles are responsible for one of the most striking spectacles offered by Mother Nature: auroras, which generally unfold over the polar (Arctic and Antarctic) regions. However, when the particle flux is very intense, auroras can travel further south. It happens very rarely, and the spectacle of the blazing sky over Italy, from Trentino to Puglia, on the night of May 10-11 was definitely exceptional.

The record for rarity I believe goes to Sardinia where something similar was described in 1859. The celestial spectacle has generally been explained as a mid-latitude offshoot of the aurora borealis due to the Sun's extraordinary level of activity,

which at midnight on May 10 produced a magnetic storm that reached G5, the maximum level on the scale, described as extreme (the last time it happened was 20 years ago). The responsibility was easily attributed to the monstrous cluster of spots called AR 3664, which, since early May, has produced dozens of M-class flares (the mid-to-high ones) to switch on May 10 to X-class flares, the most intense ones.

In fact, three CMEs originated from AR 3664, but they were not propagating at the same speed. The last one went faster and overlapped with the previous ones, giving rise to an interplanetary disturbance of great intensity. Affected by this wave of energy, the magnetosphere deformed and receded but did not let through the solar particles,

which managed to sneak only into the polar regions where they excited the atoms in our atmosphere, which, when return to ground state, emit light, the northern (and southern) auroras. The colors are determined by the excited elements and the density of the atmosphere, that is, the height above the surface. Blue emission (at 428 nm) is due to nitrogen at relatively low altitudes. Going up, atomic oxygen appears, which is mainly responsible for the chromatic emission due to two “forbidden” lines that are produced only when the gas is very rarefied. Green emission (at 557 nm) dominates up to 200-300 km altitude, while higher up the air becomes so rarefied that the dominant emission is in the red (at 630 nm).

The spectacle is evocative and has become a tourist magnet drawing fans to the northernmost part of the Scandinavian peninsula where it is more common to enjoy the celestial show.

Although all the media described the flaming Italian skies as an aurora borealis, it should be remembered that the forecast of the region affected

by the aurora (although much larger than normal) covered only the northern part of Europe and did not even brush Italy.

Rather, what we saw in Italy was a SAR for Stable Auroral Red arc, a phenomenon again due to the Sun’s intense activity but not directly related to the entry of solar particles from the poles of the Earth’s magnetic field. The protagonist is the innermost van Allen belt, a vast doughnut-shaped region of circumterrestrial space centered roughly above the equator and populated by charged particles trapped by Earth’s magnetic field. These particles revolve around the Earth and produce immense electric currents, known as ring currents.

In the presence of very intense solar activity, the currents become stronger and, following the deformation of the magnetosphere, the belt where they move, which is normally between 1000 and 12,000 km in height, is pushed to a lower altitude, approaching the higher and more rarefied layers of the atmosphere (we are considering heights of 200-400 km). In these cases, ring currents can



Sunspots seen through the clouds with the naked eye. Credit: Bob King.

overlap the F2 layer of the ionosphere and deposit energy (we talk about Energetic Electron Precipitation EEP), heating the electrons in the layer, which, interacting with the ionized oxygen molecules  $O_2^+$ , cause their dissociative recombination. Thus, excited oxygen atoms are formed at the 1D level, which then return to the normal 3P state by emitting the 630 nm line. It is called a stable red arc because it lasts tens of minutes and does not “dance” as auroras usually do. It occurs infrequently, only when the Sun’s activity is at least at the G4 level because only then the the inner belt is pushed close enough to the outermost layers of the ionosphere.

A physical clarification that in no way detracts from the magic of a burning sky like the one photographed by colleague Albino Carbognani from the Loiano observatory.

In fact, the SAR, which occupies the entire sky, can coexist with the offshoots of the far northern auroras that we have seen looking, precisely, northward. Indeed, we are living with a star. ■

## PATRIZIA CARAVEO

She was director of the Institute of Space Astrophysics and Cosmic Physics in Milan and is involved in several space missions: NASA Swift, Agile and NASA Fermi, as well as in the Cherenkov Telescope Array project. In 2009, she received the National President of the Republic Award. In 2017, she was named Commendatore Ordine al Merito of the Italian Republic. In June 2021, she was awarded the Enrico Fermi 2021 Prize of the Italian Physical Society (Sif); in April 2024, she received the Basic Sciences Book Award for the book *Saving the Starry Night*. She is a member of the “2003 Group” for scientific research and the “100women against stereotypes.” Her latest books include *Sidereus Nuncius 2.0* (Mondadori Università, 2021) and *Europe in the Global Space Economy* (with Clelia Iacomino, Springer, 2023), *Troppa luce fa male* (Edizioni Dedalo, 2024).



Setting sun with a large sunspot imaged from Cascade in Colorado, April 9, 2003. Earth Science Picture of the Day is a service of the Universities Space Research Association. Copyright by: Wojciech Rychlik.

# BERTHE MORISOT

*A major Italian exhibition is finally dedicated to the impressionist. October 11th to February 23rd at The Palazzo Ducale in Genoa.*

Eliana Carrara

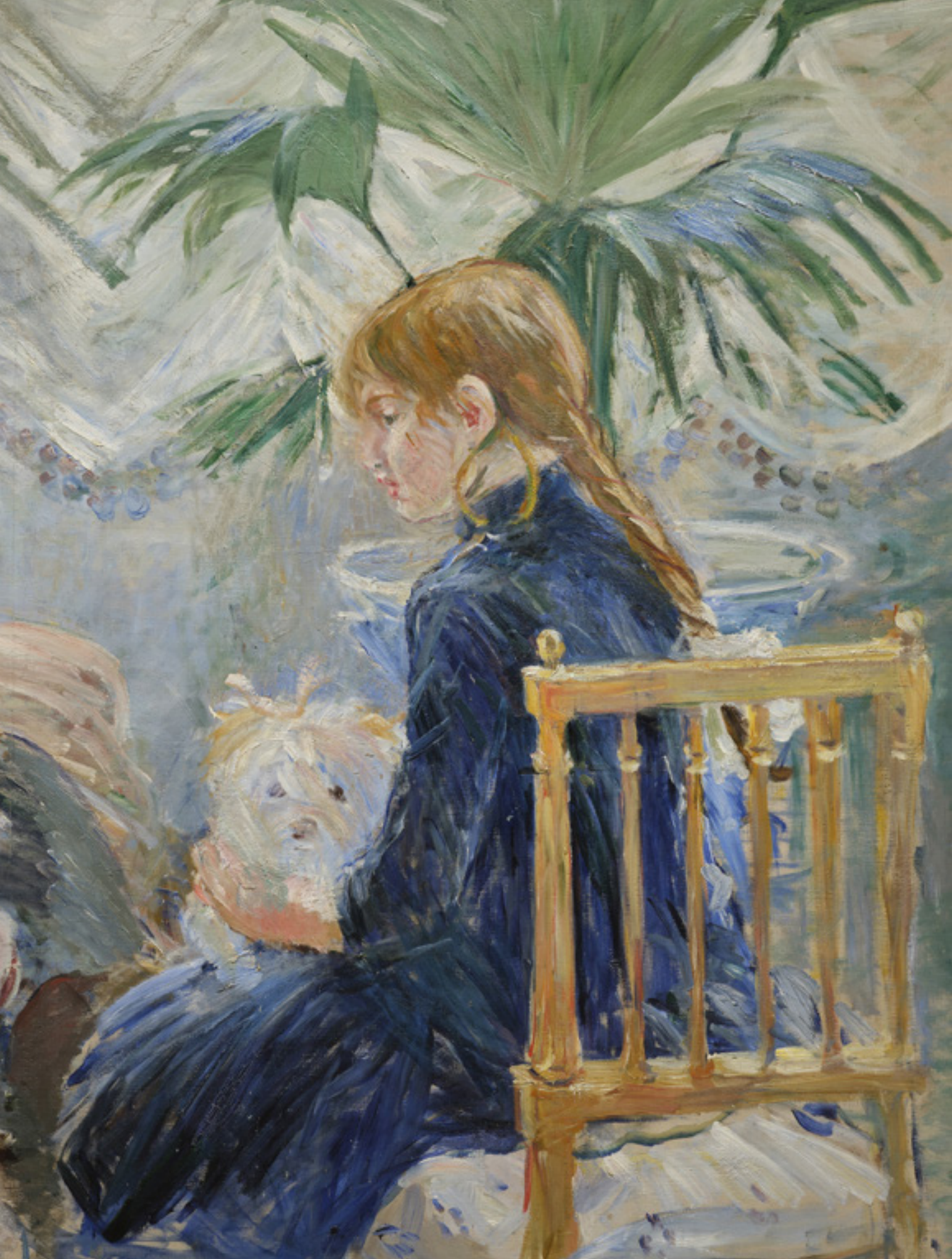


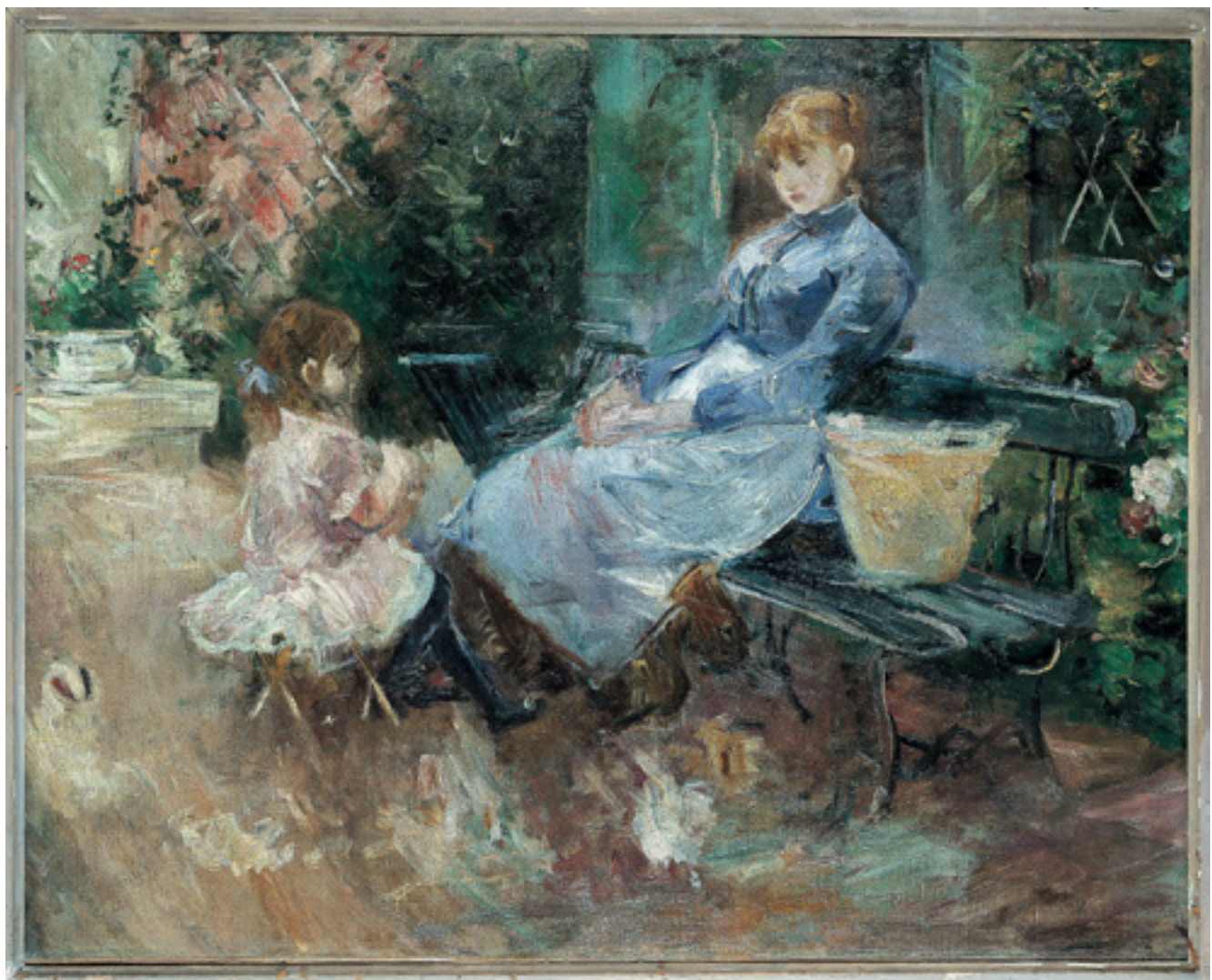
Above, *Self-portrait* of Berthe Morisot (1841-1895), from the Musée Marmottan Monet. On the page opposite, *Maiden with dog*, 1886. Oil on canvas, Private collection, CMR 210 © Christian Baraja SLB  
It's called "Impression, Morisot." Italy's first major exhibition on the figure of Berthe Morisot, painter of light, staged at Genoa's Ducal Palace in the sumptuous rooms of the Doge's Apartment, organized in collaboration with the Nice Museum of Fine Arts. With more than eighty works and photographic and archival documents, the exhibition will trace the artist's career and private life. The curator is Marianne Mathieu, among the most recognized experts on Berthe Morisot's work and a scholar of the history of Impressionism. The exhibition is a project of Palazzo Ducale Fondazione per la Cultura with Electa, publisher of the catalog, and is supported by the Region of Liguria and the City of Genoa.

*"Je ne crois pas qu'il y ait jamais eu un homme traitant une femme d'égale à égal, et c'est tout ce que j'aurais demandé. Car je sais que je les vaux."*

On March 6, 1895, Camille Pissarro (1830-1903), a major exponent of the Impressionist movement, wrote to his son Lucien. He informed him that he was "still in Paris to attend the funeral of our old companion Berthe Morisot", grieving "at the passing away of this distinguished woman of such beautiful feminine talent". He bitterly commented, "Poor Madame Morisot, the public hardly knows her!" Berthe Morisot had died a few days earlier, on March 2nd, entrusting her orphaned daughter Julie, born in 1878 from her 1874 marriage to painter Eugène Manet (1833-1892), brother of the much better known Édouard (1832-1883). Morisot was born in 1841 in Bourges, where the family was living at the time to follow the career of her father, Edmé Tiburce, a civil servant. She was the third of four children and the result of his marriage to Marie Joséphine Cornélie Thomas. Once they settled in Passy, near Paris, it was at their mother's request that Berthe and the two sisters received their first painting lessons from the painter Geoffrey-Alphonse Chocarne. These lessons later continued, for Edma and Berthe alone, with Joseph-Benoît







Above, *The Fable*, 1883. Oil on canvas, Private collection, CMR 139 © Christian Baraja SLB.  
Facing page, *Lighted Boat*, also called *The Namouna*, 1889. Oil on canvas, Private collection, CMR 238  
© Christian Baraja SLB.

Guichard and with Camille Corot (1796-1875), the greatest representative of *en plein air* painting of the period. Thanks to the teachings of Corot and Achille-François Oudinot (1820-1891), the two sisters were allowed to exhibit their work in the Salon of 1864 and in subsequent shows until 1868. The following year in 1869, Edma married and her career as an artist came to an end. This was not the case, however, for Berthe, who in 1867 had met, thanks to Henri Fantin-Latour (1836-1904), an assiduous copyist at the Louvre like herself, Édouard Manet. She had begun to approach the new pictorial moment, which found its place in the first exhibition of the Impressionists, held at the studio of the photographer Nadar between April 15th and May 15th, 1874. Morisot, who had also participated in the Salon the previous year, exhibited about ten works there (including

*The Cradle*, 1872, and *Hide and Seek*, 1873) and became a tenacious and staunch supporter of the eight total collectives of the new artistic group. She was absent only in 1879, following the birth of her daughter.

Berthe, who helped finance the Impressionists' initiatives, was greatly affected by the gradual disintegration of the fellowship, sanctioned by the last joint exhibition in 1886: "In this little group there are clashes of personal pride that make any understanding difficult. I seem to be the only one who is not narrow-minded, which compensates for my inferiority as a painter". The term "peintre" she employed to describe herself, however, does not appear on her death certificate, where she is qualified as "without profession," nor on her grave in Passy cemetery, where she rests with her husband. Even on the tombstone, the artist



retained her maiden name, Morisot, with which she stubbornly signed her works exhibited in a large solo retrospective in 1892 at the Boussod and Valadon Gallery (*Exposition de Tableaux, Pastels et Dessins par Berthe Morisot*). In 1896, from March 5 to 21, one year after her death, a new exhibition, in memory of the “great artist,” was organized by gallery owner Paul Durand-Ruel at the behest of Stéphane Mallarmé (the refined French poet, family friend and guardian of his daughter Julie, who also signed the introduction to the catalog) along with Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, and Pierre-Auguste Renoir.

The painter’s memory was entrusted, moreover, to the pages of figures linked to her by kinship and friendship, beginning with Louis Rouart, brother of Morisot’s son-in-law, who in 1908 dedicated a short essay to her, and then moving on to Paul Valéry, married to one of the artist’s nieces, who in 1926 published an article titled “Tante Berthe”. Then, there is Denis Rouart, Julie Manet’s son, who in the late 1940s devoted a short monograph to his grandmother (following those by Armand Fourreau in 1925 and Monique Angoulvent in 1933). In 1950, he had her extensive correspon-



dence printed. John Rewald’s seminal volume on the Impressionist movement, published in New York in 1946 (and in 1949 translated into Italian at the insistence of Roberto Longhi, a fine art critic, and university professor), emphasized Morisot’s role as a painter and participant in the Impressionist group’s collectives. Her role as such appears rather tempered in the catalog of the *Centenaire de l’Impressionisme* exhibition held at the Grand Palais, in Paris, in 1974. At the exhibition, Berthe was represented by only one work, unlike her male colleagues. Or even worse, her name sparsely and superficially appears in Meyer Shapiro’s text from 1997—a fixture in the bibliography of university art courses. However, thanks to the feminist scholarship, and especially Linda Nochlin’s work, due attention to Berthe Morisot has been restored and her value as a painter has fully emerged, evidenced by the recent exhibitions dedicated to her. These include the exhibition at the Musée d’Orsay in 2019 to a showcasing of Berthe’s work organized at the Musée des Beaux-Arts Jules Chéret in Nice, which will close on September 29th, 2024, before making its way to the Palazzo Ducale in Genoa, on October 11. ■

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Above, *The Mandolin*, 1889. Oil on canvas, Private collection CMR 242 © Christian Baraja SLB.  
Opposite page, *The Seine at Valvins*, 1893. Oil on canvas, Private collection, CMR 350 © Christian Baraja SLB.



*Eugène Manet in the garden with his daughter, 1883. Oil on canvas, Private collection, CMR 138 © Christian Baraja SLB.*

### **ELIANA CARRARA**

She is graduated in Modern Humanities from the University of Pisa. She was a student of the Ordinary and Advanced Course at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa and the Scuola Superiore di Studi Storici in San Marino. Currently, Eliana Carrara teaches Museology, Art Criticism, and Restoration at the University of Genoa. Her studies focus on the figures of Alessandro Allori, Francesco Bocchi, Vincenzio Borghini, Michelangelo Buonarroti, Leonardo da Vinci, and Giorgio Vasari. She has analysed the writings of Roberto Longhi, Luisa Mortari, Mary Pittaluga, and recently published, with Patrizia Dragoni, the conference proceedings volume: *Le donne storiche dell'arte tra tutela, ricerca e valorizzazione* (Macerata, EUM, 2022).

# CRITICISM OF HETEROCLITE REASON

*A global crisis runs through human civilization, and this crisis finds its diriment point in the weakening of critical thinking skills. That once intelligent and spontaneous flicker that in the past had enabled almost everyone, even uneducated people, to relate to the world with logic and some sense of reality, is no more.*

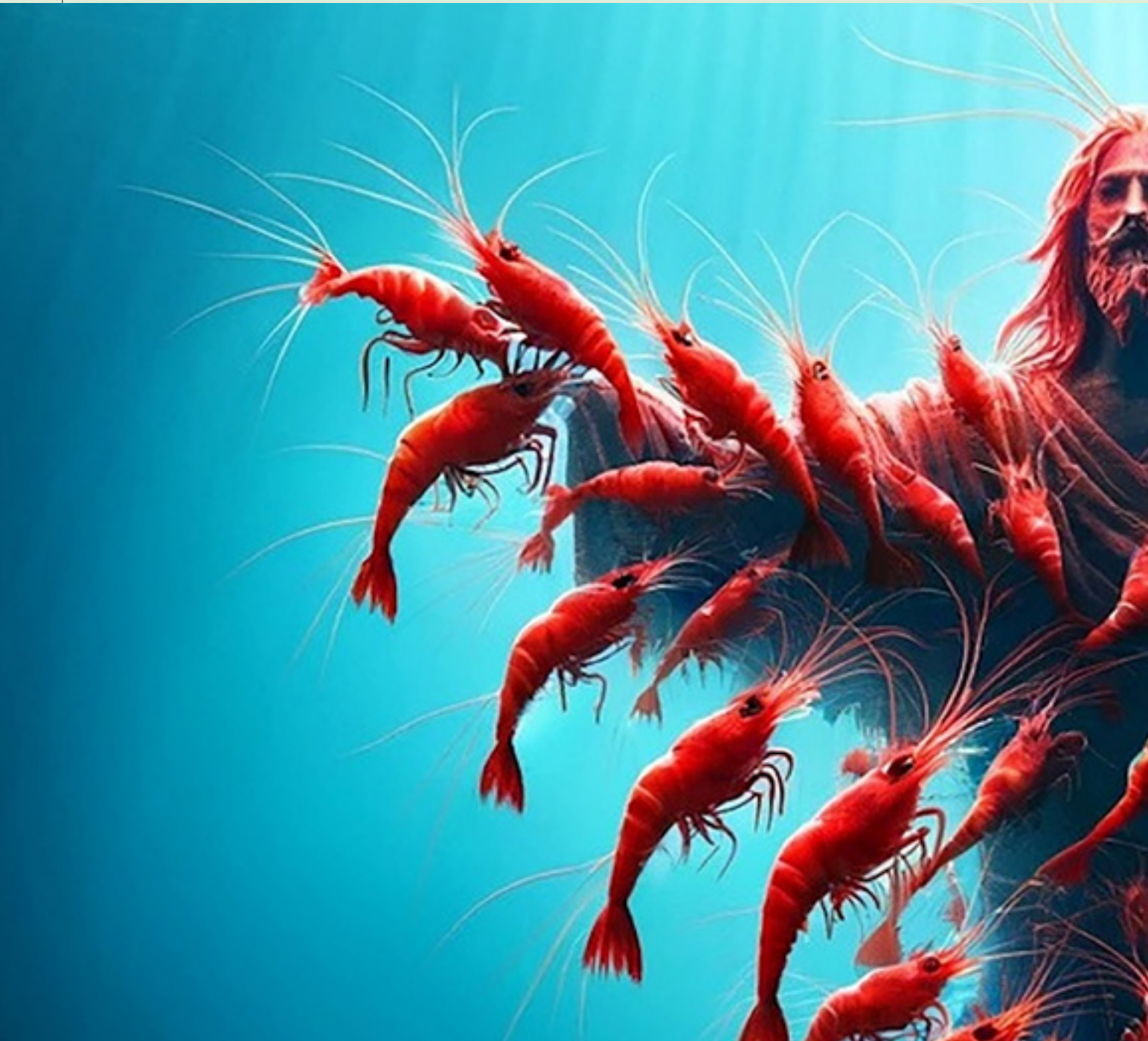
*Increasingly, our society produces ideas and impulses that flare up and fire out like meteors, depositing soot of nonsense on everything.*

*With this special issue, by no means exhaustive, Prometeo attempts to address some of the critical junctures of this discourse.*

*For example, the issue includes the sensation of online saints, the paths of “misinformation” and its fearful social and political consequences, the mental convulsions of illusions to some extent consoling, the misunderstandings of IQ metrics, and a comment on a masterful essay about human stupidity. There is also a brief scientific examination of the biological nature of gullibility.*

CROSSOVER

# THE NET OF HOLINESS





*It is a new phenomenon, still rather unexplored: a mélange  
of traditional cults and imaginary devotions,  
With unpredictable bounces between one and the other.*

**Daniele Solvi**



Talking some time ago with a psychotherapist, he was telling me that he finds in his patients a worrying deficit of historical consciousness, an inability to conceive of their selves within a becoming whereby--he will excuse me if I trivialize--we are also the result of our yesterday selves and can, by our actions, at least in part foreshadow our tomorrow selves. And instead we tend to live as if reality were composed of instants unrelated to each other, and the only self given is the present self. Needless here to discomfort illustrious philosophical theories of time, from Augustine on down, for a distortion of the self that proves problematic merely in emerging from clinical practice. Nor do I have the expertise to delve into sociological and political reflections, such as those that have long plumbed the “hyperaccelerated stasis”

and “hyperpresentification” of our - if that concept still makes sense - postmodern time. But after all, these traits are something we all experience in our daily frequentation of the Web, and social media in particular: a frenetic world in which existence lasts the time of a scroll. Hence the question from which my paper originates: is a historical approach to this world without history (still) possible?

The reflections I will propose will be not only partial - as one can well understand, since we are dealing with an epochal issue - but above all empirical, the result of a specific research experience that must be stated at the outset. I am referring to the Permanent Seminar “The Internaut Saints,” active at the Vanvitelli University, whose center of interest is holiness in all its components - from the figures subject of worship

### “THE INTERNAUT SAINTS” IN PERMANENT SEMINAR

The Permanent Seminar “I santi internauti” (“The Internaut Saints”) directed by Tommaso Caliò, Claudia Santi and Daniele Solvi, is a research, teaching and third mission project active at the Laboratory of History, Religion and Anthropology of the DiLBeC (Department of Humanities and Cultural Heritage) of Vanvitelli University. Its purpose is to document and investigate the phenomenon of holiness on the web, through constant monitoring and periodic meetings for reflection, and to promote awareness of it within the widespread culture.

Born in 2016 as a panel for the first edition of the Cantieri dell’agiografia promoted by AISSCA (Italian Association for the Study of Holiness, Cults and Hagiography), “I santi internauti” had its first public expression in the conference organized in S. Maria Capua Vetere (Ce) on April 19-20, 2018. After this founding moment, the seminar formula was adopted as the most suitable to investigate an evolving object and to fine-tune strategies and research hypotheses along the way. The cycles of meetings have taken the form of six progressive *updates* - a seventh will take place between October and November -, with no fixed theme, and thematic days, such as the one on Carlo Acutis, held in November 2020 close to the beatification, or the one on Francis of Assisi as “Earth saint,” scheduled for the centenary of the Cantic of Creatures (1225-2025). Some 30 scholars from Italy and other countries (Canada, Brazil, Germany, Holland, Czech Rep.) have spoken so far. The Seminar functions as a periodic space for discussion, where those who serve as speakers from time to time are invited to present a set of raw or semi-finished data (posts, themed sites, audio-video documents, images, etc., always from the Internet) and some interpretive lines to be submitted for discussion. A youtube channel hosts videos of the various interventions, some of which have also been published in miscellaneous volumes, under the green open access formula. The Facebook group represents, in between updates, the gathering point where anyone can post materials found on the web, launch discussion ideas or draw attention to emerging phenomena that deserve a focus on some future occasion. Reviews or news about the Seminary’s activities have appeared in online and print media, including *L’Osservatore Romano* and *Avvenire*, and in *Analecta Bollandiana*, the world’s oldest scholarly journal dedicated to hagiographic studies.

to the forms of devotion - but with a unique denominator, namely presence on the web. Here new “digital native” saints or candidates for sainthood coexist with traditional saints who, in the transition from analog to digital, may change form and functions or reach a different audience of devotees. To limit myself to a few examples, some very recent figures of Catholic activists who have lost their lives for their socio-environmental battles (from Dorothy Stang to Vincent Machozi Karunzu, working in Brazil and the Democratic Republic of Congo, respectively), have been cast on the web as “martyrs of creation” and have thus achieved a kind of digital canonization that anticipates, and perhaps replaces, that of the Church. Meanwhile, a medieval mystic and penitent who has enjoyed a feeble and local cult for centuries, Margherita of Città di Castello, rejected by her parents because she was deformed, has exploded on the web and bounced from continent to continent as an emblem of people with disabilities and *pro-life* movements, so much so that this digital devotion has been a major contributor to the recent canonization.

Not to mention the not uncommon cases in which the network calls saints people who can only be called such by analogy. I am thinking of Chico Mendes, a well-known Brazilian trade unionist of the 1970s-1980s, or of the ancient neo-Platonic philosopher Hypatia of Alexandria, whom militant atheism circles have “canonized” on the web - paradoxically, but not coincidentally - precisely as a victim of Christian fanaticism. But the champion par excellence, even in the category of “saints by analogy,” is Diego Armando Maradona. Not only is his figure juxtaposed, even physically, by Neapolitan fan-devotees with others who are fulcrum of official worship and civic identity, such as that of San Gennaro, but he is even the foundation of a *Iglesia Maradoniana*, based in Argentina, which has developed formulas and rituals (the Creed, baptism, etc.) that trace those of Roman Catholicism.

In analyzing such a complex reality and such a variety of documents, any disciplinary input is useful, but the approach remains deliberately historical. The bet, in fact, is precisely this: in the face of a certain “messianism of the digital,” typical of early scholarly analyses on the subject, which tended to magnify the advent of the Net as a revolution - technological, cultural, anthropological, etc. - destined to wipe the slate clean of all cognitive reference points, and thus to require the elaboration of modes of analysis exclusive to it, it

was a matter of applying methods and models already developed off-line by the historical sciences to online religion and verifying their hermeneutical resilience. At the same time, an inquiry conducted online finds itself intersecting, of necessity, with digital objects that are anything but refined, when not blatantly distorted or factually false. History, in this case, is also observing cultural data, precisely, as historical data to be interpreted, rather than errors to be denounced, avoiding the somewhat sterile and sanctimonious debunker approach. On the contrary, I would say that, just as for philologists it is not the “good” text, but precisely the deviation from the original that allows the reconstruction of the genealogy of copies and thus the channels of dissemination of a work, so for those who work with materials on the web the distortion of historical truth is providential, because it sheds a clearer light on the intention that produced and circulated the data itself.

#### DIGITAL HOLINESS

All the more is this valid for hagiographic research, which has always been accustomed to observing the metamorphoses of saints in order to illuminate the reasons (political-institutional, social, cultural, as well as religious) that influence the ups and downs of a cult. At the turn of the year 2000, several initiatives sprang up online aimed at identifying a patron saint of the Internet, re-shaping for this purpose even established figures, such as that of Isidore of Seville, the father of medieval encyclopedism. His candidacy (a symptom of a still static conception of the Internet, understood essentially as a great repository of information) seemed for a few years to have won the game, even in the absence of official pronouncements, over other contenders such as Don Bosco or the founder of the Pauline Family, Giacomo Alberione. A few years later, the promotion of the figure of Blessed Carlo Acutis (soon to be a saint) was favored, by important members of the hierarchies, precisely because of his profile as a “young cyber apostle.” Suffice it to recall the laptop depicted in bas-relief, as an unprecedented iconographic attribute, on the tomb recently inaugurated in Assisi. Signs, all these, of a longstanding trend, from Pius XII onward, to mark an effective presence of the Church in a world of mass media felt to be the new frontier of evangelization.

From our vantage point, the relationship between the web and history has many faces. Conflict is a real

possibility, expressing itself in many forms. There is the irrelevance of historical perspective for the “google devotee,” whose interest is to locate figures of reference within a digital iconostasis where saints are arranged as a gallery of contemporaries, in that they are all available to a relationship with the user. In this, online sainthood reflects, after all, that timelessness which, in doctrine and representation, is an eminent feature of the ranks of the blessed in the heavenly court and the practices by which the faithful come into contact with them. Then there is the de facto denial of historical knowledge, where the Web gives free rein to fake news about the saints. And often, it must be said, their forge is not so much the imagination of the individual devotee or group, but a discounting reinterpretation of historical figures or, even, certain pseudo-educated stereotypes, the result of historiographic seasons that are now outdated on an academic level, but remain stainless in the pop vulgate. As a medievalist, I have been able to delve into the function of Francis of Assisi as a postmodern myth, to whom the Web ascribes an inexhaustible amount of apocryphal writings to dress him up from time to time as an ecologist or pacifist, as a motivator or vaguely New Age guru. In doing so, archaic texts such as the “Prayer for Peace” (or “Simple Prayer”), whose twentieth-century origin has been precisely identified by research for decades, or others that are completely unheard of, such as those in which he extols the loyalty of the dog or the vibrations transmitted by the cat to its human companion, are repurposed as his - even in infographic sheets that aspire to a certain objectivity. In short, the research found that, among the ten most popular texts, only three are those that can actually (i.e., historically) be ascribed to the saint, and certainly not in the top positions.

The case of Francis also brings to light an opposite, and equally problematic, way of relating to history, which is that of a-historical recovery of documented historical elements. In the circles of Catholic traditionalism, the offensive has been underway for some time to wrest the saint from the “modernist” banner, which they see waved by the current pope, and make him exactly a champion of anti-modernity. The main tool, perhaps, is the use of excerpts from his authentic writings, selected from those most distant from common feeling - passages on death, for example, or on diabolic temptations - (and thrown as they are into the agon of *culture wars*). The reprise is not neutral, but intended as an indictment against the betrayal

of today’s institutional Church, which has allegedly forgotten the doctrine of all time in order to adopt a language complacent toward *mainstream* culture. Or else hagiographic reports - all duly referenced - are repurposed, such as those about the trial by fire Francis allegedly proposed to the Sultan of Egypt to prove the fallacy of the Islamic faith, and merely aligned with eyewitness accounts of the saint’s companions or writings without identifying any hierarchy of source reliability.

### DEVOTIONAL PRACTICES

On the other hand, history remains - though often *unconsciously* - an indispensable element of digital sanctity. It is first and foremost a great storehouse of personages, endowed with rich textual and iconographic troves, which are plundered and poured online, in ways that repurpose other crucial junctures in the history of cultural heritage. The precedents could be multiplied: from the ferrying of ancient culture into the new medieval civilization to the season of vernacularisations, from the spread of printing to the advent of mass media. If once people resorted to legends and martyrologies for some devotional information or reading about the saint of the day, now the same content has moved first to websites, then to apps downloaded to the personal device. And just as a symbolic representation of time and man has always lurked among calendar festivals (as the

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creators of the French revolutionary calendar had well understood), so it continues to happen in the new alternative calendars proposed by the web. Perhaps not many people remember that even the website [www.beppegrillo.it](http://www.beppegrillo.it) had proposed, from year to year, a “Calendar of Lay Saints” structured as a sequence of short biographical profiles of heroes next door (journalists, trade unionists, victims of the Mafia, members of the police force, etc.), each on the day of his violent death, representing an ideal pantheon of the Cinque Stelle Movement in its early days. An operation that, with all evidence, leveraged an underlying tightness of the linguistic codes of sanctity in collective memory.

Then there is the resilience of devotional practices, which transfer online with minimal adaptations. Today, it is possible to make a virtual pilgrimage, connecting to the always-on webcam in the shrine, lighting one’s own little lamp on the site and leaving a prayer intention in the comments. And it is also possible for groups with religious purposes to join together, identifying themselves on a site or blog or social channel and making virtual appointments at set times. The pandemic emergency, in this field as in others, has given a mighty boost to a process that was already under way and has shown in a macroscopic way how not only past history but also present history continues to have a non-negligible impact on online holiness. One need only think of how at that juncture the global narrative of “healthcare heroes” again adopted, on a global scale, the ancient forms of religious iconography: from images of St. George piercing the virus to those of Christ dressed as a doctor, complete with stethoscope around his neck.

On this basis, I believe it is possible, and perhaps even urgent for historical culture to attempt a dialogue with the digital world. The problem is too broad and complex for it to be addressed with easy recipes, but the experience of “The Internaut Saints” seems to me to suggest at least some food for thought. First of all, from a *public history* perspective, it is a matter of promoting in the “google devotee” a mode of relationship with the past that is more conscious: to bring to light the analog sources of digital hagiographic content not in order to distribute patents of authenticity, but to help the user to place himself in a historical series, that is, to reknit the threads of a tradition that is characterized precisely by its adaptability, and to introduce him to a more articulate and complex reading of the present

itself. It would benefit, moreover, the widespread image of academic research, too often crushed on the old idea of unambiguous and unquestionable knowledge, pitted in no uncertain terms against the world of opinion and prejudice.

But looking out onto the Web is also a useful experience for the scholar, who can finally observe in action, within the reach of a few clicks, those processes that historiography has had to analyze through documentation that is scarcer and less easy to decode. The observations accumulated by historians on the dynamics of sanctity (from the promotion of cults and patronages to narrative or iconographic transpositions, and so on) guide, in the informational overabundance of the present, the identification of the real nodal points and suggest the keys to their interpretation by way of comparison with a homogeneous factual series, obtainable from more or less distant epochs. On the other hand, it is research on the past itself that benefits from the experience of the present. Without giving in to anachronistic impulses or conducting thesis-driven research, new questions can be drawn from today’s sensibility to reread previous eras in a different key, even recovering aspects that had remained in the shadows. This is because, as we know, the selection of historical relevance, that is, of elements of the past deemed significant, can itself be historicized, and thus relativized, as the fruit of an era, with its interests and priorities. If it is true, for example, that a plurality of social, economic and cultural factors converge today toward liquidity as a figure of individual and associated living, has this not already opened the way for renewed attention to find in the past such dynamics as variability of texts or personalization of religious experience? The debate, as they say, remains open, but initiating a process of reconciliation between scholarly research and current issues, as is being attempted from several quarters, would be an important step in re-legitimizing historical method and knowledge as useful tools for understanding today. ■

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# FROM HOAXES TO FAKE NEWS

*The management of the communication process, maneuvered by many powers but also fueled by spontaneous viralities, is a hallmark of the present. Are we in the Age of Malinformation?*

Gianluca Beltrame

**H**oaxes have always arrived in newsrooms: stories and fake news that someone, for a wide variety of reasons, had an interest in publishing. Defusing them was, at least in theory, quite simple thanks to the *double-check* rule: no matter how authoritative and reliable your source is, you publish only after a second source *independent of the first* confirms the news. Many old journalists have drawers full of news stories, perhaps *scoops*, that never came out because confirmation was not found.

More insidious was what in the jargon was called the “poisoned meatball.” The journalist gets a story and begins *fact checking*: he finds confirmation on a first point, then on a second, and so on, until he arrives at an aspect that he cannot verify or verify all the way through (for example: it is true that on that certain day those two people met and talked, but one cannot know the exact content of the conversation). One is naturally led to believe, since so many matches have been found, that the whole story is true. Instead, of course, the *fake news* was the very one that was not confirmed.

The mechanism of the “poisoned meatball” is interesting because it has much to do with a central aspect of modern disinformation, what some

scholars (Claire Wardle and others) call **malinformation**, a narrative (*storytelling*) that, starting generally from true and verifiable facts, through small shifts in meaning, clever juxtapositions of facts and other techniques (in some cases, admittedly, even *fake news*), leads the public to false conclusions. These are techniques that can develop best with the arrival of the Net and then of social media, where communities arise that coalesce around a blogger, an influencer, that gather on Telegram groups, united by a common interest and vision. *Malinformation* can be extremely effective; it can lead one to believe practically any theory, even the most far-fetched as in the famous *Pizzagate* case, which, according to an *Economist* poll, had convinced 46 percent of Trump voters that Hillary Clinton was involved in child trafficking, child pornography and satanic rituals in which -among others- Steve Jobs, Mr. and Mrs. Obama, then even Pope Francis and for a time Justin Bieber participated. All of them would gather, in great secrecy, at Comet Ping Pong, a pizzeria just outside Washington, hence the name *Pizzagate*. Told this way, from the end, with private planes of the Earth’s powerful landing secretly for a meeting at the pizzeria, not even the village idiot would believe it, and yet...

In this new disinformation a central role is taken by **misinformation**, that is, the sharing, in absolute good faith, of false content. We all tend to consider this behavior a venial sin, and it is not even criminally punishable, at least in Italy, since done without malicious intent. In fact, misinformation plays a central role in disinformation. Right around the turn of the year 2000, at the Media Lab at MIT where what would become the Silicon Valley ruling class was being formed, while studying and practicing *machine learning* algorithms (those that “learn by themselves,” simply by acting), it was realized that some fundamental changes had taken place in the world of communication. Until then there had been producers of news (the journalists) and users of news (the public): with the Net we have all become *prosumers*, producers and users at the same time. Every time we share news, we effectively become what journalists once were. A second epochal change concerns the distribution of *news*; until then, it was a monopoly of the publishing companies that sent newspapers to newsstands and newscasts to TV. Now, once we create content, we have to resign ourselves to surrendering it to the Net: there is no point in spamming millions of e-mails; it will be the Net, according to its criteria, that will make it viral or not.

These, and not just *fake news*, are also the means to the end that is **disinformation**. The term is now more than 100 years old (but has only appeared in Western dictionaries since the 1980s) and comes from Russian. Indeed, in 1923, within the intelligence apparatus of the newly formed Soviet Union, a “special disinformation bureau (дезинформация) was created to conduct tactical intelligence operations.” William Safire gives a clear definition of what “tactical intelligence operations” means when he defines them as “the manipulation of a nation’s intelligence system through the administration of credible but misleading data.” Even today, when people talk about disinformation, they mainly think of the apparatuses controlled by Services of different countries. True: these structures exist and are hard at work. To get an idea, in 2015 some journalistic inquiries brought to light the Internet Research Agency (Агентство интернет-исследований) in St. Petersburg, since then known as “the Russian troll factory”: in this *content factory* a thousand people

worked full-time, plus all those from remote locations, and each of them had a minimum goal of 100 comments per day. But similar structures exist in practically all countries and operate, for example, in companies as well: one should not think only of multinational corporations, although it is clear that on issues such as climate change or artificial intelligence Big Tech or Oil & Gas giants are very active in steering the debate. In Turin, there is the Juventus Creator Lab (JCL), to talk about soccer and thus stay away from any possible political or -worse- conspiracy bias: the JCL is a structure with 35 full-time professionals producing 1,500 contents per week shared on 16 platforms, nine Western and seven Far Eastern. Now, it is clearly not a good idea to inform yourself about the soccer championship with the content produced by the Juventus *content factory* (the same argument, of course, applies to the similar structures of Milan, Rome...). The problem is that this content is the one that appears most frequently on our feeds, and often turns out to be the most compelling.

#### FROM THE SEO WAVE TO THE SOCIAL WAVE

In 2005 a young software engineer, Jonah Peretti (a name almost unknown in Italy, but he is one of the geniuses of algorithms in communication), completes his first major work: the computer architecture of a new site, the *Huffington Post*. It is based on a revolutionary system of *machine learning* algorithms, today we would say an artificial intelligence, which is ten years ahead of all others and which will be one of the keys to *HP*’s success. It is a huge and planetary success, but after just a year Peretti decides to leave all operational duties to devote himself to a new project. He realized that the world of information was radically changing. Until then, search engines had dominated: you went to Google, or the like, and asked a question. It is what he calls the Seo wave, named after the language that drives indexing in search engines. Now this wave, he senses, is about to be overtaken by a much more powerful wave: the Social wave. We should not think that this depends on the birth of social: in 2006 they do not yet exist, Twitter was born in 2007, and only in that year did Facebook open up to everyone with an e-mail address (before that it was only a network among college students). Above all, in 2006 smartphones, essential for the

success of social networks, do not yet exist (the first I-Phone will be sold in America in June 2007): in an interview Peretti will say, “We invented the locomotive before there were tracks.” What, then, does the Social wave consist of? Peretti’s insight is that the enjoyment of content on the Net is turning into a *social thing*, something more like the talk at a Friday night party than what it had been until then. This involves enormous changes. Let’s limit ourselves to those of interest to our study. **There is no longer a hierarchy.** Before the Internet, we turned to journalists to find out which, among the billions of events happening every moment in the world, was worthy of becoming news. Then we started asking questions to search engines, which would provide us with the answers. Now we are all the same, like at Friday night parties: one is worth one. The opinion, the information we get from a Nobel laureate has the same weight as the information Diavoletta<sup>87</sup> gives us. Indeed, if Diavoletta<sup>87</sup> is our friend (even if only virtual) or we are on followers, her opinion or “shopping advice” is much more effective than that of a Nobel laureate. This is a key insight for interacting with the new advertising market. “Nothing influences people more than the advice of a trusted friend,” said Mark Zuckerberg: “A trustworthy recommendation influences people more than the best ad. A trusted recommendation is the holy grail of advertising.”

Until then, then, the criterion of news selection was driven by relevance. I remember endless editorial meetings spent discussing which news deserved to be in the paper and which did not: space was limited by the number of pages, so you had to choose. And the criterion was: what, at this moment, is important for us, for our city, for our country, for the world...? In the social world this is no longer the case: **emotions are driving.** For his new project, Peretti chooses not to divide the content based on the old categories (for example: first Interior, then Foreign Affairs, Economy, Culture, Sports and Leisure...), but based on emotions: Lol, Wtf, Omg... become the new categories. Algorithms and the study of traffic flows, in fact, indicate to them with great precision which content is most likely to go viral: we interact (by liking, commenting, forwarding) mostly with posts that excite us. And those studies also indicate, with great precision, which emotions most drive

us to interact. Using our macro-categories -but the algorithms are much more sophisticated and precise- in first place we find outrage and in second place nostalgia (take a look at your social feeds and you will verify that this is still the case today).

Then there is a third point, which still seems to most people like magic rather than scientific reality: these **new algorithms are able to indicate what people want to see** without them asking for it, indeed before they even know they want to see it. The most classic example (it will become one of Peretti’s workhorses) is cute kittens. I don’t think anyone in the world has ever googled “pictures or movies of cute kittens,” yet there are still millions of people watching them today. And algorithms are able to tell who’s a kitten guy, who’s a dog guy, who’s a penguin guy (penguins are also going strong). To me it proposes spectacular rugby actions, to another it proposes soccer players’ cheers, to yet another it proposes wedding parties in the South. This is possible because, thanks in part to the increased computational capacity of computers, algorithms have become increasingly accurate. Initially born and evolved with exclusively mathematical/informatic criteria, over time they are enriched by clinical studies, teams of neuropsychiatrists being put to work together with computer engineers... Important contributions come from other disciplines, first and foremost psychology: the psychometrics studies conducted in Cambridge by Michal Kosinski have proved extraordinarily effective. And in the end, the result is impressive. In 2016, the Swiss weekly *Das Magazine* published an investigation in which it said, “With an initial input of only 10 likes [*on Facebook*, ed.] his model is able to assess a person’s character better than a work colleague. With 70 it could ‘know’ a subject better than a friend; with 150, better than his parents. With 300 likes, Kosinski’s machine could predict a subject’s behavior better than his partner.” How many “traces” have we left over the years on social media? And this was the state of the art in 2016.

The main driving force behind this very rapid technological development is not ideological or political, but trivially economic: Peretti and others sense that, exploited in the right way, the Net can make huge amounts of money in a very short time. They will succeed. The formula behind the new



economy can be summarized as follows: lots of data → lots of traffic → lots of money. The final part (the one that interests us here) is clear to everyone, just think of influencers, the simplest and most immediate aspect of this economy: if I have a lot of followers who interact with my content with likes, comments, shares, I can make a lot of money. So algorithms are increasingly being refined in order to increase traffic. They already tell us very precisely what people want to see, at this point it is just up to us to create the right content to satisfy that desire. To do that, the rule is *user experience*, a term that has become very fashionable and sums up a rule that every marketer knows: if I sell you a product that fully satisfies you, you will come back and buy from me and you will advertise to me by word of mouth. The challenge, then, is to figure out which product is the best fit, which the mechanisms of the Net will then push until it goes viral. This is not the place to delve into studies in this field, suffice it to point out the fundamental role that, in this process, *confirmation bias* plays: the information that most affects us, and to which we give the most credence, is that which confirms (by adherence or opposition: let us not forget the importance of indignation) our pre-judgments, the beliefs we already have.

#### USER EXPERIENCE

These mechanisms, as we have said, develop primarily for economic goals, but they can also be used for political purposes. Peretti, who is from a liberal background, just as he is among the very first to sense the changes in communication and the advertising market, is also among the very first to spot a powerful new wave rising in the democratic camp in the U.S., and one that many will underestimate until the end: the Obama wave. He is going to ride it, he is going to get traffic in it, and therefore dough. And he will ride it so well that, in 2008, Obama will turn to him for Web communications for the presidential election. But back to 2005 and the *Huffington Post*. Another of the founding partners, along with Peretti, is Andrew Breitbart: Peretti is responsible for the IT architecture, Breitbart is responsible for the content: he heads the team that decides every day what to publish. In addition to partners, the two become friends, collaborating well, exchanging information

and insights even though, unlike Peretti, Breitbart is politically conservative. He too will leave *HP* very soon and start his own site, *breitbart.com*. And, just as Peretti will be among the very first to catch sight of the Obama wave, Breitbart will be among the very first to catch a powerful new wave that will turn the Republican electorate upside down, first that of the *tea party* and then that of the alt-right, an extremely composite movement that is very different from the classical Republican world and that will eventually lead to the election of Donald Trump. With some more difficulty than Peretti did, Breitbart will ride this wave and benefit economically, but, compared to Peretti, he will also make a qualitative leap. Algorithms clearly tell us what a certain audience wants, and it is up to us to provide the right content: but what to do if the right content does not exist or if it is not punchy enough? Breitbart has no doubt: you invent it, you create it to fit the demand coming from the Net. The turning point can be pinpointed in 2009, when James O’Keefe, a young nerdy activist from the new right-wing galaxy, showed up in the Los Angeles basement where the site was still based, bringing a film, admittedly a fake: not a *deepfake* like the ones available today thanks to generative artificial intelligence, which can create videos in which one can make a person argue any thesis, in O’Keefe’s case it was simply a clever montage of clips that cast activists from ACORN, a charity that cared for illegal immigrants, the homeless, and the disadvantaged, in a bad light (that’s an understatement). At the time, the different souls of the new right in the United States were united by the slogan “America First”: that video creating outrage about an association devoting energy, time and money to *dropouts* while so many good citizens had to tighten their belts after the great crisis of 2008 was perfect for the *breitbart.com* audience. And so that video, which was known to be fake, was published, ended up on the Net, and raised a tsunami that swept over everything. Every effort at replication, every attempt to prove that it was a blatant fake proved futile. Eventually, after 40 years of operation, ACORN was forced to close its doors. Given the success of the operation, Breitbart would replicate this pattern again and again, and if his name is unfamiliar to us it is because he would die suddenly in 2012, at only 41 years old.

Carrying on his battles will remain his partner, Steve Bannon, who will become the great Trumpian communications strategist. In fact, at first *breitbart.com* supported Texas Senator Ted Cruz, but then Donald Trump burst onto the political scene. True to the concept of the *user experience*, Bannon understood that the new candidate was perfect for the expectations of the new electoral base and did not hesitate to change horses, creating an inversion from the classical models of politics: it was no longer the candidate who convinced the voters with his proposals, but it was directly the expectations of a certain electoral base that designated the candidate, who would express his views following what, from time to time, the base asked for, even at the cost of contradicting himself.

### THE DEEPPFAKE

A problematic element of the new communication in the age of the Internet and social media is the fact that, in this new ecosystem, *fake news* has an enormously higher potential for virality than true information and especially debunking, that is, unmasking *fake news*. This was demonstrated in 2014 by Craig Silverman, a Canadian researcher who studied news traffic flows on Ebola at a time when it seemed that this dreadful virus might become pandemic. The *rationale* for this mechanism is not hard to spot. In one of the essays contained in *Crisis of the Republic*, Hannah Arendt writes: “Lies are often much more plausible, more attractive to reason, than reality, for the liar has the great advantage of knowing in advance what the public wants or expects to hear. He has prepared his story for public consumption with a keen eye on making it believable, whereas reality has the disconcerting vice of confronting us with the unexpected, for which we were not prepared. “In the world of algorithms, we have seen how more and more precisely we can know in advance what a certain audience desires and can construct more and more just stories to respond to the desires that audience. This is perhaps the main difference between the old hoaxes and the new *fake news*: the latter are perfectly optimized to go viral on the Web.

The great leap forward that has occurred in the last few years with artificial intelligence does not change these patterns of disinformation, but it does offer more sophisticated tools for implementing it.

*Deepfake* footage is much more effective and easier to create than the complicated editing that led to the video that undermined ACORN; AI-generated images have a vastly greater potential for credibility than text (clearly we have not yet gotten used to the fact that what we see may not be true, and this applies to the now famous Christ of the Shrimp—over 40 million views and comments—as it does to the image of Trump gathered in silent prayer in church, too bad he has hands with six fingers). The most effective, according to the most recent studies, are audio hoaxes: a voice known to us leads us to scams. But the technique has already been used for political purposes as well: on January 21, American voters in New Hampshire received thousands of phone calls in which Joe Biden asked them not to vote in the primaries. Of course, it was not the president, but his sampled voice. And then there are the bots, the programs that mimic or replace the actions of a human being on the Web, performing automated and repetitive tasks. According to the latest Imperva report, 49.6 percent of all Internet traffic in 2023 was generated by bots: thus, they are programs, not human beings, a large part of the followers, likes and shares. With the arrival of chatbots (like little ChatGpts trained to support a thesis) we will increasingly run the risk of having discussions on social media not with people, but with bots, without us even noticing: the thousands of employees of the St. Petersburg IRA, whose goal was at least 100 comments a day, can now happily devote themselves to other tasks. ■

### GIANLUCA BELTRAME

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# THE ILLUSION OF ILLUSION

*There is a recurring theme in our culture: reality is what it appears. Yet, the real illusion might be the very idea of illusion. What if, unexpectedly, the world were exactly as it appears? Many would like the world to be a grand dream seeking a more consonant and fulfilling alternative version of it. But it is a process—human, too human—doomed to failure. Let's return to reality.*

Riccardo Manzotti

Western civilization is, at its heart, the civilization of dreams in the sense that it is founded on the idea of not seeing reality for what it is. Ever since Plato, Greek culture has had at its core the opposition between reality and appearance, which on the one hand allowed for speculative thinking by questioning the existent, but on the other hand separated the self from the world by opening a split between the subject and the object, between thought and existence. Thanks to Cartesian dualism and the notion of interiority, this split allowed for the emergence of science and philosophy that fueled a path of alienation in which the person is increasingly detached from reality. Science and neuroscience have assumed-and

thus confirmed-this groove, reinforcing the idea of a mental dimension separated from material reality as expressed iconically by René Magritte's famous 1933 painting, *The Human Condition*: a canvas inside a room and the inaccessible world outside.

Doubting reality makes it possible to redesign it, but it comes at a steep cost in terms of the existential condition: it implies that reality and appearance-world and dream, self and other, image and things-are different. Paradoxically, doubt implies the certainty of the possibility of doubt and thus faith in something that is hardly questioned: the reality of illusion; that is, the possibility that reality may appear different from what it is. Let us doubt doubt instead! But

what if it is not? I anticipate the conclusion: belief in the reality of illusion is the greatest illusion and condemns us to never being able to see reality for what it is. Illusion, too, is an illusion, and--much to the chagrin of Plato, Descartes and neuroscience--the world may be, surprisingly, just what it seems.

Let us make a fundamental point clear right away: error of judgment is not an illusion. Error of judgment, in philosophy, means any conclusion one draws on the basis of what is happening. For example, if I see a mirage, I see a horizontal surface reflecting light. This perfectly real, physical behavior is in common with lakes and bodies of water. Is there anything illusory about the mirage I see in the desert? Absolutely not, and in fact I can even photograph it. There is nothing "wrong" or illusory about a mirage, or a fatamorgana or a fatuous fire. The error is only in my provincial judgment: because I have seen only ponds, when I go to the desert I make an error in judgment. I think there is water there, while there is only hot sand. But there is nothing wrong with what you see. What should the hot sand look like? Exactly like this. Kant would have said "the senses are not the kind of thing that can be wrong." Or I see a prematurely haggard 30-year-old friend and attribute an older age to him. These are not cases where reality appears different from what it is. It is just a matter of our ignorance causing us to draw wrong conclusions and judgments.

But why do we believe in the possibility that reality is and is not, why are we convinced that things can exist and even appear? It is not obvious at all. If we look around, everything is exactly what it is: the pot of geraniums on the terrace is a pot of geraniums. The painting of geraniums in the hall is exactly a painting of geraniums. How could it be otherwise? Find me something that is not what it is! Yet despite this consistent solidity of existence, almost everyone believes that the world is not as it appears. Why?

The answer is contained in that deep-rooted superstition that underlies language and that is the self; a mythical entity that no one has ever seen and that everyone assumes to satisfy a hidden desire. The self, being by definition

different from the non-ego that is the world, implies a separation between reality and appearance. Humans, who want confirmations of the existence of the self, are happy to believe in illusions and dreams because they confirm them in their irrational belief that there is no world. Against this tradition, I explain why illusion is an illusion.

Illusion, hallucination, dream, even everyday perception are seen as the Platonic shadow of reality and for many would be the concrete proof that we see what does not exist. Wrote Phil Dick in 1977 in *A Scanner darkly*, taking up Paul of Tarsus' first letter to the Corinthians, "Now we see in a confused way, as in a mirror." The idea is always the same: we would not see the world as it is, but through an illusion that we mistake for reality. Going back to Magritte, we would see the canvas and not the landscape. In scientific-philosophical literature, the shadows of the cave were transformed first into mental representations and then into virtual worlds, both united by the promise of a great

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escape from reality. In each case, the senses are denigrated to the point that Galileo cannot hide his admiration for those who were able to do violence to them. The world would be hidden behind a veil and we would be prisoners of fallacious images produced by the senses that only with reason can we overcome. The world we find in our existence—from Calderon De la Barca to neuroscience the world-is thus degraded to dream, shadow, veil representation, deception or error. Only a higher authority -- the church, the philosopher, the neuroscientist -- can free us from the shackles of our deceptive, dreamlike existence so that we can see the light of the sun. At a certain distance, the differences between these versions of myth cancel out: reality is shadow or dream, and only authority (politics, religion, philosophy, science or reason) will open your eyes. After two thousand and more years, in *The Matrix* (Wachowski Brothers, 1998) we are still anxiously waiting for the red pill that will show us how deep the rabbit hole really goes! But is that really the case? Or perhaps the illusion is also ... an illusion?

Let us try to deconstruct the Platonic myth and show that we are not prisoners of the cave at all and that, indeed, there is no cave. There are no shadows. Life is not a dream. Life is reality, and everything that is presented to us is exactly reality. The world may be just as it seems. Let's get into it. Is it not true that—as Plato, Galileo and Penfield have told us—the world is a dream? Is it not true that we cannot know whether we are dreaming? Do we not have hallucinations and illusions that daily deceive us? The answer is negative and it is all contained in the case of the mirage we mentioned earlier. What we call an illusion is never a less real reality, but simply an error in judgment. When we see hot sand, we see exactly what is there. When Marco Polo goes to China and sees some Rhinos and in the *Million* writes that he saw some unicorns did he see something that was not true? Not at all. Marco Polo saw exactly what was there, only his language and culture did not have a term for Rhinoceroses and he drew the wrong conclusion. But the error was in the conclusion and not in what Marco Polo had seen.

The same reasoning can be applied to any perceptual illusion—from Ponzo's line to Hering's stripes, from the Lilac illusion to Kitaoka's colors. In all these cases we think we are not seeing what is there only because we think we should see something else (we think we see a unicorn and instead we see a rhinoceros or vice versa). The fact is that we are used to having these cases told in terms of naive realism. Let me explain by taking one case among many: the colors of Kitaoka spirals (see figure). These spirals *seem to* have different colors even though *they have the same color*. But who said *they have the same color*? Of course, if we assume that color is just the spectral curve reflected from a single point on a surface, they have the same color. But where is it written that color is this very thing? Sure, in many circumstances, it is a good hypothesis, but as a hypothesis it is just as good as Marco Polo's hypothesis that there are horses with a horn on their heads that are called unicorns. What if the colors are a combination of spectral curves that include neighboring portions? Then the two spirals would no longer be the same color, but would be for all intents and purposes, two different colors; just as the unicorn and the rhinoceros are two different beasts.

To simplify, the notion of illusion is a child of the idea that there is a reality fixed forever by our beliefs and that when the world deviates from this idea, it happens because the world appears different from what it is. This is not the case. The world always appears as it is—color of Kitaoka, rhinoceros of Marco Polo, mirage in the desert—and sometimes our judgments fall short. As recounted in a famous anecdote reported by Elizabeth Anscombe, one day Ludwig Wittgenstein asked her, "Why do people say that it was natural to think that the sun revolved around the earth rather than that the earth revolved on its own axis?" to which Anscombe replied, "I suppose, because it seemed that the sun revolved around the earth." but found nothing to add to the philosopher's prompt reply, "Fine! But then what would it have been like if it had seemed that the earth revolved on its own axis?" In short, illusions are not cases where the world looks like something

it is not, but cases where we believe it must look like something else because we have not understood what it really is. Marco Polo did not understand what a rhinoceros is. I didn't understand how desert sand works. Psychologists did not understand what color is. As our knowledge of the world increases, instances of illusion disappear.

Okay ... but the combinations we see in dreams, those don't exist. I dream of my grandmother taking me to the sea, but she has never been to the sea and has also passed away thirty years ago. How can that be explained? Then what about dreams or hallucinations? Are these not concrete cases in which things appear that do not exist? Surprisingly, it is possible to argue the opposite and show that dreams are also real and that we judge them as mere appearances only because we believe in the myth of a perceiving self that is separate from the world. Consider some questions that should give us pause. Has anyone ever dreamed of a color they had never seen? Has anyone ever dreamed of a physical property that was not a combination of everyday objects? Has anyone ever seen, in a virtual reality device, a non-physical color? The answer to all these questions (trust me) is negative. Descartes himself noticed this despite the fact that he was, of all philosophers, the one with the most metaphysical credit for creating pure appearances. In *Meditations*, the French philosopher will argue that the dream mechanism is like a painter who, having to create fantastic creatures, can do nothing but combine animal limbs in an unusual way thus obtaining chimerical animals made of other animals.

Yet even if dreams are made up of pieces of the world, the fact remains that these pieces are not there at the moment the dreamer experiences them. So what? Once again we can set aside our belief in a self located at an imaginary point in space and, more importantly, time. Let us use as a metaphor Leon Battista Alberti's visual pyramid, which, from the Renaissance to the present day, has been the perfect allegory of the perceptual process: a point (the apex of the pyramid) toward which the world (the base) is projected. The points, unfortunately,

have no dimension and therefore do not exist. Once again, the metaphor employed betrays the

“  
**WHETHER  
 THE TRUTH  
 IS NOT  
 THE BEST THING  
 TO KNOW,  
 I CAN'T IMAGINE  
 WHAT CAN**  
 ”

negative concept of the self as something that does not exist or that, if it did exist, would not be real. The error here is to assume that this “I” we have seen to be the reification of a negation is at a particular point in time and space.

Like illusions, hallucinations require a world of shadows only if we assume that we know something that we do not know and that is that we would be placed here and now and that what we should see is the boring and predictable reality of the near environment. But this fact, as obvious as it may seem to us, is by no means a given. Where are we? And why should reality all fit inside Leon Battista Alberti's dimensionless point? What is a dream? The dream is us and the dream is the world. If we cancel the distance between us and reality, there is no longer any room for this ambiguous dimension of being and non-being that we had identified with the dream.

If anything, we should ask why has our culture so long fondled and uncritically accepted the illusion of delusion? And the answer, I suspect, depends not so much on sophisticated logical arguments as on a psychological factor: the world is bad and we would like an escape. The world (often) sucks and we would not want it to be that way. Our bodies are too fat or too thin, we are sick, people are dying, we are suffering, there are inequalities and

injustices, children are starving and dying of disease in general indifference, and rich people have possessions beyond their imagination. All of this we do not like. It takes a pitiful lie to convince us that this is not how things are; one has to live. And so supply meets demand, and we come up with many spaces less insensitive to our needs: the last will be first, karma will punish the infamous and reward the victims, divine justice, a charitable god (father and mother) will help you, you will not die, and, of course, *the world is dream* or *reality is illusion*. Human too human, Nietzsche would have said.

But I don't think one lives better by believing pitiful lies. I share Bertrand Russell's response to a question about the desirability of knowing the truth: "If the truth is not the best thing to know, I cannot imagine what could be." Be that as it may, lies waste life because, as lies, they make people live in an inauthentic dimension and also, from a practical point of view, they make mistakes. For example, if I were told I would live for a thousand years, I might decide to use the first hundred to accomplish relatively futile activities, but come the end of my hundred years (I am optimistic) I would regret not having devoted them to things that really mattered. Similarly, if I knew that today was my last day of life, I probably would not be doing what I am doing, and perhaps, as Marcus Aurelius said, this is proof that I should be doing something different! So, the main reason we so enthusiastically accepted the idea that reality is an illusion is that, from dreams (especially bad ones), you can wake up. And this has been the fairy tale that our culture has so ardently wanted to believe in: we are ugly, old and sick, but one day we will wake up from this bad dream and be beautiful and happy (that, however, just think, will not be a dream!). Throughout the Middle Ages, the theme of real life as a dream and real life after death (resurrection as awakening) was repeated incessantly.

It is significant that now that most people are no longer officially practicing religious beliefs, most people continue to believe in the immortality of the soul and, of course, the fallacy of the senses. In particular, the connection

between these two beliefs is also very significant in scientific-technological terms. Consider a number of film-television successes that have as their *deus ex machina* the hypothesis that we do not live in reality but in a virtual world created by information processing - *The Matrix*, *Black Mirror*, *St. Juniper*, *Altered Carbon*; a hypothesis also popular in the philosophical world (e.g., in the works of Nick Bostrom). In these cases, if we were living in an illusion generated by some supercomputer, then we could hope that this illusion would continue forever. Information is eternal and removed from the grip of reality (aging, disease and death). If we are information, we are eternal even though, of course, we no longer live in reality, but in an imaginary or virtual world created from a physical base (a connection with the real world is always needed), which, however, can be from time to time, replaced and superseded. If we are not reality, or live in a dream world, we can make ourselves independent of reality and decide the rules ourselves. The illusion of delusion allows us to delude ourselves that we are not what we are, but that we are what we would like to be. In the dream we are the masters and dictate the rules, but this is nothing more than the vestigial residue of adolescent fantasies, a kind of metaphysical *hikikomori*, a step backward or a step missed. Dreaming, which underlies the shadow culture in which we have lived from Plato to medieval Christianity, from baroque metaphysics and fiction to contemporary neuroscience and virtual worlds, is a form of immaturity we choose to avoid confrontation with reality. Belief in illusion allows us hope in a different ultimate reality. But this would be absurd: for we would have to concede to a world that does not exist that it has the power to appear; that is, we would have to admit that non-being can be, which is impossible. The illusion of illusion is just a lie. Without the possibility of illusion, but only of error, there is no more room to think that the world, and we, are not what we appear to be. As Groucho Marx said, "He looks stupid, he talks stupid, he acts stupid, but don't be fooled ... he's just stupid." The world is just what it seems. ■

# CREDULOUS (AND NOT)

*Understanding and classifying when an object is animate (or inanimate) is a basic ability of human cognition, promoting several expectations.  
A brief survey of the biology and neuroscience of beliefs.*

**Giorgio Vallortigara**

**G**ullibility seems to have a firm foundation in our biology, traceable to two principles: the first relating to the ability to detect causal links between events in the environment, the second relating to the ability to distinguish what is animate from what is not.

Grasping cause-effect relationships in the world does not require explicit understanding, relying instead on “causal detectors” that are mechanically and unconsciously activated when two events occur in close temporal contiguity. Psychologist Burrhus Skinner’s famous superstitious pigeon provides an example: frequent but completely random feeding of food at intervals causes the responses emitted by the pigeon moments before to be associated with the sporadic events of reward availability. Perhaps half a second before the food was made available, the bird was busy lifting its wing to clean itself, and lo and behold, the behavior of lifting the wing is repeated by the pigeon because it is associated with the reward. Since the frequency of occurrence of rewards is high, raising the wing will often be found, by chance, to precede the release of food, increasingly reinforcing the behavior.

This relentless and somewhat stubborn operation of the causality detector provides the unconscious basis for many of our superstitious behaviors, which are then enriched by the usual narratives: don’t allow a black cat to cross your path, don’t go under the ladder, put your left foot down first when getting out of bed in the morning... However, the natural inclination to detect causality on the basis of spatio-temporal contingency between events is only part of the natural history of credulity; the other part has to do with detecting in the environment the presence of intentional agents.

The classification of objects into animate and inanimate is fundamental to human (and other species) cognition. Much evidence for this comes from neuropsychology. For example, some patients with neurological damage show semantic deficits for animate categories, while their knowledge of inanimate categories is intact. This suggests that animate and inanimate objects are processed differently in the brain, in anatomically distinct regions. In fact, functional MRI studies show ventrolateral activation for animate objects and ventromedial activation for



inanimate objects.

Just like causality, the presence of animate agents in the environment is not captured on the basis of sophisticated inferential processes using our past experiences, but by “animacy detectors” that operate automatically. In the visual sensory mode, the detectors use mainly motion. You may have happened to be walking down the street and turned around suddenly attracted by a leaf or newspaper moved by the wind and exclaimed, “It looks like a living thing!” Indeed, self-motion and abrupt changes in speed are clues to the presence of an animate object, and a variety of laboratory studies have documented this in both human subjects (adults and infants) and other animal species. Changes in trajectory, on the other hand, seem less effective, while the alignment of the body’s major axis with the direction of movement is quite effective.

An important clue to animacy of a static type is provided by facial features, the prominence of which has been proven both in human infants and in many other animal species. In my laboratory we have shown that the nearly automatic response to a schematic face obtained from a rounded outline within which two spots at the top and one at the bottom (a kind of *emoticon*) are recognized is based on the presence of single neurons selectively sensitive to such a configuration.

We possess a set of expectations about the behavior of animate and inanimate objects, which cognitive scientists call intuitive physics and intuitive psychology. We expect physical objects to be cohesive entities that move while maintaining their size and shape, and that they can act on other objects by contact but cannot pass through or occupy their space. The violation of these properties is what causes amazement at a magician’s manipulations. Animate objects, on the other hand, while sharing certain general properties with inanimate ones, can move by occasionally violating certain physical constraints, for example that of gravitation, by flying or jumping, and they can grow and change shape or act on each other at a distance, by mechanisms of causation that are psychological rather than physical.

With regard to credulity, the distinction between

animate and inanimate carries with it an important consequence, namely that people tend to be spontaneously dualistic, that is, to believe that minds are separable from bodies and capable of independent existence.

The existence of this intuitive dualism is supported by the fact that people, even from very different cultures, and preschool children commonly believe that psychological traits (knowledge, desires) as opposed to bodily or biological traits (sensory and physiological states) continue after death.

I have two friends who are impervious to the idea of dualism, one is a writer, Massimiliano Parente, the other is a philosopher with a background as an engineer studying robotics, Riccardo Manzotti. “Never been a dualist!” they both assure me. A biological predisposition, however, is not a sentence carved in stone: all organisms show phenotypic variability, due to the intertwining of environmental, epigenetic and genetic factors. Moreover, these two friends alien to any form of dualism are not alone.

Another close friend, cognitive psychologist

## GIORGIO VALLORTIGARA

Professor of Neuroscience at the Centre for Mind-Brain Sciences at the University of Trento, of which he was also director, he is the author of more than 400 scientific papers in international journals and of several popular books *Divided Brains* (with L.J. Rogers and R.J. Andrew /Cambridge University Press 2013), *Pensieri della mosca con la testa storta* published by Adelphi in 2021 (currently being translated by Routledge, UK under the title *The Origins of Consciousness*), and *Born Knowing* published by MIT Press in 2021 and, in a revised and updated edition, in Italian in 2023 under the title *Il pulcino di Kant* also at Adelphi.

In 2016 he received the Geoffroy Saint Hilaire International Prize for Ethology and an Honorary Degree from Ruhr University, Germany. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Biology. He writes for the cultural pages of newspaper such *Il Sole 24 Ore* and popular journals such as *Le Scienze*. He is part of the Scientific Direction of *Prometeo*.

Iris Berent, found that in people with autism spectrum disorders intuitive dualism would be greatly attenuated compared to what happens in neuro-typical individuals. Responding to a question about what traits about a person might persist after death, neuro-typical participants were likely to believe that thoughts might survive into the afterlife, while those with autism did not think this was plausible. If people were asked to imagine that it was possible to construct a perfect replica of their bodies, autistic participants appeared much more likely than neuro-typicals to believe that thoughts would transfer to replicas. It therefore appears that people with autism spectrum disorders tend to anchor mental states to bodies much more than neuro-typical people do.

These results are well explained if we consider that possessing specialized brain mechanisms to pick up the presence in the environment of animate agents is the foundation of social life. In our species, the mechanism for detecting the presence of animate agents has undergone even hypertrophic development: we see faces in clouds and hear voices in the croak of a badly tuned radio. (Indeed, the phenomenon of pareidolia is not confined to the human species, and its roots lie in biology rather than culture.) Then again, far better to believe that the noise I hear in the middle of the night is produced by *someone* (a burglar?) than by *something* (the wind?): the relative cost-benefit ratio of a false positive (I think there is a burglar instead it was the wind) is far more advantageous than that of a false negative (I think it was the wind instead there was a burglar). Gullibility here reflects a simple rule of evolution: better to be cautious than to be dead.

However, having been shaped by the action of natural selection and encoded in the genome, in a minority of individuals these mechanisms can run into accidents and pathologies. Many data suggest that people with autism exhibit difficulties with the so-called “theory of mind,” the spontaneous inclination to attribute mental states to others. The attribution of mental states is constructed progressively from the recognition that some thing is animate and that this some thing may be an agent, and as such possess pur-

poses, intentions, desires and other mental states.

The idea of animate agent has made beliefs in the supernatural possible and universal among human beings, as accidental byproducts of an adaptive mechanism that actually evolved for relationship life. There are bodies and spirits, the world was created by someone, and some thing about us survives after death...All human cultures have developed forms and variations of these beliefs. Spirits, demon angels and deities partially violate the established boundaries of intuitive physics and intuitive psychology, which makes them memorable. And bodies, of course, have been inhabited by minds (or spirits), and for that they deserve our respect.

Much research has been conducted in recent years to understand what happens in the brains of believers while they are engaged in activities such as prayer. The results concordantly show that the same areas are activated that we employ in usual social-type activities. God in the brain is a person, an animate agent. What else could He be? ■

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# IQ THE INEFFABLE NUMBER OF EXCLUSION

*The measurement of intelligence has been a challenge and true obsession for humans. Attempts to quantify our intelligence extend back to positivism. They never arrived at universally accepted criteria with rampant abuse of IQ tests for discriminatory policies. In the age of mass stupidity, overly deterministic science is not saved.*

**Daniela Pasqualini**

In times of Artificial Intelligence, human IQ tests appear to be going out of fashion. Yet the century, in which people dreamed of finding the right yardstick to measure intelligence, discover talent, and direct everyone toward the right profession and personal fulfillment, is not so far away.

Fine-tuned through the work of Alfred Binet, a psychologist commissioned by the French government to find a way to give personalized help to the most fragile students, these tests come to be both loved and hated, lending themselves to different uses and purposes that are not always agreeable.

Even as Binet was busy identifying indices of mental age, his collaborator Piaget had lost interest in the actual tests, finding instead the way children formulated the answer more stimulating. Thus, by leaving IQ measurement on the back burner, Piaget was building piece by piece a theory of cognitive development capable of revealing the nature of thinking, showing that the child is no less intel-

ligent than the adult. Instead, he theorized that the child's mind has its own logical form made evident by prompting the right questions and the right problems.

If, as Piaget argues, intelligence is the ability to adapt to the world around us, it is inevitable that from this same world, we receive stimuli, feedback to interpret, and conditioning capable of broadening or narrowing our field of experience. Indeed, we know that experience affects human intelligence both when it represents an enrichment and when, on the negative side, it undermines the sense of self-efficacy that is essential to sustain motivation. So, there are variables that can be determinants of IQ as they affect knowledge, including culture, personal experience and, of course, level of education.

Beginning in the late 1980s, with the publication of *Frames of mind : the theory of multiple intelligences*, Howard Gardner questioned the reliability of IQ measurements because they referred only to

logical/mathematical and linguistic thinking. His studies on multiple intelligences contribute to a revision of the concept of IQ and, consequently, instead of looking for suitable tools to quantify, shift attention to ways to enhance a plurality of intelligences. Compared to the twentieth century, this current century is that of overcoming limits and the maximum empowerment of the posthuman: the human being who resolves his own frailty and mortality through Artificial Intelligence. Thus, the subject of measuring intellect, which has also lost much of its original interest, can now be dealt with again by partly changing the tested subject: quantifying the IQ of Artificial Intelligence.

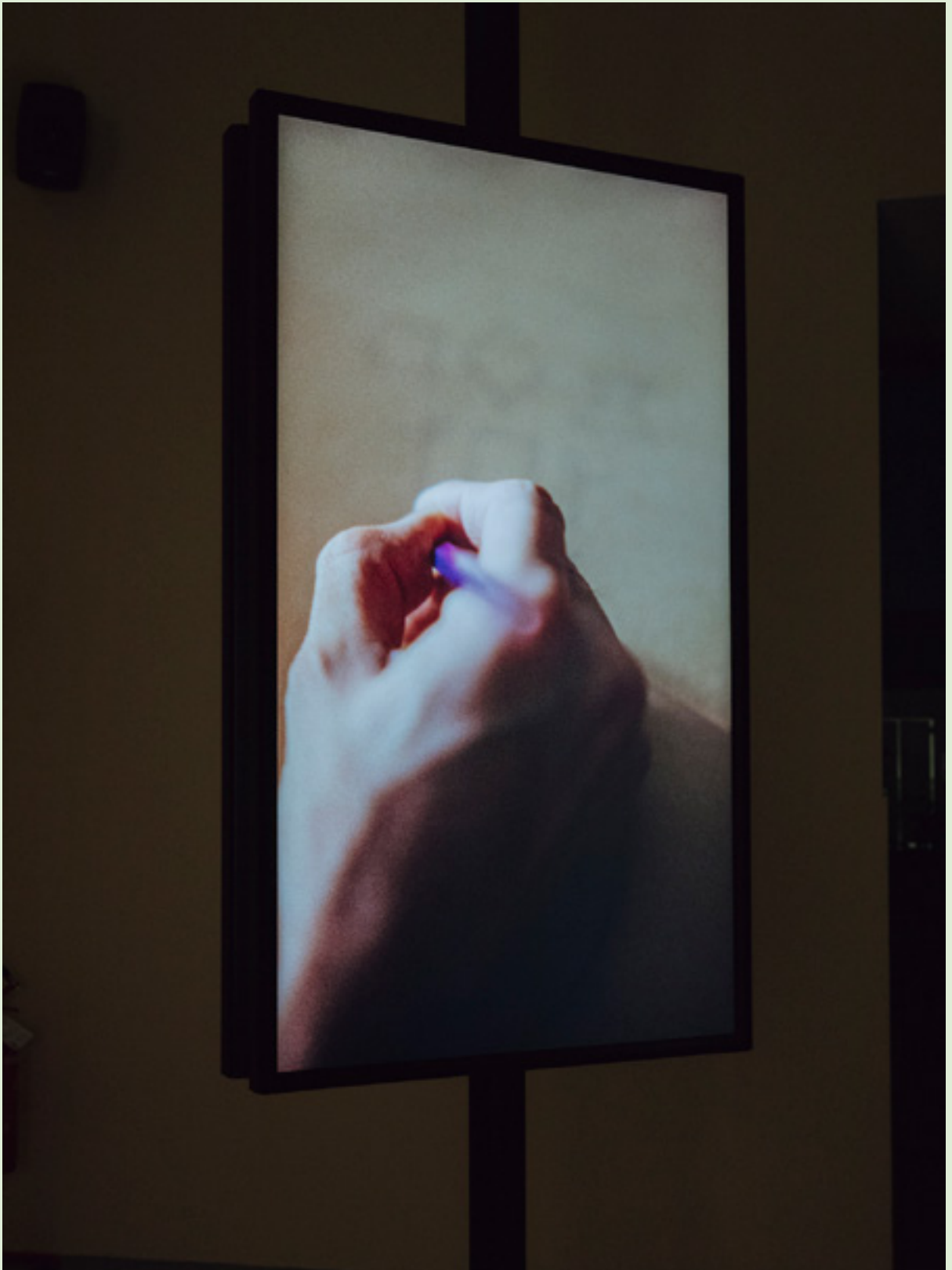
One wonders, then, what sense it might make, other than to confirm the anthropic view of machines that we sometimes have. How could tests intended for humans be adapted for an AI that is not human? Some attempts have yielded high results, compared to the average human IQ, estimating the measure of AI where only 1 percent of humans reach. However, there remains a problem of reliability and objectivity of the data collected. For example, *problem-solving* tests involving real-world understanding, invention, or solution are not found to be suitable for machines, even if they are highly intelligent. If already overcoming the monolithic view of intelligence has forced us to rethink the language used to formulate test questions, addressing the issue of the cognitive capabilities of Artificial Intelligence would pose the same problem. Because once again intelligence is not singular, just as AIs are many, varied, and designed for specific purposes and different fields of application. If one were to succeed in devising a test suited to the complexity of AI, what would happen to less-gifted intelligences? Although the question seems surreal and the anthropic reading a bit too far-fetched, current theoretical thinking has already considered the risks. Low-IQ intelligence would in all likelihood be “abandoned”. There is no point in investing in underperforming AIs. It might be said that this is pure fantasy, speculative like science fiction. Perhaps, on the contrary, it is the mere resurfacing of reasoning that has been seen and heard before, applied to human beings when they were the only ones who could/should be tested to measure IQ.

The history of IQ, after Binet, after 1905, varies

from one country to another. Many became disinterested in it, others sought didactic applications. Notably, the United States of America focused specifically on these measurements from a reformulation of the Binet-Simon test, which became Stanford-Binet. Here, too, the occasions for the use of tests to assess human intelligence have been many: not only in the fields of education and many other professions but also in the military, as a way to enlist privates or commanders or even to justify the marginalization of certain groups and individuals. When a threshold -- if we want to call it “normality” -- is drawn, it is inevitable to wonder what that level will demarcate, what might determine barely reaching it or, instead, surpassing it. These questions are especially pressing if the number measuring IQ denotes a judgment after a child has been tested, instilling the belief that the result will remain valid throughout his or her life. Such questions burgeon in the face of *Memory Contours*, a work by Lebanese-born video artist Joyce Joumaa featured at the Venice Biennale 2024. “Strangers Everywhere” is the apt title of the international art exhibition, for the broad theme promotes different points of view precisely because, as curator Adriano Pedrosa suggests, ‘we are all foreigners’. Playing with the etymology of the term, strange or foreign, for their disparity in Romance languages, the visitors of the exhibition navigate the experience, like the artists who express themselves through different techniques, of being at times foreign and at other moments strangers. The complex and articulated theme includes a reflection on decolonization and migration, declining the research in a historical

### DANIELA PASQUALINI

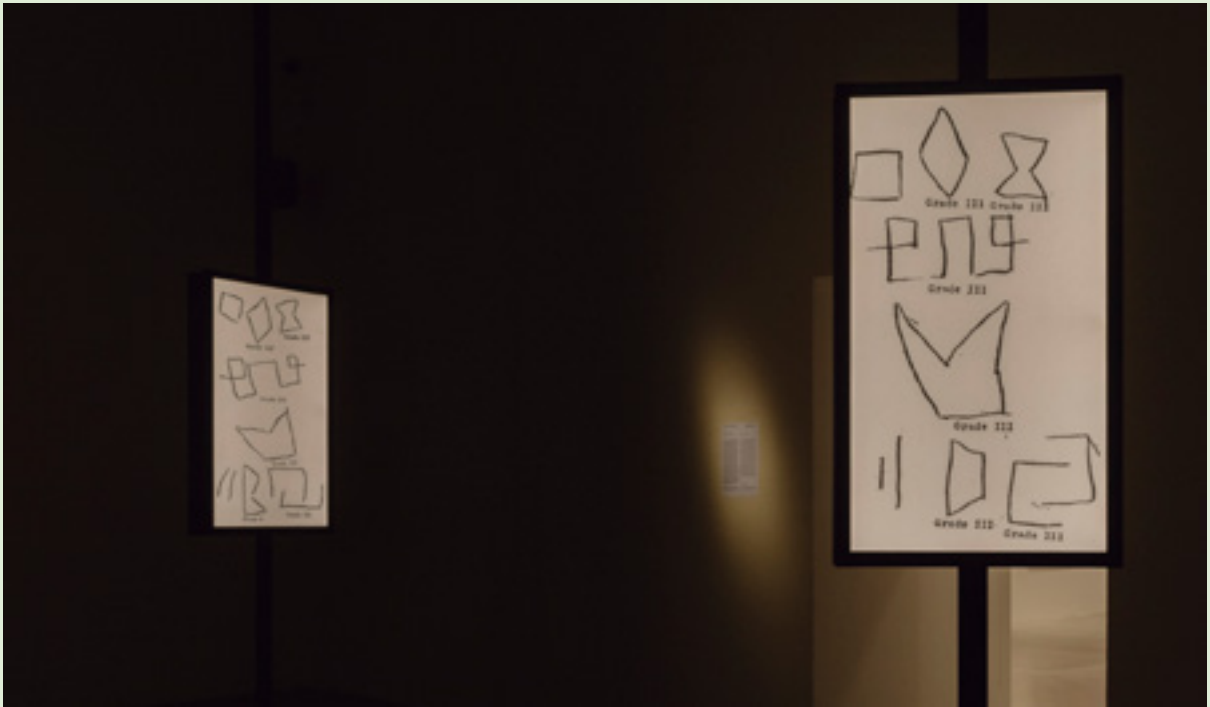
Professor of pedagogy and didactics at the Ligustica Academy of Fine Arts in Genoa. She contributes to the magazine *Charta*. Among her publications: *Lasciare il segno. Lezioni di Pedagogia e Didattica dell'arte* (Armando, 2021); *Dalla carta agli schermi. Il lungo viaggio attraverso la scuola* (I libri di Emil, 2021); *Masaccio. L'artista in Italia* (Odoja, 2019); *Educare on line* (SEU, 2002) and the monograph *Giuseppe Bottai e la carta della scuola. Una riforma mai realizzata* (Solfanelli, 2013).



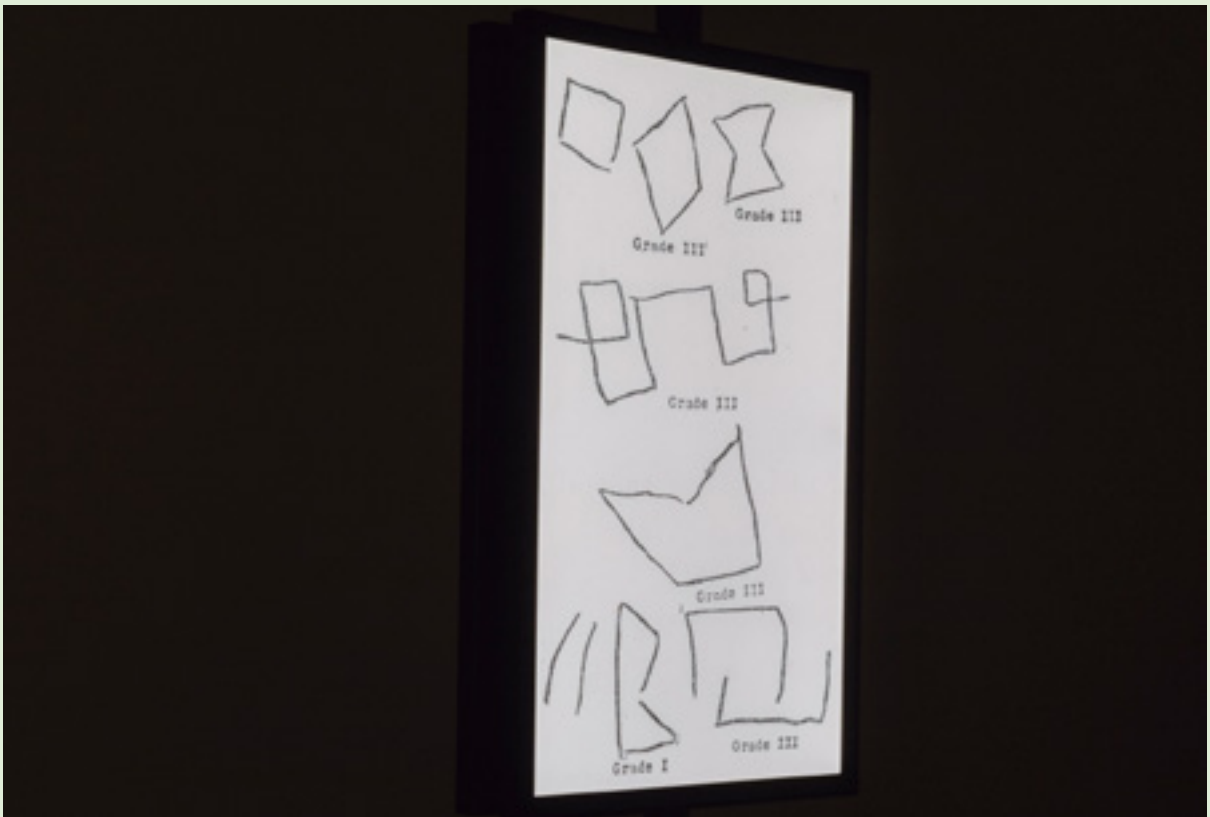
and contemporary key, but also creating an interpretative short-circuit across past and present. This play on temporality, history, and colonial memory comes to the fore when looking at Joumaa's *Memory Contours*. The artist's video installation chronicles the condition of immigrants arriving in early twentieth-century America, covering an inordinate number of stories, dreams, and strenuous lives that the spectator nevertheless does not know as Joumaa's video focuses on a drawing hand. To better understand the genesis of the work and grasp its meaning, it is worth remembering that the control center for immigrants who wanted to enter the United States in the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries was Ellis Island, New York. The island was an enormous reception center, with spaces suitable for receiving between two thousand and five thousand people a day. Certainly, mandatory medical examinations were held at Ellis Island for those wishing to be accepted into America, but it was not enough to certify a healthy constitution. Proof of an equally healthy "brain" also had to be presented, and brain health was evaluated through tests of various kinds. For an America with the myth of high "IQ" as a measure of virtue, test results became grounds for admitting high-performing immigrants, and barriers for accepting immigrants with low cognitive potential. Under this belief, opening doors to the low scorers meant assuming the risk of future delinquency, the costly need for medical care, and newborns requiring of immediate care. Under this sort of positivist thinking, the sorting at Ellis Island was justified. IQs were also measured for those who did not know the English language, which skewed scores due to limited understanding of verbal questions. Moreover, people were subjected to the Knox test, a kind of wooden puzzle game with pieces to arrange and fit together. This test carried the advantage of being a bit more intuitive and practical. Other tests evaluated the memory and logical reasoning skills of migrants. As portrayed in Joyce Joumaa's video installation, evocative of the Ellis Island tests, people were required to reproduce geometric shapes from memory. The artist starts with the document entitled *Mentality of the Arriving Immigrant*, compiled by the U.S. Office of Public Health. It is a study of immigrants from countries outside America and the methods of investigation adopted at Ellis Island to trace

cases of mental retardation. Joumaa focuses on one such test administered for this purpose: looking at figures and signs for a time, then reproducing them from memory. The artist chooses four graphic tracings and for each one makes a video in which a hand performs the assigned task. The drawing is no longer just a gestural expression but becomes scientific "proof" that will determine acceptance or, on the contrary, rejection and detention in the event the tracings produced do not adhere to the models provided by the administrators. In a Biennale entitled "Strangers Everywhere", the reflection on foreignness and at the same time the desire for inclusion is particularly apt. Ellis Island, an islet not far from Manhattan, was the United States, but to set foot in the true New World immigrants had to pass through the entry port. That is, they had to obtain an IQ number greater than the threshold of normality.

Before realizing that intelligence is not one, that it is not innate, that it is not genetic, that the tools that were presumed to be exact turned out to be imprecise, misleading, and inadequate, how many individuals were subjected to "normalizing" tests? How many still think of the human being as a mind/body system that can be weighed, measured, and quantified? At Ellis Island, people were turned away if they did not meet the threshold requirements for entry. Those on the cusp were assigned basic tasks. Curiously, IQ measurements were not deemed necessary for first-class travelers, who were most often white. Joumaa's focus on a drawing hand displays in a slow progression a series of marks that gradually form a figure, and in that rubbing of the pencil on the paper, with the framing that puts us in the place of the draughtsman, she manages to convey all the malaise and daze of those who do not know, do not understand, and are not called upon to express themselves. It is the silent story of millions of immigrants who, having just disembarked from a very long and exhausting voyage, were given pen and paper and still shaken by the rocking of the sea, were tasked to reproduce the figures seen just before with a steady hand. What was the fate of those who failed those tests? If in Binet's original application a low score entitled one to aid, here it was only a number that determined exclusion -- a number that causes the wonders of individual variety to disappear. ■



Joyce Joumaa on display with the work *Memory Contours* (2024), Multimedia Installation Variable dimensions by Biennale College Arte, at the 60th International Art Exhibition - La Biennale di Venezia, *Stranieri Ovunque - Foreigners Everywhere*. Photo by Andrea Avezzù, Jacopo Salvi, Marco Zorzanello, Matteo de Mayda. Courtesy La Biennale di Venezia.



# HOW WE BECAME FOOLS

*This is the title of Armando Massarenti's latest essay. A disenchanted and renunciatory book? Not at all, in fact it incites "an immodest proposal for getting smart again."*

Gabriella Piroli

If we loved witticisms, we could begin here with a learned disquisition discussing the stupid and the cretin: what similarities and what differences? Carlo M. Cipolla's old bestseller, *Allegro ma non troppo* (exploring *The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity* (private edition, 1976; il Mulino, 2011) would provide ample harvest of quotations to plunder. In fact, the subject is terribly serious, let's settle for the fact that in common parlance they are two entirely interchangeable epithets. The essay by Armando Massarenti, a philosopher, editor-in-chief of *Il Sole 24 Ore* and essayist, directs with a light pen but razor-sharp reasoning a flowing weave of chapters on what is a glaring emergency: the now more than widespread lack of critical capacity. I will concentrate this brief review in an honest account of the book and, just at the end, a couple of personal reflections.

The author does not digress into the world, nor does he insist on philosophy-although the repertoire of scholars who are cited is very rich. No, his field of observation is firmly empirical and has the perimeter of the West. A brutal summary of the book might conclude that the triggers of the current stupidity have been, on the one hand, the "mediatization" of life, that is, an over-reliance on information technologies and its decomposed viralities. On the other, woke cultures, that is, the rhetoric of political correctness. Actually, the book winds its way through much more sophisticated arguments, beginning

with the quotation of Lessing's fable in the preface. What does it say? It tells that a shepherd invites a nightingale to sing, but the nightingale prefers to keep quiet because so many frogs make a great noise, which even the shepherd perform cannot fail to hear. "Of course I hear them," he replies. "But only your silence condemns me to hear them."

Admittedly, we are in the realm of apologetics, but it has exquisite relevance to the theme and the author's reflection, who comments, "Things, however, are not exactly as in the fable. The voices of the nightingales thankfully do not stop being heard. The din of the frogs, even more than deafening, mixes with that of the nightingales and, beyond good intentions, makes everything even more confusing and incomprehensible."

The first sign of contemporary stupidity is precisely the indistinctness, the loss of boundary, the overlapping of voices in what appears to be a rutilant and magmatic *Blob*, TV Italian program (*The blob* was a 1958 American science fiction horror film).

In Massarenti's book, from here on, it is a succession of educated and critical, even self-critical considerations, for example when Alberto Savinio is recalled who enunciated how "stupidity, this unmentionable love, exerts a hypnotic power over us, an invincible enticement." And secondarily Milan Kundera, who specified how *kitsch*, that is, "the need to look at oneself in the mirror of falsehood and to



recognize oneself in it with moved satisfaction” is to be coupled with that *bêtise* that had so tormented Gustave Flaubert, that is, “the triumph of the commonplace.”

The cultural background of stupidity is an immense florilegium. But the topic has also been widely investigated by the social sciences. Beyond the technical questions about IQ, its measurement and the even racial controversies to which it has given rise, the discussion of the *Flynn Effect* and its current, albeit debated, retroversion has a very relevant place in the essay. If in the 1980s the American psychologist James R. Flynn had found a rising curve in the average IQ of the population, forty years later, that is, today, there appear conspicuous signs of cessation of growth, and indeed of true regression.

After all, nothing is ever irreversible, as Steven Pinker reminds us in *Enlightenment Now* (Penguin, 2018). Why should the average IQ be? Now, let’s face it: it is very difficult to determine what intelligence is, the author tries to investigate the concept under various agolatures and perspectives. The question - *vexata quaestio* - revolves around genetic overdetermination, which is usually disputed by those who instead see that the let’s say epigenetic, i.e., environmental and behavioral, factor is decisive. There is a very tasty chapter that, starting with chickens and the differences between them in egg production, arrives at critical judgments about “homogeneous” school classes, in short, those that principals and parents like because all children are more or less similar in extraction. In fact, the truth appears counterintuitive: various research has documented how “scion” classes-what economist Vittorio Pelligrà wickedly calls “super chickens”-do not flourish in education and knowledge, do not perform well, in fact perform less well than mixed classes.

From Chapter 6, with the title playing with a wonderful oxymoron-“Naturally Artificial”-we begin to address the topic of AI. Aside from ChatGPT’s congruous and incongruous responses, in the world of the metaverse, as philosopher Silvano Tagliagambe also points out, “there are not only shadows, but also extraordinary opportunities that it would be guilty not to seize.” However, the world of the Internet has complex and contradictory reflections on all of us. Apart from Umberto Eco’s famous quip (“It has given legions of imbeciles the right to speak”) it is a reality that polarizes even the judgments of

experts. Nicholas Carr, for example, noted that the first populations to have a regression in IQ were the British and Scandinavian populations, i.e., also the first to enjoy high-speed connections. Perhaps, as the author later notes, “The constant flow of short, fragmented information may affect our ability to maintain attention and think deeply.”

It is what in other words is feared as a change in the cognitive set-up of individuals, and it also drags with it some ethical weaknesses in perceiving, trivially, good and evil.

Armando Massarenti’s essay, perhaps the most political within his publications, continues with many other considerations, impossible to report here due to tyranny of the page. He devotes much space, however, to two major topics. The first is the need for a liberal renaissance as an antidote to stupidity; the second, is a sharp critique of so-called *cancel culture*, that is, to the insistent claim to standardize languages and behavior as a function of defending oppressed minorities.

Just in the spirit of completeness and to avoid misunderstanding: by liberal theme the author means that logic, *sentiment* and ethical construction that were dear to John Stuart Mill. As for culture *woke*, even to me they seem excessive, wrong, and at times so severe as to seem “stupid,” to stay in the vein of this review. As my own small contribution, I went to find a luminous and in a sense definitive passage by Mario Perniola, a beloved philosopher, which I quote in full: “Political correctness is based on claiming the rank of victim: weakness is not thought of as something that must be changed into strength, because what matters, what makes strength, is precisely its ostentation. As one critic writes, the essence of “politically correct” culture is complaining, whining; its motto is “don’t tread on me, I am fragile” (Robert Hughes, *Culture of complaint*, Oxford UP, 1993). This is a paradoxical strategy, because those who complain claim to win by asserting their “difference,” which consists in suffering. This cannot be transformed into joy, because then the “difference” from the enemy would be lost.”

Here, after this raid between and in quotes, I would like to conclude with a radical but simple thought: perhaps the real antidote to stupidity lies in the capacity for wisdom and irony: in spite of the culture of lamentation, they represent a joyful way “back to being smart.” ■

GEOGRAPHIES OF HISTORY

# METAMORPHOSIS OF THE BORDERS



*A barrier can be natural or artificial, saving or impeding.  
This quality has forced mankind across time to grapple with  
the concept, as we fight and negotiate at the border.*

**David Bidussa**



The border occupies our contemporary imagination, but perhaps it never really ceased to captivate us. Despite this continuity, in the current age, the border is taking on different and sometimes unexpected meanings. For example, think of those in the alt-right today who decry border protection to fight climate change [Santolini 2024]. It was geopolitician Klaus Dodds [2023 and 2024], lecturer, at Royal Holloway University in London, who proposed a new reflection on how we should look at the concept of the border in our time by pointing out how water, minerals, and space will become the resources that determine the loci of border wars [Sarcina 2024].

Such a proposal has serious underpinnings, and I will return to it in the concluding part of this piece. Reading what Dodds proposes is striking not only for identifying the new causes and types of wars that could impact us but also for his renewed idea of geography, which undoubtedly merits our full attention.

To begin, I would like to consider the condition preceding Dodds' reflections.

Political scientist Carlo Galli recently observed [Galli 2021] that the terms "border" and "frontier" -- irrespective of how synonymous they may appear -- do not represent the same object and, more notably, do not indicate the same condition.

On the one hand, Galli reminds us how there are various definitions of "boundary" as he delineates three meanings of the term. "On the one hand border," he writes, is "a merely political entity (...) the arbitrary line that a power draws on a map. Elsewhere, the idea of border amounts to a "natural demarcation" (take mountains, for example). In his third articulation of the term, he looks to "consider the boundary from a historical-relational perspective, as the result of the intertwining of physical and political conditions and the interaction between states. But "the different ways of thinking about a boundary," he adds, "are, however, accompanied by the concept of pluralism: there is a boundary if there are at least two entities that border each other" [Galli 2021, p. 7].

In the case of the "frontier", Galli shows how the opposite consideration applies. Supporting this position, the example Galli offers is that of the history of the United States, probably drawing on a fixture in American historiography like Turner [1959]. Galli points out that, "while the border remains

stationary or, if it moves, it is done quite slowly, with effort, from the idea of a pluralism or at least a persistent duality, the frontier, on the other hand, moves, where possible, quickly." He then goes on to conclude, "the frontier moves forward incessantly with the idea of no return: the frontier implies not pluralism but monism" [ibid.]

Such a concept in some respects is not entirely new, which finds its roots in, for example, the definition of a nationalist geographer like Friedrich Ratzel who in his late nineteenth-century canonical study wrote that "the frontier consists of innumerable points on which an organic movement has come to a halt [Ratzel 1899, Bd. II, p. 259].

The distinction makes it possible to isolate a discrepancy between a line that takes on the function of marking the division between two communities. In view of this, the border becomes the sign of an expansion line.

Significantly, Galli provides the example of the growth and expansion of the United States from its original configuration of 13 original colonies to its present condition, marked with precision by border lines. Demarcations confirmed or "reinforced" by the construction of walls. This wall-border phenomenon has a long history. In antiquity, the fortified route along the Rhine divided Rome from the Germans, whereas the Great Wall of China exemplifies another purpose, aimed more at containment than separation. Elsewhere, defensive measures undergird the construction of the Danish wall in the early Middle Ages. In order to prevent 'others' from invading Denmark, the Danish erected a wall out of fear that barbarians would come from the south and as a means of safeguarding their civilization. The scenario in medieval Denmark recalls aspects of the U.S.-Mexico border and in some regard the function of the wall that modulates traffic between Israel and occupied territories in the West Bank.

#### NATURAL LIMITS AND ARTIFICES OF POLITICS

This first definition provided by Galli allows us to specify how the frontier, understood to be more than marking a dividing line, is above all else a path of possible crossings. When the frontier presents itself not as a dividing line, it accentuates the elements of connection or exchange between realities that do not necessarily propose themselves as alternatives or naturally "enemies".

The frontier, in other words, stresses the issue of



mobility. This is precisely the characteristic that Lucien Febvre [1928 and 1929] insisted on about a century ago. In that case, Febvre's reflection was mainly informed by the figure of the "natural" boundary. A theme that, for example, would fascinate him in his later years when he returned to contemplate the desert as a "frontier line" [Febvre 1951].

Febvre rightfully notes that the border often identifies the practices of crossing instead of the "norms of interdiction". This is especially true for terrains of separation marked by mountains or those that give rise to "no man's land". The dimensions and configurations of those portions of space (e.g., those defining linguistic, cultural, or religious borders) remain subject to change. This remains true, even though they carry a purpose to mark a forced division or to increase the rate of conflict and distinction,

and thus prevent practices, moments, or customs of exchange or mutual visiting procedures.

In this case, the possibility of creating border configurations susceptible to possible re-composition emerges when the site of contrast acquires a different function (this is, for example, the case with his reflection on the Rhine [Febvre 1998]).

Long assumed to be the natural barrier, synthesis, and symbol of the Franco-German rivalry, the Rhine would appear explicable only as the foundation and verification of political geography, taking on the concept of a border and that of the founding myth of the concreteness and organicity of a community. Put differently, it is a symbol capable of expressing an ethnicity spatially and spiritually.

The Rhine, Febvre explains, more than a frontier in the naturalistic and political senses of the term, is

a strip of land that thrives on the continuous crossing of men and activities. In turn, these practices determine a networked system that fosters an urban civilization characterized by the political dominance of a social class (i.e., the merchants) different and differentiated in artistic, religious, and cultural experiences, yet still in possession of its own unifiable and integrated physiognomy.

It is necessary to remember that first and foremost the Rhine is an artificial product. That is, the Rhine is a consequence and not a datum. The Rhine is a result determined by development and settlement since the Medieval period, by the distribution of towns along its course as administrative units peripheral to the countryside, and then ultimately by the slow hegemony of the former over the latter as the social class of merchants grew. This social development does not distinguish between the “French shore” and “German shore”, but occurs homogeneously and, above all, complementarily. The settlement system shows many traces of contiguity and develops seamlessly. Quite notably, the system is perceived as a unity: by the road network, by the stages of pilgrimages that are distributed indifferently along

the two banks of the river, and in the development of ports in the systems of interchange towards the sea.

This space, characterized by reciprocal relations, diverse and integrated urban systems, regional economic functions, and distinct economies, but unified by the fact of presenting itself as a *network*, does not resist, however, the formation of modern national consciousness. This susceptibility to national consciousness is evinced by the ‘advent of the French Revolution, the theorization of France as the “hexagon”, for which the Rhine becomes one of its constituent sides. Moreover, this notion is reinforced by the repercussions that the complex of these events determines in the reflections of German intellectuals about Valmy and Waterloo. The Rhine then becomes a *barrier*, a border. No longer a meeting point and union between valley and mountain between hills, between shore and plain, between North and South.

The project of Europe as an attempt at overcoming the modern nation-state can be pursued not as an artificial project because it is precisely the natural dimension of that space that proposes a possibility of rewriting that system.

In other words, what Febvre intended to challenge with his remarks was, on the one hand, the doctrine of natural boundaries and, on the other hand, the pseudoscientific foundation of geopolitics as a discipline and belief that entrusted geographical factors with a determining function in political history.

In Febvre’s language, nature did not in itself define the political configuration and physiognomy of the territory, but presumed an intention, a line of behavior, the construction of needs, customs, economic practices, and projects of growth and development that connected territory, resources, industrial model, and resource-use practices. At the heart of this reflection by Febvre was the need to think of a practice of coexistence in Europe not based on the dominance of one political reality over others (a thought would later return to in the fall of 1944 in his lectures at the College de France in newly liberated Paris) [Febvre 2014].

### THE BORDER IS NOT A LINE

Yet how true is this dynamic linking geography and the project of building new actors? Hardly responds Klaus Dodds.

Dodds argues that while it is true that geopolitics is held on three transformative principles (the first: measuring power and influence in terms of space

### DAVID BIDUSSA

He is a historian of ideas, with a focus on those that developed in and about the twentieth century.

He has published: *Il mito del bravo italiano* (il Saggiatore 1994); *La mentalità totalitaria* (Morcelliana 2002); *Dopo l'ultimo testimone* (Einaudi 2009); *La misura del potere* (Solferino 2020), *Siamo Stati fascisti* (with Giulia Albanese and Jacopo Perazzoli, Fondazione Feltrinelli, 2020); *Benito Mussolini. Scritte discorsi 1904-1945* (Feltrinelli 2022). He has also edited Antonio Gramsci, *Odio gli indifferenti* (Chiarelettere 2011); Norberto Bobbio and Claudio Pavone, *Sulla guerra civile* (Bollati Boringhieri 2015); Zygmunt Bauman, *Visti di uscita e biglietti di entrata* (Giuntina 2015); Yosef H. Yerushalmi, *Toward a History of Jewish Hope* (Giuntina 2016); Benito Mussolini, *Me ne frego* (Chiarelettere 2019); Claudio Pavone, *Gli uomini e la storia*, (Bollati Boringhieri 2020); Victor Serge, *La rivoluzione russa* (Bollati Boringhieri 2021); George Orwell, *Millenovecentocentottantaquattro* (Chiarelettere, 2021).

and territories; the second: explaining conflicts via a geographical frame; and the third: geopolitics' purpose lies in shaping the desired future in the present moment [Dodds 2023, pp. 6-7]). What has changed is what we recognize as the boundary [ibid., pp. 55-56]. The boundary is no longer a line. The boundary is where my ability to control, exploit, and govern commodities extends.

#### **First transformation:**

Walls are no longer understood as simply “barriers of prescription,” but also as protective measures. It is now the rich who isolate themselves in the name of security, tranquility, silence, and privacy. This brings about a different meaning of the words, public and private. Public signifies “encroachment” while private becomes synonymous with “safeguard” [Quetel 2013].

#### **Second transformation:**

Lucien Febvre explained how a “frontier” rather than a border amounted to that terrain where we appreciate to what extent we are no longer “at home” in respect to others. Now, explains Klaus Dodds, that particular sign presents new meanings and, most importantly, radically revolutionizes our perception of “geography”.

Borders, instead of loosening, become not only lines of separation, but also points capable of affecting the daily life of the neighbor *beyond* the state border established on the map.

For example, this is the agenda that has been marking the uneasy relationship between India and China for a long time (at least since the late 1950s) with the People's Republic of China doing everything in its power to “govern” water supply by controlling the river currents that originate in its territory and continue into Indian territory.

#### **Third transformation:**

The border, Dodds insists, does not mean land or dividing line between territories. Other disputes have been marking conflicts between states for a long time and even more significantly will mark them in the future. For example, the control of marine waters and access to mineral resources, like oil, for potential exploitation in the seabed constitutes a type of border. It is a project that marks the expansion of borders beyond the distance recognized as the territorial waters of each state (12 nautical miles from the coast) and that predictably (but already in fact it is so) will lead to a clash for control in large marine areas. In the Pacific, the waters of the

China-Korea-Japan triangle as well as those between China and the Philippines exemplify this tension.

During the 20th century, we believed that borders could be loosened (didn't the whole bet of the growth and enlargement of the European Union start precisely from lowering customs?). Meanwhile, the border has dematerialized and, *at the same time*, stiffened.

Dodds remembers how twenty years ago, Steven Spielberg with his *The Terminal* (2024) already warned us of this “bizarre” possibility (incidentally, the film was inspired by a true story). The film follows Viktor Navorski, a citizen of the fictional state of Krakozhia, who lands at JFK in New York but cannot get through security because his state, following a regime change, is no longer recognized by the United States. His future is to remain in “no man's land” – a space that now delineates his residency.

Twenty years later if our biometric data do not comply with the security rules of the incoming country, our fate is to remain in such a vacuum, destined to be filled with unwanted stateless humans, like Viktor Navorski. This is not an abstract assumption, but rather a sobering reality of great consequence for millions of people. ■

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CYBERNETICS

# THE UNDERGROUND OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE





*A glimpse perspective on the ground from which AI develops.  
Its structures, its roots.  
Influence of the mathematical models adopted.*

**Paolo Maria Mariano**



In October 1950, a twenty-eight-page article entitled “Computing Machinery and Intelligence” appeared in *Mind*, a historic quarterly journal of philosophy and psychology from Oxford University Press. The author, Alan Mathison Turing, the son of Crown officials in India, had done secondary studies with a humanistic orientation, which did not appeal to him. He excelled at King’s College, Cambridge, in subjects involving mathematics and science in general. He had then moved on to Princeton to pursue a doctorate in mathematics. By 1950, Turing was thirty-eight years old, had worked as an analyst of coded messages during World War II, developing their decoding, and had already laid conceptual foundations on which the logical architecture of modern computers is based. The article in *Mind* was a natural outgrowth of his work: it concerned the interaction between human and machine, and was in this also a writing of philosophy.

Turing’s argument can be summarized as follows: let us imagine that we can ask questions and get answers through a diaphragm that does not allow for direct perception of two possible interlocutors, one a human being, the other a machine; if from the interview we could not distinguish who is the human being and who is the machine, Turing argued, then we would have to conclude that the machine is endowed with “artificial intelligence” (AI).

Turing’s proposal is a functionalist one; it follows the viewpoint of Thomas Hobbes, his countryman, a philosopher in the late sixteenth and much of the seventeenth centuries: in a nutshell, for Hobbes thinking is equivalent to calculating; reason “adds up”, meaning it “joins”, and “subtracts” names and thus concepts associated with names. Turing assumes that the machine can access language in a meaningful way. Whether this is possible is itself a matter of debate. In any case, Turing’s criterion raised multiple philosophical criticisms; Turing objected to all of them, albeit in ways that were not always decisive, as in the case of awareness: Can a machine be self-aware despite the fact that it can be programmed to simulate this awareness? The question implies another one much more general and perhaps of greater depth and therefore difficulty: What distinguishes awareness itself from the simulation of awareness? To distinguish means to somehow

differentially evaluate a natural awareness, not the result of human design action, from that which is programmed in terms of logical instructions by a human being or a machine designed by a human being or another machine. It also means having a conception of human intelligence and what nature means.

Turing’s contribution to the issue was interrupted in 1954 by a not infrequently remembered tragedy: Turing killed himself at the age of forty-two, crushed by the compulsion to undergo chemical castration as an alternative to prison as a sentence for his homosexuality.

The discussion of artificial intelligence, however, lingers, given the vigorous impact that AI is having and promises to have increasingly even on the minutiae of daily life, from the quality of bureaucratic services to the organization of work and its type. Central to this process is an increasing demand for computational capacity with the consequent need for energy resources and memory space. The social impact of the consequent technological development will require cultural and political choices; each of which, if it is to be positively constructive, should not be able to be divorced from an awareness of the foundations of AI, at least in terms of hope about how political action should develop. Discussing the roots and structure of AI can then be useful for purposes other than purely technological or theoretical research: above all, it can stimulate awareness of AI-related choices.

Artificial intelligence is based on an evolutionary layering of algorithms. Each is a computable expression of a mathematical model, and each model is a representation of observed phenomena or conjectured behaviors. More specifically, an algorithm is an explicit, unambiguous computational procedure that takes place in a finite number of operations and provides, because it is feasible, quantification of some specific property of a system, of which a mathematical model has been constructed. For example, the computational procedures through which one determines the taxes to be introduced in a state’s annual budget law are in themselves an algorithm; however, they reflect choices about the kind of attention one wants to give to the various social partners, choices that are an expression of the imagined model of society, which becomes a discourse progressively



expressed in mathematical terms because one needs not only to qualify but also to quantify. Those choices are then the model that is then translated into the computational procedures.

What a model is deals with the perception of the world that each person has through the senses and the tools that of the senses are extensions. That perception involves a judgment made by the subject who experiences it; this judgment is the selection of what one believes to be the relevant aspects of what is observed, which constitutes at least a partial and momentary discourse about the world around the observer.

Hereafter, the non-contradictory organization of perceptions in terms of formal mathematical structures generates a mathematical model or a class of mathematical models, then a physical mathematical theory, which can in principle lead to algorithmic structures. The mathematical aspect is crucial here because it involves computability and thus the possibility of quantification.

A theory that is purely qualitative still requires

a “transcription” into mathematical terms in order to have a character such that it can be implemented in a computational structure.

In itself, a mathematical model of empirical phenomena must confront data; these influence it but, at the same time, it transcends them because it includes and can predict phenomena that are only conjectured. Experiments can either falsify a model or only corroborate it; to verify it “entirely” one would, in fact, have to test all possible situations predicted by the model under all possible conditions, which is at least arduous. On the other hand, to construct experiments we need to have a prior view of what we want to measure; we must therefore have conjectures or be able to formulate them. The evaluation that the person who builds a model makes of the data depends on his culture, his preferences, finally, although it may seem surprising, on his aesthetic sense which, although born as a subjective factor, has consequences that gradually become shared heritage. Thus, imagination plays a role, which

stimulates the construction of formal structures. Then, they must be tested both in logical-formal and experimental terms. Data suggest principles (e.g., the principle of conservation of energy, the second principle of thermodynamics, claims of invariance of certain entities when certain conditions vary, and so on), which are starting points, concepts in which one believes.

In this process of analyzing perceptions and conjectures, we move from the empirical to the abstract of mathematical structures and also travel the reverse path: forms that were initially conjectural were finally revealed as existing in nature.

On the other hand, a model is not just a “mathematical model,” that is, it does not have only mathematical form. The notion of “model” can be referred to formal logic in general, in a way that appears more detached from phenomenological perception, at least at first impression. We then define *model* as the construction of structures that allow statements in certain formal languages to be attributed meaning: the analysis of semantic elements using syntactic tools. By *formal language* we mean a set—let us denote it by  $L$ —consisting of a set  $A$  of letters and signs, rules for connecting the letters by means of signs, and finally a grammar for distinguishing the propositions we think we accept from those we intend to exclude from  $L$ . A model is thus a structure that assigns truth or falsity to a proposition  $P$  that is neither a tautology nor a contradiction. It is such that its truth can be established, with respect to some criterion assigned to the formal language under consideration, only in terms of the truth of its component elements. Among the available formal languages, it is mathematics that allows for the expression of both qualitative propositions (... there exists the weak solution of a given system of equations in a given function space ...) and quantitative propositions (... the solution that has been shown to exist is this very one here ... or, it can be approximated this way ...). Quantitative and qualitative aspects interpenetrate in data processing, and it is precisely the ability to process data that is the basis of AI. It arises from the implementation of algorithmic structures derived from models of the human brain, whose behavior they simulate. Formal logic is then used to represent “reasoning,” but this is not enough. One needs an ontology of knowledge: a set of

“objects”, properties, categories, relationships between objects. It needs a theory of the process of knowledge, or rather a knowledge of knowledge that is based on a philosophy of knowledge. In this context, one of the pivotal problems is to assess depth and significance of common sense, and its variability, because this, when implemented, affects the responses the machine is led to make.

Language analysis is thus the foundation of AI programming; it is essentially based on assessing the frequency with which peculiar language structures occur and formalizing in mathematical terms the direct connectivity and associations by analogy between individual concepts. In this way, characteristic semantic structures are identified. There are not (or do not appear to be) universal semantic mechanisms at the phonological, lexical or syntactic level, nor do grammatical rules have an exclusive and definitive role in defining the intrinsic meaning of a word, nor do modes of pronunciation (barring cases of onomatopoeia, although inflection can color the meaning with a sense of irony, outrage, approval, whatever) or morphological aspects (singular-plural, present-past tense, etc.).

Statistical analyses of a language then have a hierarchical structure: they involve different scales, from the analysis of the recurrence of letters to those of syllables, words, and sentences. In the search for broadly recurring structures—in this sense tending to be universal—we then tend to analyze meaningful text fragments with respect to a given context. It is then possible to measure how close different concepts are to each other and how then their mutual presence in an intended signifying text can be considered or excluded in a computationally constructed semantic structure,

#### PAOLO MARIA MARIANO

He is Professor of Continuum Mechanics at the University of Florence and coordinates the “Research Group in Theoretical Mechanics” of the E. De Giorgi Center of the Scuola Normale Superiore. His books include: *Fondamenti di meccanica dei solidi* (with Luciano Galano, Bollati Boringhieri, 2015); *Gli occhi di Eulero* (Mimesis, 2020); *Vite riflesse in un catino* (Mimesis, 2022); *Quando la bellezza* (Aestetica, 2023).

i.e., in an automatic way, assigned therefore to an algorithm.

Recurring statistical schemes for connecting considered linguistic elements to some scale (e.g., to that of signifying text fragments) are based on “Markov processes”, so-called in memory of the St. Petersburg mathematician Andrei Andreevič Markov (1856-1922), who had nothing to do with AI, but was credited with thinking up mathematics that, in retrospect, seems to serve AI. In short, a process is said to be Markov’s if it consists of a sequence of events in which the probability of a given event occurring depends only on the probability pertaining to the previous event; in other words, the probability of going from one given event to another is evaluated and is called the “transition probability” with no other memory. Thus, the probability with which the insertion of a linguistic fragment in the generation of a text is computationally chosen depends on the previously inserted text and thus on the probability with which the two fragments are related. The determination of such probabilities depends on statistical data of recurrence of letters, words, or meaningful fragments in a large number of texts; the larger the set of reference texts the more “reliable” are the correlations between its fragments. This need for data is remembered in the acronym GPT, which stands for “Generative Pre-Trained Transformers”. The term “pre-trained” (meaning endowed with prior education) emphasizes precisely the need to provide an accumulation of data whose processing makes it possible to generate “reliable” answers according to certain criteria. Thus, there is a need for a large corpus of texts and assigned ways of establishing semantic relationships between words. Thus GTP can convert one text into the “next” generated by it in a syntactically and semantically meaningful way. To do this, the algorithmic structure that constitutes GPT is designed to divide the text into linguistic units with autonomous meaning (lexemes or “tokens”) and to select into symbol classes what the set of lexemes can be associated with, according to a defined and updating evaluation process.

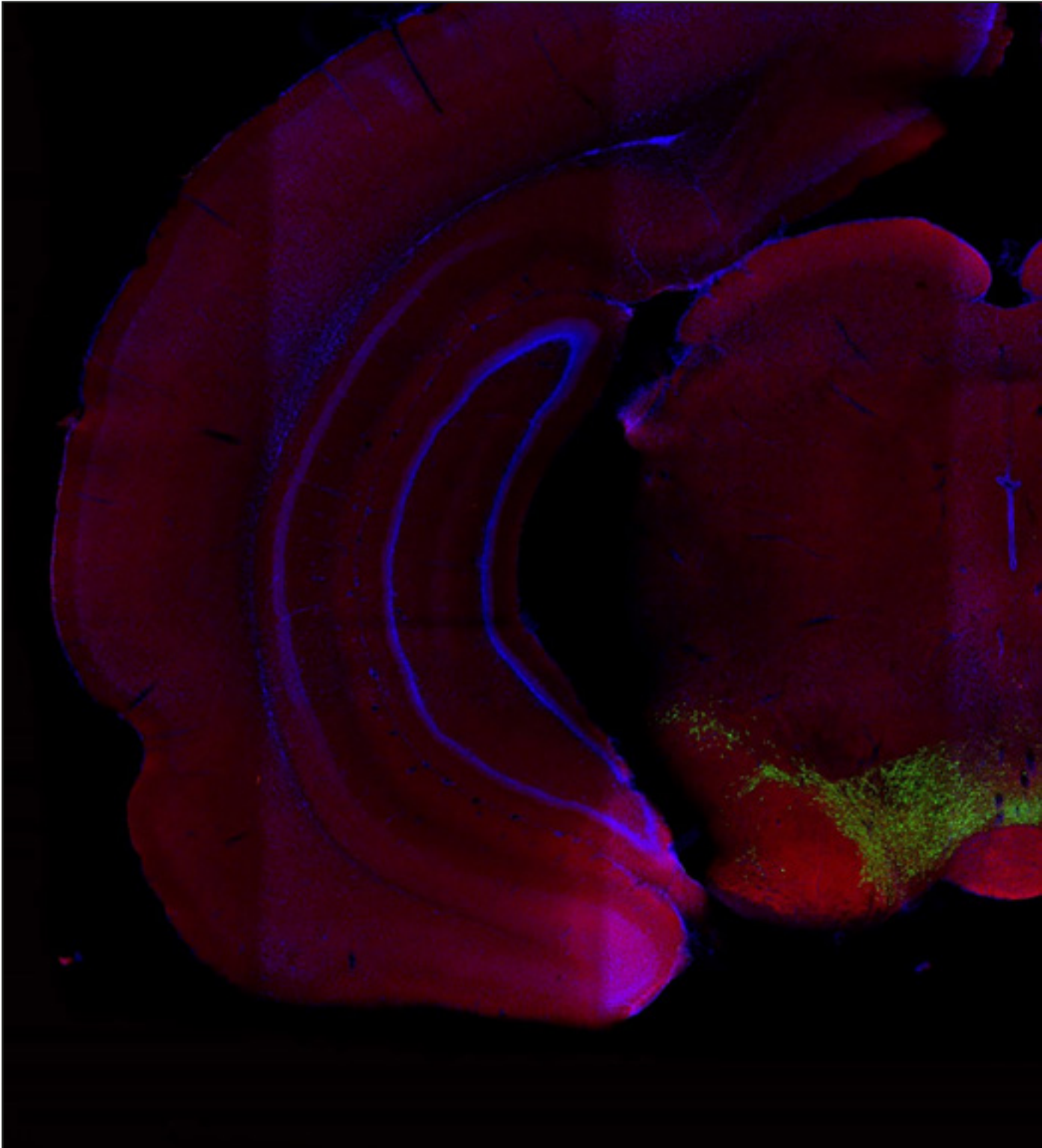
Does the AI then behave only as it is prescribed? The question is answered by noting that random controls are built into the algorithms, making the AI “independent”. Without external aids, however, a computer can only simulate a random

process, for example through a recursive algorithm with a very large period, thus producing only fictitious randomness. Then an attempt is made to remedy this by introducing a connection with a physical phenomenon external to the computer, which is considered inherently random. In any case, the multiplication of choices that the algorithmic structure of AI is allowed to make in a given process measures the increasing “practical” difficulty of directing its analyses, which rely on access to and storage of data, so they depend on the machine’s memory, the extent of which is a physical limitation that technological research continually seeks to shift. They also depend on the kind of connections between data that the specific algorithmic structure is capable of making because of the way it is designed.

Here the distinction between erudition and culture related to it plays a role, the former being the accumulation of data, the latter the way those data are connected and interpreted. AI is not, therefore, an oracle. One must have suitable cognitive tools and possibilities for comparison and verification of answers. On the other hand, the use of AI, as of all tools, is an ethical issue and depends on the ethics one refers to. Its impact on the organization of work will increasingly be an economic and social, then a political issue.

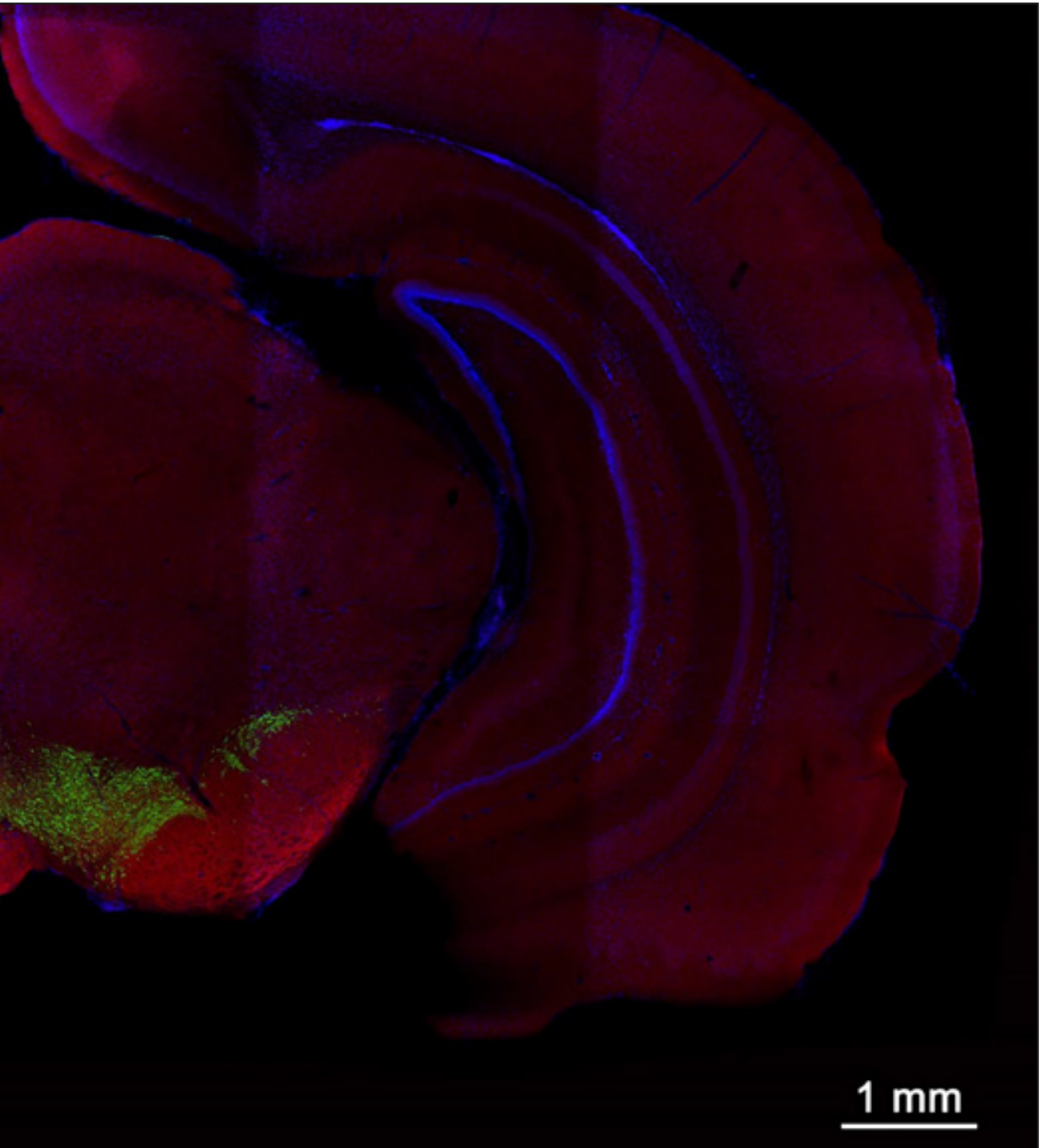
Human thought itself and its simulation, however, remain entities with distant roots. The machine has no emotions. On the other hand, one can argue, one can recognize, interpret and finally simulate human emotions so as to instruct AI. It is, however, still simulation, assuming it has interest (and for me it does) or one can recognize the difference between simulation and the facts underlying it. There is, however, something more. How is it, in fact, that we are able to abstract from empirical data down to even figurative formal structures? And therefore, how is it that we are able to design and instruct an also inert machine to do in some way, albeit approximate and fictitious, that too? How is it that we say “I think, therefore I am” with an awareness that is not simulation, assuming (again) that one grasps the difference? And if it were simulation, even human simulation, what need would there be for it in the balance of natural processes, since it generates art but also destruction? It may be that these are undecidable questions. It may be that they are not. ■

«IF IT MAKES YOU HAPPY  
IT'S YOUR JOB»



*Miriam Melis tells us about changes in neurodevelopment  
and how to have confidence in your scientific vocation.*

**Elena Cattaneo**



When she was a child, her father often asked her, “What makes you happy?” Miriam Melis, now an electrophysiologist at the University of Cagliari, found her answer at the end of her pharmacological studies. She chose an experimental thesis, informed by the enthusiastic tales of her Confirmation godmother, Graziella Sanfilippo. “She had two degrees, in Pharmacy and Natural Sciences, and an inexhaustible passion for science”, she tells me. “It was Graziella who suggested the experimental path to me, as a life experience rather than out of need, because it would not have benefited me for the purpose of my final grade. That advice radically changed the course of my life: from the time I started attending the microbiology lab, I realized that doing research made me happy”.

After graduation and a biomedical and pharmacological research training fellowship at the Mario Negri South Consortium in Abruzzo, Italy, Miriam returned to her hometown of Cagliari to work in the school of pharmacology created by Professor Gian Luigi Gessa. It was alongside Gessa that she became definitively passionate about neuroscience. “Among the topics covered by his research”, she explains, “emerged the study of dopamine, a molecule implicated in the regulation of various brain functions including motor functions, and drug addiction”.

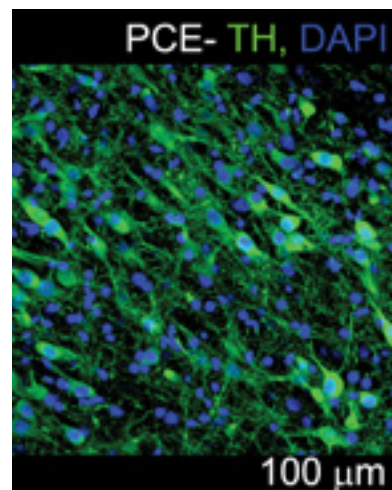
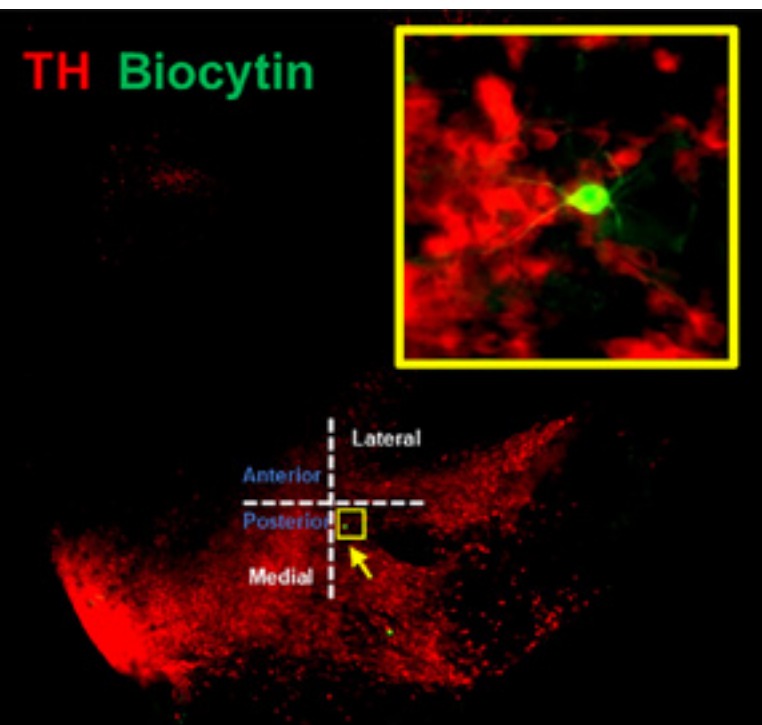
It was the mid-1990s, and there was still no scientific evidence that cannabis induced physical or psychological dependence. What is now called ‘substance use disorder’, which occurs when an individual abuses one or more substances resulting in cognitive, behavioral, and physiological symptoms, was not yet included in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). “It didn’t get included until 2000”. Melis points out, “Before then, the drug addict was seen as a weak individual of vice, one who didn’t really want to quit, because otherwise by willpower he would have succeeded. Now, on the other hand, we know that willpower and self-control are not abstract things but rather functions finely regulated by circuits dedicated to the task, which have been conserved throughout evolution. In some of us, however, these circuits do not act as they should”. Thanks to advances in neuroscience over the past two decades, we have come to understand how some individuals use substances as

‘self-medication’ for a range of mental disorders, often without being aware of either the disorder or the function the substances play in regulating it. “Pathological addictions are a disease of the brain”, Miriam confirms, “the brain is an organ of our body, and if it has a problem, it should be treated, no more or less than the heart or liver. Instead, it often happens that those suffering from mental illness are judged and ghettoized”.

Linked to the years of working alongside Prof. Gessa is another episode that was fundamental to Miriam’s scientific journey: “I was in the laboratory”, she recalls, “when Marco Diana (then researcher and head of the electrophysiology laboratory and now full professor of Pharmacology at the University of Sassari), entered the lab with a centrifuge tube containing a synthetic cannabinoid (WIN 55, 212-2) to be tested to observe its effects on the spontaneous electrical activity of dopaminergic neurons in animals. What we observed was shocking for the times.” It was with that test and that test tube that we began to demonstrate how the psychoactive principle of cannabis (THC, tetrahydrocannabinol), and other structurally different synthetic cannabinoids, excited dopaminergic neurons in the same way that morphine, nicotine, or ethanol found in alcoholic beverages do. “We were effectively rewriting the textbooks I had studied only a few years earlier!” exclaims Miriam, still so inspired by the memory. Next, the research team began to study chronic effects and withdrawal from THC: “Again, our test results on rodent brains were similar to those obtained with alcohol and morphine”.

In 2000, Miriam moved to San Francisco, to the Ernest Gallo Clinic and Research Center at UCSF, where she specialized in *patch clamp*, a then cutting-edge technique that she was able to learn from Antonello Bonci, an early student of John Williams, among the pioneers of dopaminergic neuron research. This technique is a milestone in electrophysiology that has not yet been surpassed over the years and is used to measure *ex vivo* (on living tissue) the currents of potassium or sodium ions that cross the membrane of neurons in brain sections kept alive and viable in a saucer post-explant. The goal is to understand the molecular mechanisms by which these neurons function normally or are altered as a result of





The opening image of the service is a brain section: in green, marked, the tyrosine hydroxylase (TH) enzyme that identifies dopaminergic neurons. The latter, enlarged, again in green, are in the image above, while in the blue there are

the nuclei of the cells (DAPI). Left, a brain section for electrophysiological measurements with a recorded neuron insert. In this case, the TH enzyme probe is in red, and the neuron is filled with a dye (biocytin) during recording to make sure we are recording from the right neurons in the right portion of this area, which is called ventral tegmentum area (VTA).

various experiences, including after exposure to substances of abuse.

### FROM FATHER (AND MOTHER) TO SON

Today Miriam’s research aims to understand what determines the propensity of some individuals to manifest mental disorders such as depression, psychosis, and suicidal tendencies, while others retain their mental health even after adverse events and trauma, regaining or even increasing their psychosocial functioning. Consulting the available literature Miriam finds that there is a strong association between parental psychopathologies and alterations in children’s neurodevelopment. “The question I asked myself, also as a consequence of previous research, was specifically about whether and how much cannabis use by pregnant women affects the unborn child”.

Miriam explains to me that when she first became interested in the topic, cannabis use among pregnant women was also increasing dramatically as a result of the expansion of its legalization, both for medical and recreational purposes. There were already human studies showing that cannabis use in pregnancy, by interfering with endogenous

system function, posed risks for the development of neuropsychiatric disorders from the earliest years of life and into young adulthood, but they were mostly based on opinion-gathering. Melis began, in her laboratory, to study these effects from a neurobiological/molecular point of view, following in the footsteps of the pioneer in this field, Yasmin Hurd: “I took the first steps on my own, again from the *patch clamp* technique: the changes I observed were similar to those already published by other researchers following fetal exposure to alcohol, cocaine or stress”. In addition, she found that dopaminergic neurons in the offspring of women who had used cannabis during pregnancy had higher discharge frequencies, “a sign of a vulnerability factor predisposing to various neuropsychiatric disorders, both in the experimental animal and in humans. Some colleagues in anatomical physiology in Budapest then discovered that there was an alteration in the balance between arousal and inhibition, a phenomenon that I measured *ex vivo*: our results were consistent”. In 2018, the first clinical studies were published showing an increased likelihood for children born to mothers who had used cannabis

during pregnancy to be prone to psychotic-like experiences. “This was”, he tells me, “the same manifestation that we found in rat pups subjected to stress or THC: at that time we were unraveling the neurobiological mechanisms at the molecular level. The previous year we had also succeeded in ‘curing’, through postnatal drug treatment, pups exposed in utero to THC”.

The results achieved by Melis’ group in Cagliari on this strand of studies secured US funding from the National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA): “We continue the research as an international team involving colleagues from Baltimore and the KOKI Center in Budapest, and in June 2019 our work focused on preadolescence, which lasts just five days in the rodent, was accepted by *Nature Neuroscience*. It is the first paper entirely ‘born and bred’ here in Cagliari published by this journal: of 14 authors, 10 are from Cagliari, many are PhD students and postdocs, and there is also a lab technician. I wanted the contributions of those who had firmly believed in this project to be recognized.” And so, let’s list them all in a succinct bibliography: R, Miczán V, Traccis F, Aroni S, Pongor CI, Saba P, Serra V, Sagheddu C, Fanni S, Congiu M, Devoto P, Cheer JF, Katona I, Melis, authors of *M. Prenatal THC exposure produces a hyperdopaminergic phenotype rescued by pregnenolone*. The study demonstrates the effects of THC, therefore, are not extendable to legal cannabis in Italy, which is totally or almost devoid of this active ingredient.

**FROM NATURE TO ERC**

After the article was accepted by the editors of *Nature Neuroscience*, Miriam continued for days to think about the soon-to-be-published results and to wonder whether what she discovered concerned only the prenatal effects of THC or might extend to children not exposed during fetal life to cannabis. “I mentioned this to Alessandro Zuddas, a child and adolescent neuropsychiatrist with whom I collaborated, who sadly passed away prematurely in 2022, leaving an unbridgeable void for me. Professor Zuddas told me that psychotic-like experiences, far from being true psychosis, are the effect of increased sensitivity to sensory stimuli, due to a deficit in the processes of filtering and integrating stimuli, which in neuroscience are called *sensorimotor gating* functions. Within a

very complex circuit, which coordinates this integration of sensory stimuli, dopamine plays a key role: this molecule, involved in the regulation of several brain functions including motor functions, allows unimportant sensory stimuli to be filtered out, and instead allows only salient ones to pass through, regardless of their valence, positive or negative. The literature tells us that in humans and animals, disinhibition of the mesolimbic dopaminergic system is associated with deficits in this function”.

I understand, then, that our well-being depends on proper processing of the stimuli we receive from the environment around us: if dopamine does not ‘filter’ them properly, problems begin. “If this process of integrating stimuli and information received through the senses is deficient”, Melis confirms, “a kind of sensory overload is created, which results in emotional hyper-reactivity and gives problems at the level of learning, development, behavior, and social interactions. Zuddas had pointed out to me that this hyper-sensitivity to sensory stimuli was a common trait even in healthy children and, I later discovered, especially so in males. It tended to disappear with development, however, and was therefore defined as a neutral trait”.

This (little) known information is the starting point for a new cognitive enterprise: “With what I study,” Miriam recounts, “I find that this neutral trait, if it does not disappear with neurodevelopment during adolescence, becomes a common

**ELENA CATTANEO**

“For about thirty years I have dedicated my life to research on a hereditary neurodegenerative disease, Huntington’s Chorea: many projects, many young people involved, many results - achieved even after various failures - for which we feel, as any scholar feels, all the pride and responsibility. In 2013 I was appointed by the President of the Republic as a Senator for life for scientific merit. In these pages I will try to bring some light into the many “dark spots” in which the extraordinary world is confined of Italian research.” In 2021, Elena Cattaneo published *Armati di scienza* (Cortina Editore).i.

trait in a wide range of neuropsychiatric disorders, from autism spectrum disorders to attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), from obsessive-compulsive, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), to Tourette's syndrome, to psychosis and schizophrenia. Disorders that worsen under stressful conditions". Melis also finds that human studies are very few: "until I come across a beautiful 2019 meta-analysis. Here a clarification is needed: "meta-analyses" are scientific articles that, to investigate a supposed divergent evidence, analyze the set of studies already published on a topic to see if it is possible to give overall univocity to the scientific results.

The study encouraged preclinical researchers to investigate what mechanisms made an individual hyper- or hypo-sensitive to sensory stimuli. "I felt like the authors were talking directly to me!" This led to the REDIRECT (*Resolving sEx DiffeREnces in proCessing sensory informaTion*) project, which enabled her to be among the winners of an ERC Consolidator Grant in 2022. The goal of REDIRECT is to elucidate the role of dopamine in the mechanisms that explain differences between individuals in sensitivity to sensory stimulus processing.

"With this project, we want to understand the mechanisms of resilience and vulnerability by identifying genes that are differentially expressed at the level of each individual dopaminergic neuron, in a specific neural circuit. The next step will be the application of the "molecular copy-and-paste" technique, CRISPR/Cas9, to try to turn off and on the identified genes in a targeted way and thus be able to understand the mechanisms that determine resilience in those individuals who lack them and are therefore hypersensitive to sensory stimuli".

#### **ANIMAL EXPERIMENTATION SAVES LIVES**

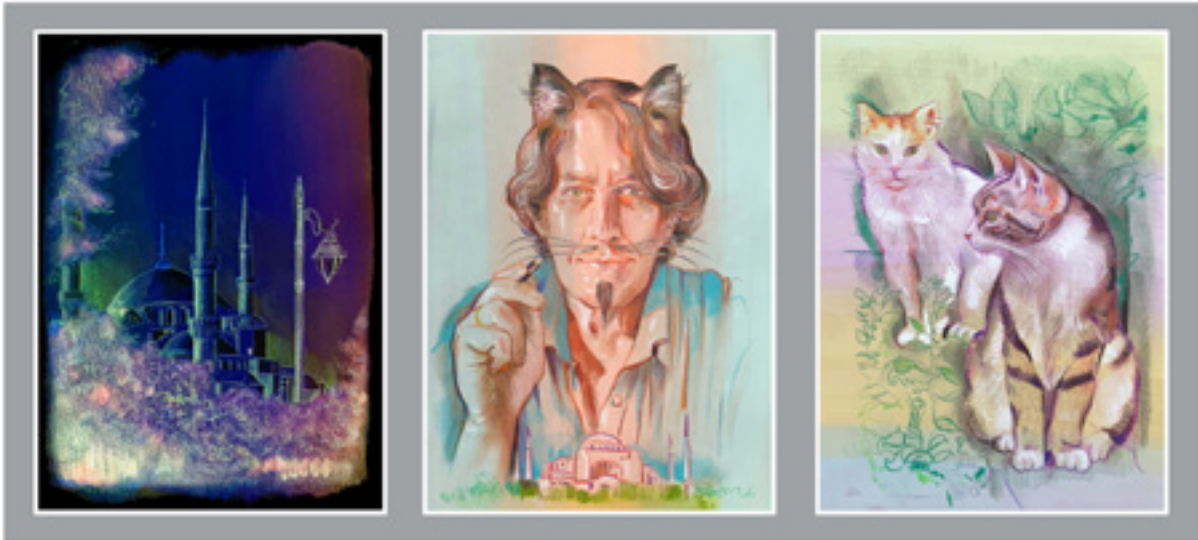
Melis' field of research is among those at risk of being banned in Italy. The law that has regulated animal experimentation in our country since 2014, in fact, provides for prohibitions in addition to the European reference directive (this is Directive No. 2010/63/EU transposed in Italy by Legislative Decree No. 26 of March 4, 2014, on the protection of animals used for scientific purposes, and for this Italy is currently in pre-infringement proceedings). These specific

bans concern the use of animals in studies on xenotransplantation and, indeed, on substances of abuse; the effectiveness of the bans has been deferred from year to year (or at most by a three-year period): a hypocritical way of proceeding that condemns scholars to uncertainty, from extension to extension. The next deadline is set for 2025. "The task for us as scientists", comments Melis, "is to explain our work, at every opportunity we are given; I take advantage of every opportunity, in schools, in more or less public social settings, and in the media to explain and remind people that on the welfare of the animals we use in our research depends the very goodness of the results of what we study. I explain, for example, that more than one-third of mental disorders are diagnosed by the age of 14 and a half, and it is therefore most important to understand if there is something wrong in preadolescence so that those who are at risk can be made resistant to adverse events (such as stress, trauma, and substance abuse). To date, this can only be done accurately from the study of animal behavior".

When filmed in photos or videos Melis often has a pin on her lab coat that reads '*animal research saves lives*'. "Every time I wear it", she sighs, "they try to ask me to take it off to avoid protest reactions on sites or social media.

Explaining what we discover in our laboratories also has another value: to make it clear that illnesses should never be a source of shame or a cause of prejudice or stigma. This is especially true for mental illnesses, but not only. "Only by constantly communicating and informing about what we do and study", says Miriam, "can we help eliminate some old preconceptions that continue to condition us. When I explain to students the importance of considering mental illnesses in the same way as physical ones, I find that the children are particularly sensitive in understanding that only empathy with all our patients can make a difference, even to the point of saving lives". Sharing research activity is not always easy, but science can never give up its collective dimension. Communicating what is discovered, and retelling the path to discovery, including the bumpy parts, is the duty that comes with the privilege of studying to understand what we do not yet know. A duty that no scholar should ever abandon. ■

# HOLY CATS!



*Clear, dark, short or long haired. Placid, wise and independent.  
A visual tribute to Istanbul's sacred cats.*

## Gabriella Pirola

**W**e promised and we keep our word. After all, it would be foolish not to seize an opportunity like this: to share with readers a selection of 28 sketches from the third and final chapter of the *Turkish Notebook Trilogy*. The entire work bears the signature of Stephen Alcorn, an American artist and also cover artist of our masthead. Drawn directly from life over a period of ten days (May 26 to June 6), the series is intended to pay homage to Istanbul's legendary (wild) feline population, the size of which is estimated at more than one million.

Why is this city, already magical in itself, so full of cats? Various hypotheses have been formulated. There is the idea that the ancient harbor on the Bosphorus has always favored their presence, even on ships in an anti-rodent function. There is the memory of the famous Muezza, the tabby cat who had saved Muhammad from a snake bite, generating gratitude and affection in the Prophet and later benevolence in the countries of Islam.

In any case, it is literally impossible today to stroll through Sultanahmet or Galata or any Istanbul neighborhood without coming across some cat, be it a specimen in majestic isolation or a colorful feline colony.

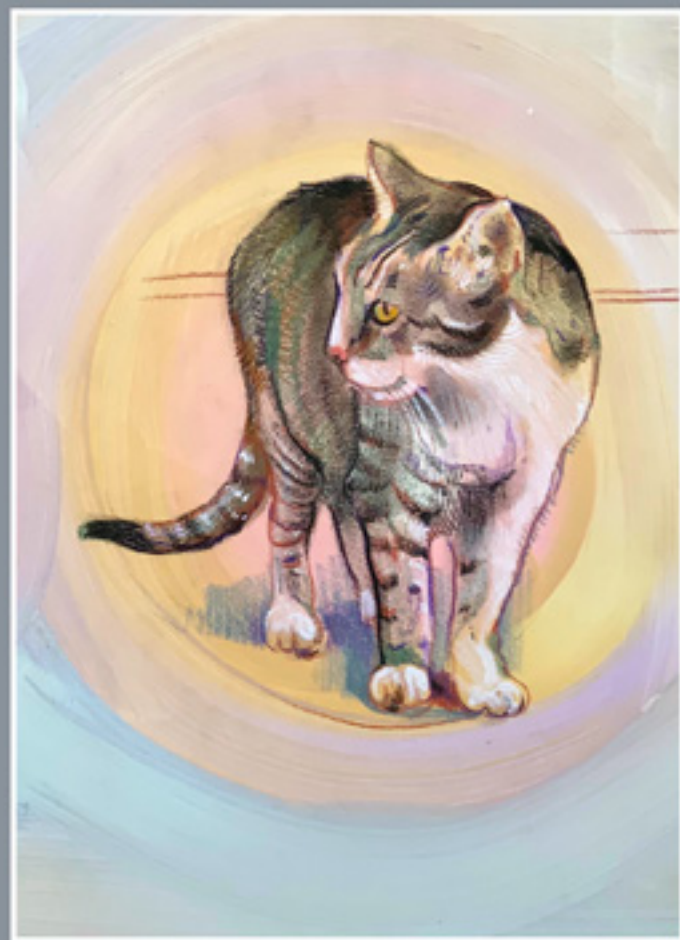
### A FEW TECHNICAL DETAILS

In the next few pages flows the latest installment of Stephen Alcorn's action drawing course, entitled *Drawing From Life at the Speed of Sight*. It represents an extension of the author's longstanding commitment to exploring the basic mechanics of drawing the human figure in motion. More specifically, the series is emblematic of his attempt to achieve what he believes to be "a sacred union of two seemingly disparate but complementary mental faculties, namely analysis and intuition." As usual, the images presented (measuring 12 x 11 centimeters) were created using a combination of silver point and pastel on pre-prepared colored chalk backgrounds. ■





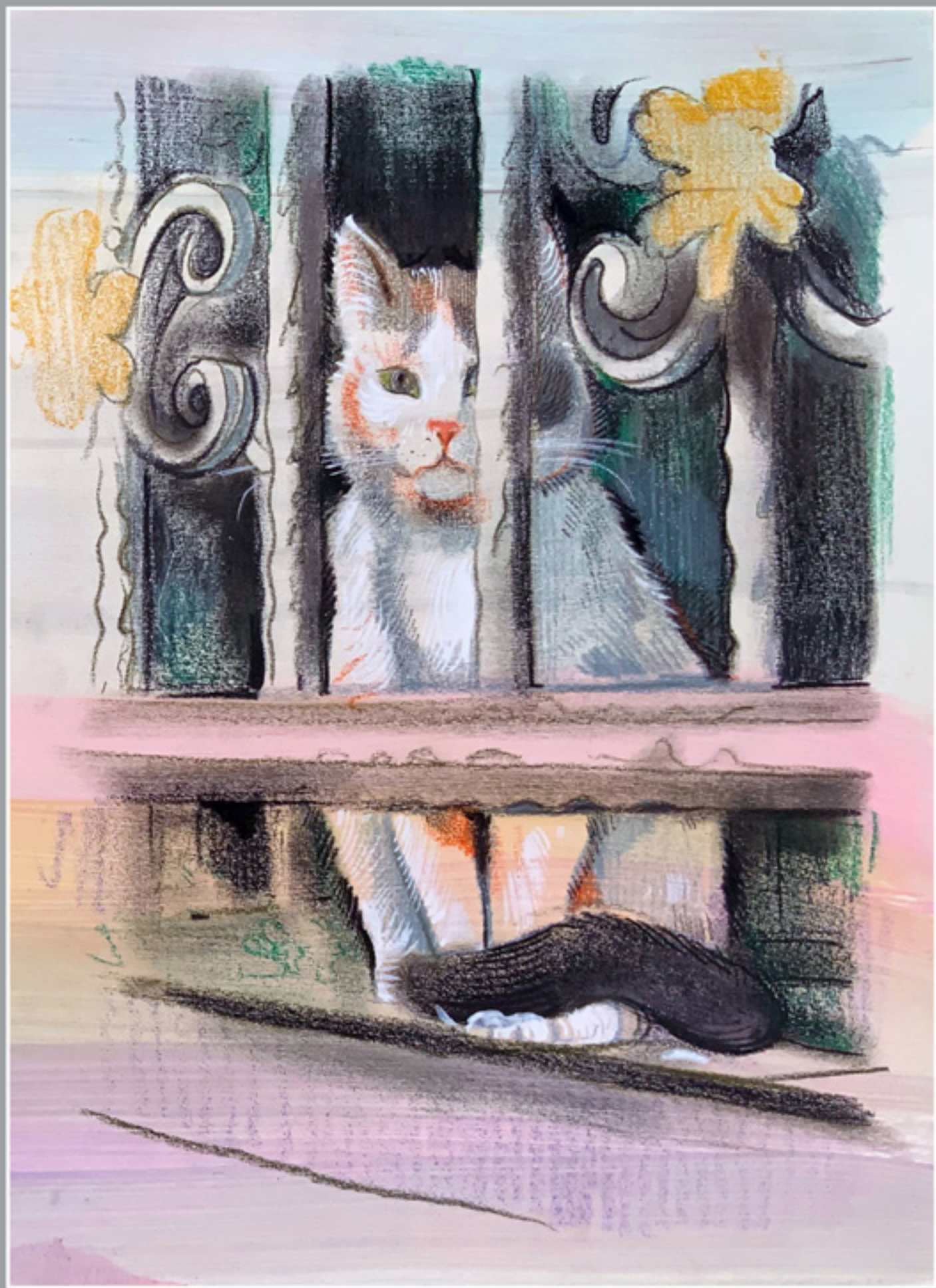










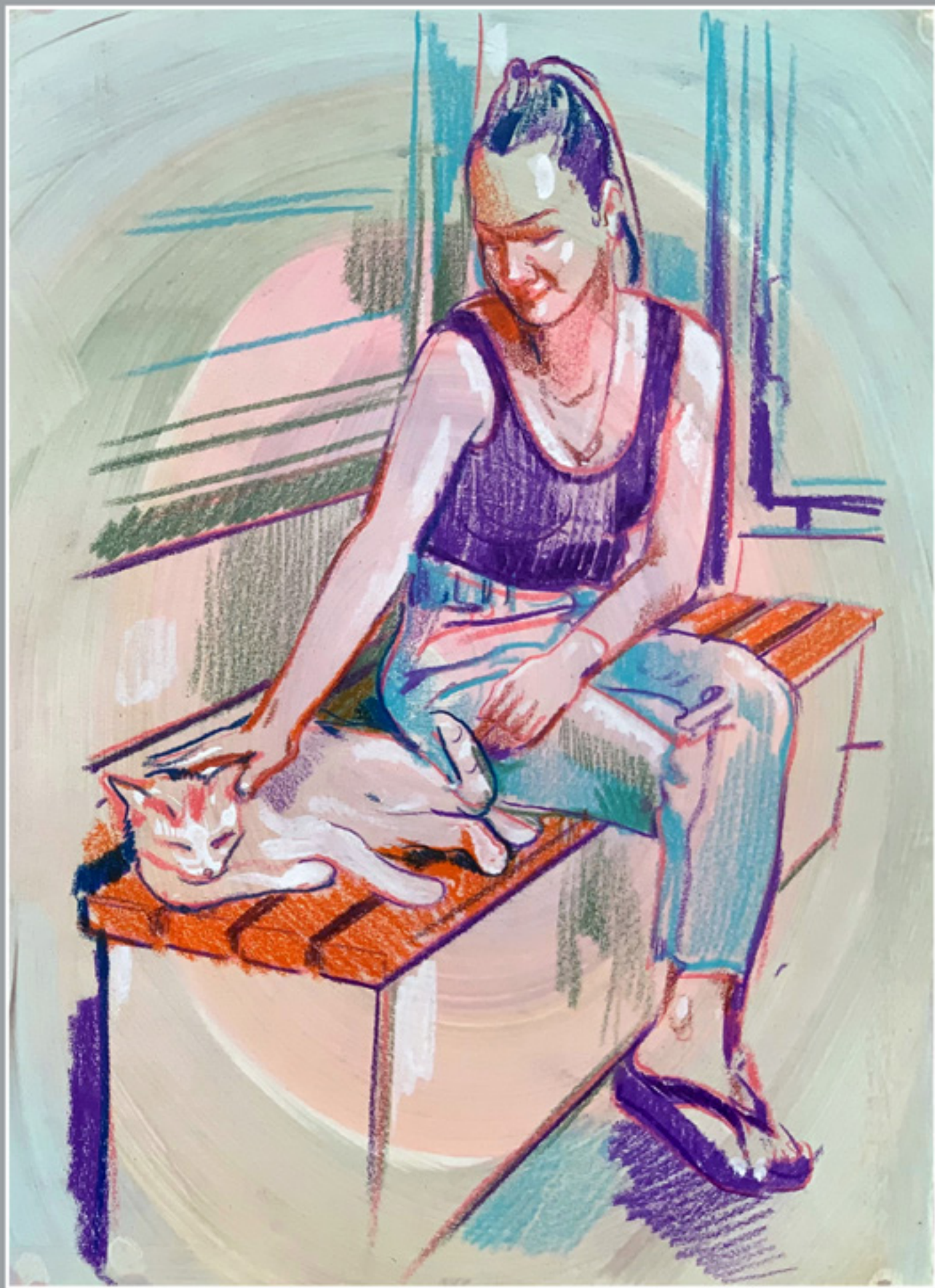




TIŞİM







# QUOUSQUE TANDEM ABUTERE, CATILINA...





*A story of great turmoil in the “res publica”: a bold and unscrupulous contender, opponents not beyond reproach. In the background, the “state of exception” and the struggle for power.*

## Luca Fezzi



That of Lucius Sergius Catilina is the most famous conspiracy in the Greco-Roman world.

Famous but with very smoky contours. After all, an affair necessarily born in the shadows cannot lend itself to particular historiographical certainties, nor can its protagonist, described only by his enemies or critics.

Among them Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BCE), the orator and consul who played a leading role in the repression, author of the four *Catilinarian* speeches, delivered during the events and published a couple of years later, as well as numerous other writings aimed at justifying his own conduct.

Among them was the historian Gaius Sallustius Crispus (86 or 85 - 35 or 34 BCE), who devoted an entire monograph to the conspiracy, the *bellum Catilinarium*, the “war of Catiline” (this is the most likely title of the work). In it he had an opportunity to reflect on the moral and political decadence of the republic, on the relations between power and citizen’s guarantees, so much so that his writing became a reference for universal thought: historical, political, juridical, philosophical.

With these difficulties in mind, let us try to reconstruct the story.

### A SERIES OF FAILED ATTEMPTS

The mastermind of the conspiracy was the fallen patrician Catiline, whose surname, unique in all of Rome’s history, is perhaps derived from *catulina*, “dog’s flesh,” indicating his physical endurance. From a very young age, Sallust writes, he delighted in domestic wars, massacres and robberies; his bold and devious mind always desired things exceedingly great (5, 1-5). He had his first military

experiences during the Social War, the terrible fratricidal conflict that opposed the Romans to their allies in the Italian peninsula in 91-88 BCE. He then distinguished himself among the loyalists of the dictator Lucius Cornelius Sulla, making himself guilty of several political murders, albeit quite legalized ones. When republican “normality” returned, he devoted himself to a political career, but allegations of concussion raised by his rule of the province of Africa slowed his final part, which involved attaining the consulship, the highest magistracy. Possibly a member or even the mastermind of an early mysterious conspiracy between 66 and 65 BCE, which was never implemented, he was defeated in the 64 BCE elections for the consulship the following year. Instead, Cicero, a personality from Arpinum (nowadays Arpino), a *homo novus*, a “new man” whose ancestors had never been involved in politics, won, and this was due to his extraordinary oratorical reputation but also to the widespread fear that Catiline now engendered. The latter, who had also been acquitted in a trial for murders committed under Sulla, ran again in 63 BCE for the consulship the following years.

Cicero then began a kind of “information warfare.” The consul revealed rumours of an assassination attempt, postponed the elections, and finally had them held protected by a conspicuous breastplate under his toga. Catiline lost again, despite some proposals much appreciated by the people - but not by the “conservative” ruling class -, such as debt relief and land distribution. As the activities of Catiline’s men intensified in Etruria - a region with a difficult agrarian situation -, one night in October some senators brought anonymous letters to Cicero foretelling a massacre in Rome. The next day the Senate voted a *senatus consultum servandae rei publicae causa*, a “senate decree for the defence of the republic,” ordering the consuls to intervene with supreme judicial and military powers.

Cicero decided not to use it right away and concentrated on the search for evidence and culprits, necessary to further convince of the veracity of his allegations. Other senators revealed that they had received letters with very serious disclosure, while attempts at rioting in some places on the Peninsula were suppressed by sending military contingents. Catiline, who remained in Rome, obtained house

arrest at the home of a friend; this did not prevent him, however, from organizing a subversive meeting in November and arranging for Cicero’s assassination, which, however, was foiled by informers. Cicero was thus able to reconvene the Senate and pronounce the first *Catilinarian* speech, with its famous incipit: “Until when, Catiline, will you abuse our patience?” The accused fled Rome, proclaiming that he wanted to exile himself, but actually heading for Faesulae (nowadays Fiesole), where waiting for him was the army of the rebels, including many debt-crushed people. It is difficult to understand the extent of the debt phenomenon: scholars are divided between those who consider it to be general in extent (and thus regard Catiline as a politician sensitive to a serious concern of his time) or limited to privileged groups, due to the scarcity of credit in a pre-modern economy.

### A FAMOUS SENATORIAL DEBATE

In any case, the Senate’s ultimatums were of little use: none of the rebels retraced their steps. Events in Rome, however, would deal a severe blow to the cohesion of the rebel army.

In fact, Cicero learned that the conspirators who remained in the city had proposed an alliance to some ambassadors of the Allobroges, a Celtic population. This was particularly serious because the Gallic populations, since the ancient sack of Rome (early 4th century BCE), were seen as a

### LUCA FEZZI

Full professor of Roman History at the University of Padua, he has authored numerous scholarly contributions in history, economics, and law of the Graeco-Roman world, and on the reception of ancient models in modern and contemporary political thought. Among his publications: *Cesare. La giovinezza del grande condottiero*, Mondadori 2020; *Pompeo*, Salerno editrice 2019; *Il dado è tratto. Cesare e la resa di Roma*, Laterza 2017. His most recent book is *Roma in bilico. Svolte e scenari alternativi di una storia millenaria*, Mondadori 2022. Coming soon: *Morituri. La “vera storia” dei gladiatori* (con M. Rocco), Garzanti 2024.



On the opening page, Cesare Maccari's famous fresco *Cicerone denuncia Catilina* (1880), Palazzo Madama, Rome.

Next, an imaginary portrait of Lucius Sergius Catiline, from the *Libro di Giusto*, Istituto Nazionale per la Grafica, Rome.

potentially deadly threat. Cicero perhaps induced the Allobroges to demand written commitments, which he seized in a coup, during which he captured the ambassadors and the intermediary of the conspirators. He then ordered the arrest of the five Roman citizens who had signed such documents, one of whom was a praetor, Publius Cornelius Lentulus Sura, and led them to the Senate, where the plot came to light: a massacre of senators and magistrates would take place in Rome and a fire would be set, while Catiline would march on it with his army.

The five were placed under arrest in the residences of five senators, but the risk of their release by force was great. Two days later, on December 5, 63 BCE, the Senate witnessed what would turn out to be the most famous debate in its history: what to do with the five arrested? Two positions emerged: imprisonment in protected places of the Peninsula and requisition of their property (permanently or perhaps waiting to overcome the situation), as proposed by the “popular” Gaius Julius Caesar; the immediate execution, as proposed by the “conservative” Marcus Porcius Cato. Both appealed to fear: the former argued that denying citizens a fair trial would set a dangerous precedent; the latter argued, on the other hand, that showing compassion for the enemies of the

homeland would boost the morale of Catiline and his troops. Cato prevailed; the consul Cicero - a supporter, moreover, of the death penalty - had the prisoners executed in the Tullian prison, a section of what is now better known as the Mamertine prison.

### MILITARY, POLITICAL AND LEGAL OUTCOMES

Events turned out as Cato had predicted. Catiline, at the news, was abandoned by his troops: his army was reduced to a third or even a sixth, and he had to face the legions of the other consul, Gaius Antonius Hybrida, with only 3,000 men. The battle took place at Pistoria (nowadays Pistoia), where the rebel led his men with extraordinary courage; Sallust recalls that “having seen his troops routed and himself surviving along with a few, mindful of his own ancestry and antique dignity, he went where the enemies were thickest and there, fighting, he was wounded” (60,7). When the battle ended, Catiline was “found far from his own, among the corpses of his enemies, his breath being faint and his face retaining the pride with which he had lived” (61,4).

Cicero portrayed himself as the saviour of Rome, but accusations of abuse of power, especially by the “populans,” began to come swiftly. Catiline was rightly killed as an enemy of the homeland, but why kill without trial five Roman citizens already under arrest? Finally, in 58 BCE, a tribune of the plebs, Publius Clodius Pulcher, obtained by legislation the departure and the exile of Cicero. The main accusation against the former consul was that he had forged the *senatus consultum* of December 5, 63 BCE, on the execution of the prisoners, a guilt that made its author alone bear the burden of a major decision but actually shared by almost the entire ruling class. Clodius thus succeeded in isolating Cicero, abandoned even by figures close to him but who were eager to protect themselves behind a scapegoat.

How was this possible? The “state of exception” is by its very nature difficult to define and delimit - stepping outside institutional normality - today as for Cicero’s contemporaries. Consequently, much discussed and problematic was the legal instrument of the “senate decree for the defence of the Republic,” voted in October 63 BCE. The measure conferred full powers to the consuls and ordered them to use them, but it did not guarantee



*Le serment de Catiline*, a depiction of the conspirators painted by Joseph-Marie Vien (1809).



*Il ritrovamento del corpo di Catilina dopo la battaglia di Pistoia*, by Alcide Segoni (1871), Palazzo Pitti, Firenze.

them, once the emergency was over, an equally full impunity for any violations of the law; Cicero was well aware of the risk, and his spasmodic search for evidence also derived from this. The orator was then painstakingly reinstated into the city, but no one looked to him any longer as the saviour of Rome.

Catiline was always seen by ancients as an example of the corruption of the Roman republic; this idea was further developed from the age of Humanism, with the rediscovery of classics. The figure was linked first to the locality of Fiesole and then to Florence; in Elizabethan England, however, he also became the protagonist of tragedies. His story then gave Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in *The Social Contract* (1762), an opportunity to reflect on the importance of the Roman institution of dictatorship (in this particular case not used for repression as it should have been). From a histo-

riographical point of view, there is a tendency to criticize Ciceronian and Sallustian constructions and to point out their bias, a criticism, however, that rarely goes so far as to re-evaluate Catiline, on the basis of his attention - unfortunately discernible only in general terms - to the needs of the populace. ■

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LITERATURE

# A TERRIBLE BEAUTY IS BORN



*A pivotal moment in history, the Ireland of 1916, and  
immense poetics that can come to terms with sloppy politics.*

**Rosita Copioli**



John O’Leary died on March 16, 1907. In August, Yeats wrote an essay in memory of his old friend, which includes valuable testimony about the connection they shared and the great authority that O’Leary wielded throughout Ireland in his time. Yeats acknowledged all that he owed to O’Leary, who had not only facilitated Yeats’ unearthing of his own themes, but had ensured him an audience, a wide readership and instant fame. It would not have been possible for Yeats to become the voice of Ireland without O’Leary and Young Ireland. He opened thus in the truly inspired essay that is *Poetry and Tradition*:

When O’Leary died I could not bring myself to go to his funeral, though I had been once his close fellow-worker, for I shrank from seeing about his grave so many whose Nationalism was different from anything he had taught or that I could share. He belonged, as did his friend John F. Taylor, to the romantic conception of Irish Nationality on which Lionel Johnson and myself founded, so far as it was founded on anything but literature, our art and our Irish criticism. Perhaps his spirit, if it can care for or can see old friends now, will accept this apology for an absence that has troubled me. I learned much from him and much from Taylor, who will always seem to me the greatest orator I have heard; and that ideal Ireland, perhaps from this out an imaginary Ireland, in whose service I labour, will always be in many essentials their Ireland. They were the last to speak an understanding of life and Nationality, built up by the generation of Grattan, which read Homer and Virgil, and by the generation of Davis, which had been pierced through by the idealism of Mazzini, and of the European revolutionists of the mid-century.

O’Leary’s fitness for a different era was clear. It was akin to that of those who had died for Ireland. Seven years later, Yeats would publish *Responsibilities* (1914), which included *September 1913*, punctuated

by the relentless refrain:

*Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone,  
It’s with O’Leary in the grave.*

[...]

*For men were born to pray and save:  
Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone,  
It’s with O’Leary in the grave.*

*Yet they were of different kind,  
The names that stilled your childish play,  
They have gone about the world like wind,  
But little time had they to pray  
For whom the hangman’s rope was spun,  
And what, God help us, could they save?  
Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone,  
It’s with O’Leary in the grave.*

*Was it for this the wild geese spread  
The great wing upon every tide;  
For this that all the blood was shed,  
For this Edward Fitzgerald died.  
And Robert Emmet and Wolfe Tone,  
All that delirium of the brave?  
Romantic Ireland’s dead and gone,  
It’s with O’Leary in the grave.*

The contemporary Irish people were turning themselves into shopkeepers, ‘born to pray and save’. In the conclusion of *Poetry and Tradition*, Yeats clearly observed the passage of the generations:

Power passed to small shopkeepers, to clerks, to that very class who had seemed to John O’Leary so ready to bend to the power of others, to men who had risen above the traditions of the countryman, without learning those of cultivated life or even educating themselves, and who because of their poverty, their ignorance, their superstitious piety, are much subject to all kinds of fear. Immediate victory, immediate utility, became everything, and the conviction, which is in all who have run great risks for a cause’s sake, in the O’Learys and Mazzinis as in all rich natures, that life is greater than the cause, withered, and we artists, who are servants not of any cause but of mere naked life, and above all of that life in its nobler forms, where joy and sorrow are one, Artificers of the Great Moment, became elsewhere in Europe protesting individual voices. Ireland’s great moment had passed, and she had filled no roomy vessels with strong sweet wine, where we have filled our porcelain jars against the coming winter.

#### A LEGENDARY VERSE

“A terrible beauty is born” is the final part of *William Butler Yeats: John O’Leary, The Young Ireland, Maud Gonne, la nascita dell’Eire*, the essay which closes *William Butler Yeats. Omero in Irlanda*, by Rosita Copioli just published from Ares, where she retraces the history of the future nation: the intertwining of literature, art, politics and the foundation of the National Theatre, which contributed to its identity.





Born in Dublin in 1865, he entered the Godolphin School in London in 1877, developing a vibrant pro-Irish nationalism. In 1885 his first poems and essay "Sir Samuel Ferguson" were published in the Dublin University Review. During this period Yeats's poetry is steeped in Irish myths and folklore. Then, with Lady Gregory, Martyn and other writers including J. M. Synge, Seán O'Casey, and Padraic Colum, Yeats founds the Irish Literary Revival or Celtic Revival movement. This group buys property in Dublin where they open the Abbey Theatre on December 27, 1904. Yeats would be involved in theater until his death, but he oscillates between decadent 19th-century London and Ireland in the midst of an independence boil. His early poems are characterized by the marked use of symbols taken from different traditions-Irish, Kabalistic, Catholic, Greco-Roman. Yeats forges friendships with many literati and artists. He is known and respected by Oscar Wilde, John Millington Synge, James Joyce, Thomas Stearns Eliot, and Virginia Woolf. For a few years, around 1913, Ezra Pound served as his secretary. Yeats was very interested in mysticism and spiritualism, so much so that he was a member of the Theosophical Society and one of the earliest members of the Rosicrucian-inspired English magical-initiative secret society known as The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. In 1923 he received the Nobel Prize for Literature. On January 28, 1939 he died in Cap Martin, France, but in September 1948 his body was moved to Drumcliff, Sligo, a beloved town of his childhood that dedicated a statue to him.

Nonetheless, Yeats was taken by surprise by the Easter Rising of 24 April 1916, the occupation of the General Post Office, the declaration of the free Republic of Ireland by a group of Catholic nationalists and the terrible reaction that followed, with the execution by firing squad of 15 rebels. A few days after the occupation, the British government gave orders to fire on all occupied buildings. The rebels resisted until 30 April, then surrendered. 450 people died in the clashes, and 2614 were injured.

In July, four months after the event, Yeats wrote: 'Romantic Ireland's dead and gone' sounds old-fashioned now. It seemed true in 1913, but I did not foresee 1916. The late Dublin Rebellion, whatever one can say of its wisdom, will long be remembered for its heroism. 'They weighed so lightly what they gave', and gave too in some cases without hope of success.

In *Michael Robartes and the Dancer* (1921), several poems deal with the occupation of the GPO and with the tragic outcome of the rebels' executions; the most memorable is *Easter 1916*, again punctuated with rhythmic lines:

*All changed, changed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born.  
[...]  
That woman's days were spent  
In ignorant good-will,  
Her nights in argument  
Until her voice grew shrill.  
What voice more sweet than hers  
When, young and beautiful,  
she rode to harriers?  
This man had kept a school  
And rode our winged horse;  
This other his helper and friend  
Was coming into his force;  
He might have won fame in the end,  
So sensitive his nature seemed,  
So daring and sweet his thought.  
This other man I had dreamed  
A drunken, vainglorious lout.  
He had done most bitter wrong  
To some who are near my heart,  
Yet I number him in the song;  
He, too, has resigned his part  
In the casual comedy;  
He, too, has been changed in his turn,  
Transformed utterly:*

*A terrible beauty is born.*

Like O'Leary, Yeats did not endorse blood sacrifice. He believed in non-violent means, and regretted, with Gregory, that the Conservative Party in England had not announced that it would keep the 1913 promise of Home Rule as a first step to Ireland's independence; this could have averted the rebellion. Sacrifice, Yeats feared, made a stone of the heart. When he showed *Easter 1916* to Maud Gonne, she responded with hardness:

No I don't like your poem, it isn't worthy of you and above all it isn't worthy of the subject – Though it reflects your present state of mind perhaps, it isn't quite sincere enough for you who have studied philosophy & know something of history know quite well that sacrifice has never yet turned a heart to stone though it has immortalised many & through it alone mankind can rise to God – You recognise this in the line which was the original inspiration of your poem 'A terrible beauty is born' but you let your present mood mar & confuse it till even some of the verses become unintelligible to many.

Although the number of people killed was negligible compared to the thousands who were dying in the First World War, Yeats remained disturbed by the Rising. He had an added reason for this: he

#### ROSITA COPIOLI

She has written books of poetry and prose, plays and historical texts; she edited and translated works by Sappho, Yeats, Leopardi, Goethe, Flaubert, Fellini. She edited the magazine *L'altro versante* (1979-1989). Books of poetry include: *Splendida lumina solis*, Forum 1979; *Furore delle rose*, Guanda 1989; *Elena*, Guanda 1996; *Il postino fedele*, Mondadori 2008; *Le acque della mente*, Mondadori 2016; *Le figlie di Gailani e mia madre*, Franco Maria Ricci 2020; *Elena Nemesi*, MC 2021; *I fanciulli dietro alle porte*, Vallecchi 2022. Among those in prose: *I giardini dei popoli sotto le onde*, Guanda 1991; *Il fuoco dell'Eden*, Tema celeste 1992; *La previsione dei sogni*, Medusa 2002; *Il nostro sistema solare*, Medusa 2013; con Vallecchi: *Gli occhi di Fellini*, 2020; *La voce di Sergio Zavoli*, 2021; *Simbolo*, 2022. A new book will be in bookstores in June: *William Butler Yeats. Omero in Irlanda*, Ares, 2024.

felt directly involved and partly responsible for the actions of Pearse, Connolly, MacDonagh and their comrades. He would reflect on this again in 1937:

Sometimes I am told in commendation, if the newspaper is Irish, in condemnation if English, that my movement perished under the firing squads of 1916; sometimes that those firing squads made our realistic movement possible. If that statement is true, and it is only so in part, for romance was everywhere receding, it is because in the imagination of Pearse and his fellow soldiers the Sacrifice of the Mass had found the Red Branch in the tapestry; they went out to die calling upon Cuchulain:

Fall, Hercules, from Heaven in tempests hurled  
To cleanse the beastly stable of the World.

In one sense the poets of 1916 were not of what the newspapers call my school. The Gaelic League, made timid by a modern popularisation of Catholicism sprung from the aspidistra and not from the root of Jesse, dreaded intellectual daring and stuck to dictionary and grammar. Pearse and MacDonagh and others among the executed men would have done, or attempted, in Gaelic what we did or attempted, in English.

Shortly after 1916, Ireland achieved independence, with the exception of the North. However, it was from that very moment that a fratricidal civil war escalated, in which many would be killed.

Once Yeats was elected a Senator, he had a means of continuing to offer young Ireland his experience, as well as the principles that he had developed over many years and which had distinguished him at O'Leary's side. He was particularly concerned with questions of art and culture, from the minting of coins that would have symbolic and artistic value to authorial copyright and the problem of censorship, which was becoming an obsession in primarily Catholic Ireland. Yeats' consummate experience as an orator and his *vis polemica*, accustomed as he was to debates and theatrics, easily dazzled his fellow Senators.

His speeches on the right to divorce were especially memorable. In February 1925, a bill had been proposed that would make it impossible to file for divorce. On 14 March, in the 'Irish Statesman', edited by his friend George Russell, Yeats expressed his opposition and attacked anyone who wished to impose 'his Catholic convictions upon members of the Church of Ireland and upon men of no church'. Finally, in June, he gave an impassioned and persuasive speech

in the Senate on the necessity of separating Church and State, on the unreliability of Biblical sources, and on the moral laxity of Catholic countries. He defended the Irish Protestants, to whom he belonged:

I think it is tragic that within three years of this country gaining its independence we should be discussing a measure which a minority of this nation considers to be grossly oppressive. We against whom you have done this thing are no petty people. We are one of the great stocks of Europe. We are the people of Burke; we are the people of Grattan; we are the people of Swift, the people of Emmet, the people of Parnell. We have created the most of the modern literature of this country. We have created the best of political intelligence. Yet I do not altogether regret what has happened. I shall be able to find out whether or we have lost our stamina or not. You have defined our position and given us a popular following. If we have not lost our stamina then your victory will be brief, and your defeat final, and when it comes this nation may be transformed.

The excellent piece published in the 'Irish Statesman' also contained a political assessment of the impossibility of uniting the Free State with Northern Ireland if public life was determined only by Catholic conscience:

This country has declared through every vehicle of expression known to it that it desires union with the Nord of Ireland, even that it will never be properly a nation till that union has been achieved, and it knows that it cannot bring that union about by force. It must convince the Ulster Protestants that if they join themselves to us they will not suffer injustice. They can be won, not now, but in a generation, but they cannot be won if you insist that the Catholic conscience alone must dominate the public life of Ireland. The Catholic Church fought for years against the Unity of Italy, and even invited recruits from this country to help it in that fight, and though it had the highest motives history has condemned it, and now it is about to fight against the Unity of Ireland.

Knowledge of the Italian Risorgimento, of the Church's hostility to Italian unity, which had led it to recruit an Irish brigade (as well as volunteers from the rest of Europe) to defend the Papal State, and of the militancy of Young Ireland, with Mazzinians and nationalists as diverse as John O'Leary and Maud Gonne, had heightened Yeats' capacity for political foresight, at least where Ireland was concerned. ■

*(translated by Emer Delaney)*

# THE FLIPPANT DADAIST

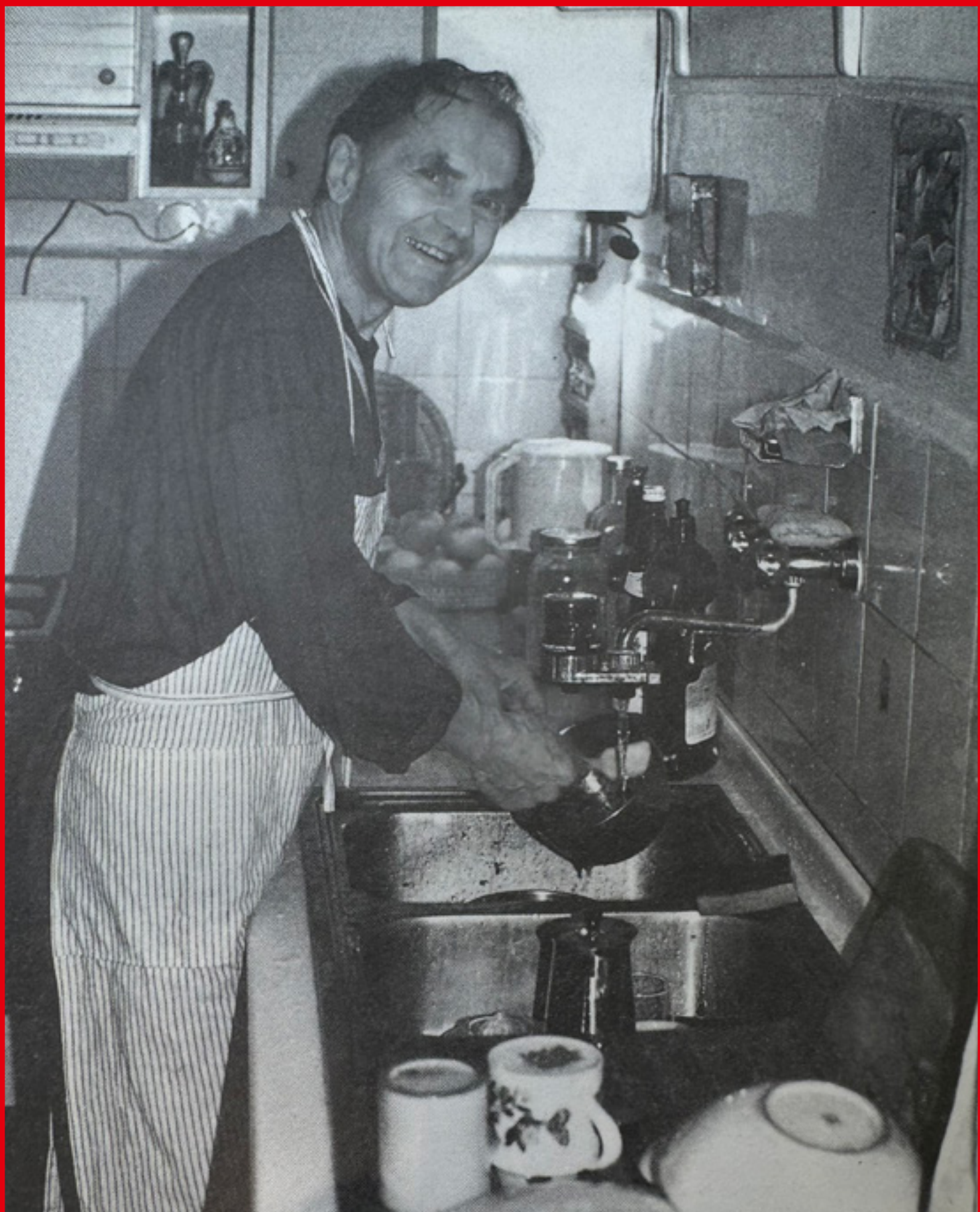
*Paul Feyerabend, one of the most original and nonconformist epistemologists of the 20th century, is known for describing science as an essentially anarchic enterprise characterized by different, sometimes contradictory, methods, approaches and ways of reasoning. But it was through his reflections on art and myth that he developed an even more radical view: there are different forms of human thought, each characterized by a different rationality and reality, and science is only one of them. And in intellectual history there is only change, but not progress.*

**Luca Sciortino**

Few epistemologists have feared the enormous power of science and its claimed superiority over other forms of knowledge as much as Paul Feyerabend. His philosophy can be described as a fierce struggle against all totalitarian forms of knowledge in a desperate attempt to affirm human creativity and freedom. Throughout his life, he never ceased to defend pluralism in all fields of culture, insisting that the proliferation of theories, methods and forms of thought is beneficial to the development of knowledge and that uniformity hinders the free development of the individual. In this sense, no sentence is more emblematic than the one in the opening pages of *Against Method* (1975), one of his seminal works. Feyerabend wrote that knowledge is not a series of theories in themselves consistent that gradually converge to truth, but 'it is rather an ever-increasing *ocean of mutually incompatible*

*alternatives*' (Feyerabend, 1993 [1975], p. 21).

Feyerabend was a paradoxical, nonconformist and ironic philosopher, as when he traced his original interest in philosophy not to intellectual motivations but to the necessity of taking full advantage of a purchase at a pre-auction sale: 'tons of books could be had for a few pennies. They came in bundles; you had to buy a whole bundle or nothing at all. I selected bundles that were rich in plays or novels, but I could not avoid an occasional Plato or Descartes. I may have started reading these unwanted additions out of curiosity or simply to cut my losses' (Feyerabend, 1996, p. 27). As a teenager, he loved opera, theater and astronomy so much that he would spend his afternoons practicing on a stage and his evenings stargazing. His passion for theater never left him, to the point that in several interviews he declared that he would have preferred to be



an actor or director rather than a philosopher.

### THE WAR AND EARLY STUDIES

Feyerabend was born in Vienna on the 13<sup>th</sup> of January 1924 to a middle-class family. After passing his high school final exams in March 1942, he was drafted into the Arbeitsdienst (the labor service introduced by the Nazis) and later participated as an officer in several engagements against the Russians, in one of which he was wounded. The bullet, lodged in his spine, paralyzed him from the waist down, forcing him first to use a wheelchair, then to walk with crutches and finally with the help of a stick. With his trademark humor, he recounted how his first wheelchair for the disabled had three wheels, was operated by levers and could acquire great speed: ‘pedestrians scattered in terror from when I approached at full speed’ (Feyerabend, 1996, p. 56).

After the war ended, he returned to Vienna to study physics with such scientists as Hans Thirring (1888-1976) and Felix Ehrenhaft (1879-1952). He would later jokingly describe himself as a physicist who converted to philosophy for lack of talent. The reality is that those studies helped Feyerabend gain a deep understanding of the issues being debated in the Vienna of his time, where various thinkers were pondering the philosophical implications of scientific theories, particularly quantum theory and the theory of relativity.

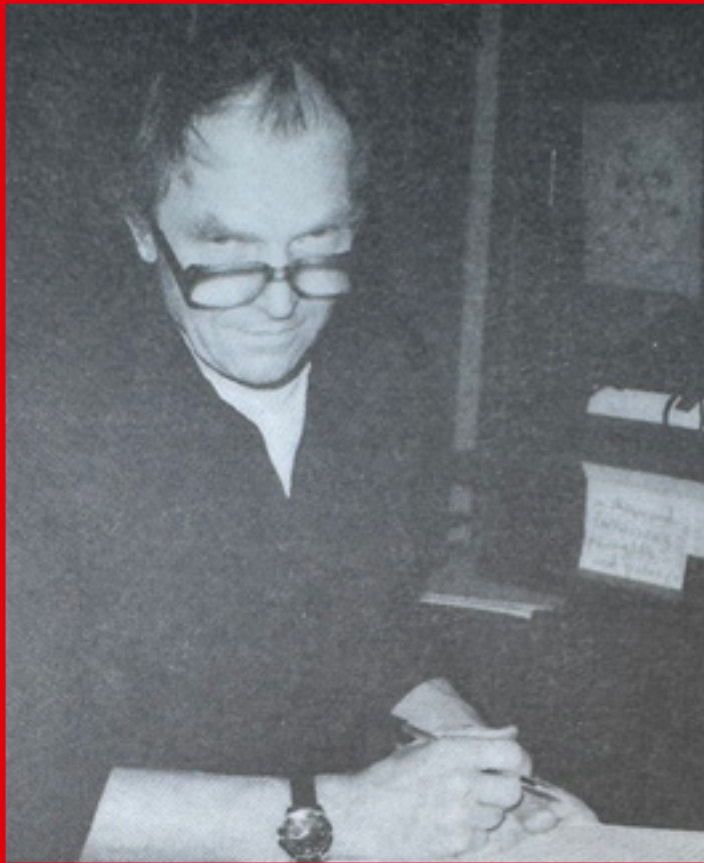
After finishing his studies in physics, he moved to London where he obtained a doctorate in philosophy under Karl Popper (1902-1994) in 1951. His doctoral dissertation, entitled *Zur Theorie der Basissätze* (‘On the Theory of Basic Statements’), was conceived under the influence of logical positivism: in 1949, when he was in Austria, Feyerabend had founded the ‘Kraft Circle’, a society of young philosophers who were interested in ‘considering philosophical problems in a non-metaphysical manner and with special reference to the findings of the sciences (Feyerabend, 1966, p. 3-4). His first articles reveal Popper’s influence. For example, when he was in Bristol, where he had obtained his first teaching position, Feyerabend wrote two articles advocating a realist view of scientific theories (Feyerabend, 1957, 1958). And in 1961 he defended Popper’s view regarding the transition from myth to logos, that is, from the mental universe of the mythological writers to

that of the early Greek philosophers. He described the latter as ‘very brave and optimistic’ and the world of the Homeric poems as ‘closed and dogmatic’ (Feyerabend, 1961). However, around 1967, Feyerabend matured an aversion to Popper’s critical rationalism, culminating in *Against Method* and other later works.

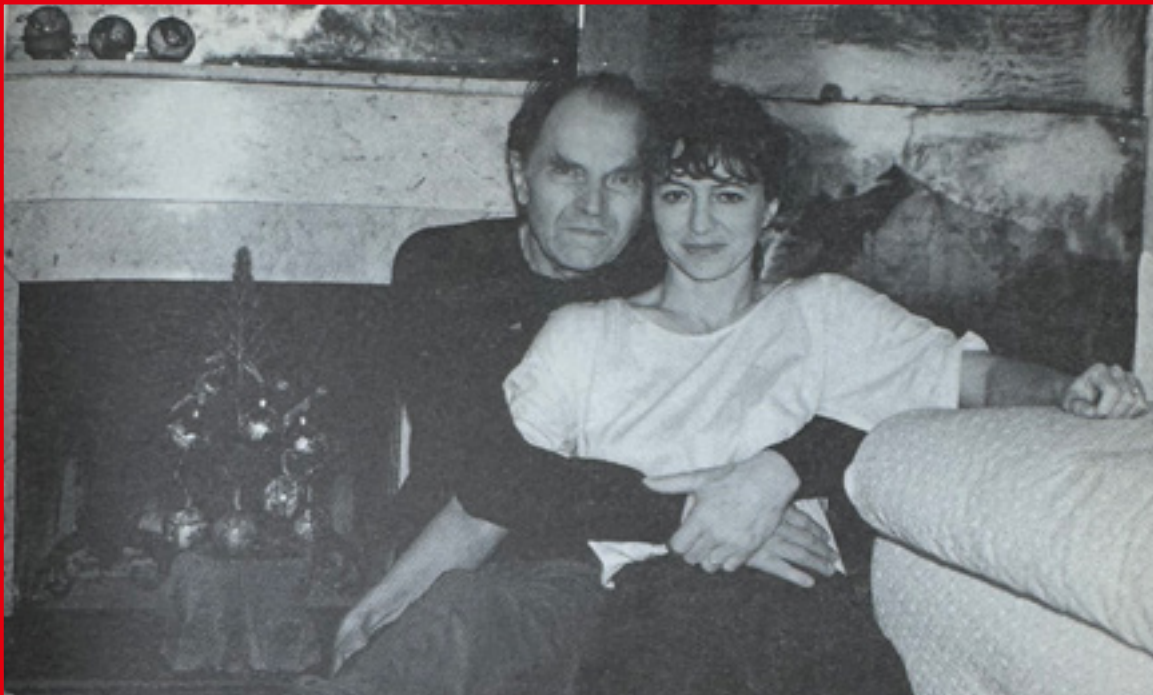
### AGAINST METHOD

At first Feyerabend raised a point concerning the existence of methodological rules implicit in the process of producing scientific knowledge. One of these consisted of excluding hypotheses inconsistent with well-confirmed theories or facts (Feyerabend, 1970). Feyerabend argued that instead we should encourage the proliferation of theories and not exclude anything, not even what is considered non-scientific and may provide insights for new theories: for example, metaphysics, myth and religious cosmologies (Feyerabend, 1962; 1981 [1965]). While at this stage Feyerabend relied on general arguments to justify why scientists used or violated certain methodological rules, in time he became convinced that this was an unworkable path. An explanation of why in certain circumstances progress in knowledge is made by abiding by or violating certain methodological rules could not be universally valid. One had to take into account the domain to which the rules apply, the conditions under which they are considered valid, and which of the possible ways of using them promote progress (Feyerabend, 1993 [1975]).

Thus, in *Against Method*, Feyerabend asserted that ‘the idea of a method containing firm, unchanging, and absolutely binding principles for conducting the business of science meets considerable difficulty when confronted with the results of historical research’ (Feyerabend, 1993 [1975], p. 18). His point was that in the evolution of scientific research situations emerge which require new methodological rules and even new categories of thought. For example, Feyerabend examined ‘the tower argument’ that the Aristotelians used to examine the motion of the Earth: according to the latter, the ‘fact’ that a stone in free fall from a tower falls along the perpendicular disproves the hypothesis that the Earth is in motion. The argument is perfectly rational and in line with Popper’s falsificationist epistemology, but Galileo destroyed it by introducing an ad hoc hypothesis,



Paul Karl Feyerabend (Vienna, January 13, 1924 - Genolier, February 11, 1994) was an Austrian philosopher of science and sociologist. His work was particularly impactful in the 1960s and 1970s, his life has been rather erratic, with frequent moves: from Austria to the UK, from the US to New Zealand, from Italy to Switzerland. The images in this feature, taken from *Ammazzando il tempo*, in english "Killing time" ( Laterza, 1994), depict him in scenes of everyday life: washing dishes (on the article's opening page), at work (here on the side), and hugging his wife Grazia Borrini (here below), now president of the Paul K. Feyerabend Foundation.



the law of inertia: since the stone dropped from the tower maintains the initial velocity imparted by the Earth's motion, which is also that of the tower, the stone falls along the perpendicular. Thus, according to Feyerabend, Galileo skillfully introduced ad hoc hypotheses by violating the rational standards of Aristotelian reasoning and succeeded in being convincing.

It could then be said that the tower argument 'was valid' in the time of the Aristotelians and the inertia argument in the time of Galileo. Hence the famous principle that 'anything goes', introduced by Feyerabend in a half-serious tone. Far from being an irrationalist principle, as it is often interpreted, it is actually an admission of the existence, and sometimes coexistence, of different forms of rationality within the history of science. But 'anything goes' is neither a principle expressing Feyerabend's position nor a methodological recommendation for conducting scientific research: "anything goes" does not express any conviction of mine, it is jocular summary of the predicament of the rationalist: if you want universal standards, I say, if you cannot live without principles that hold independently of situation, shape of world, exigencies of research or temperamental peculiarities, then I can give you such a principle. It will be empty, useless and pretty ridiculous -- but it will be a "principle". It will be the "principle" "anything goes" (Feyerabend, 1978, p. 188).

#### EPISTEMOLOGICAL ANARCHISM

Feyerabend reformulated these ideas by stating that his was an 'anarchist theory of knowledge' that stemmed from an application to scientific methodology of the ideas of John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) contained in the essay *On Liberty* (Mill, 1992 [1859]). The latter had argued, among other things, that pluralism of opinion fosters the search for truth. The central thesis of Feyerabend's epistemological anarchism is that there is no such thing as *the* scientific method: scientists are methodological opportunists who use whatever moves are available to them, even those that violate the canons of empiricist methodology. Later, with his usual polemical verve, Feyerabend preferred the term 'dadaism' to 'anarchism': 'anarchy cares very little about human life and human happiness [...] so I prefer the term *dadaism*'. And then he added: 'I hope that after reading this pamphlet

[*Against Method*] the reader will remember me as a flippant dadaist and not as a serious anarchist' (Lakatos & Feyerabend, 2010, p. 295). The term 'dadaist' suited Feyerabend's attitude more than the term 'anarchist' because of its allusions to the exaltation of creative freedom, the rejection for the pursuit of aesthetic standards, and the critique of the artwork itself. Last but not least, the Dadaists emphasized humor and extravagance, features that were well suited to Feyerabend's character. Taking a cue from the 'dadaist artist', the 'dadaist epistemologist' had to look with detachment and levity at the attempt to find rules defining the scientific enterprise and thus also at the very philosophy of science conceived in a normative sense: 'A dadaist is utterly unimpressed by any serious enterprise and he smells a rat when people stop smiling and assume that attitude and those facial expressions which indicate that something important is about to be said. A dadaist is convinced that a worthwhile life will arise only when we start taking things lightly and when we remove from our speech the profound but already putrid meanings it has

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accumulated over the centuries ('search for the truth', 'fight for justice', 'passionate concern', etc.)" (Lakatos & Feyerabend, 2010, p. 295).

Over time, Feyerabend's theses took on a more radical form. He realized that non-scientific worldviews could be considered real alternatives to scientific theories precisely because they too had factual and cognitive content. For example, myths conveyed knowledge for the purpose of promoting social harmony; and the dramas of ancient Greece laid bare the contradictions of society and used particular methods to suggest the reasons for them. In 1975, Feyerabend came to argue that the worldview of myth and that of the early Greek philosophers are 'incommensurable' and based on two different ways of perceiving the world. The term 'incommensurable' had first appeared in 1962 to describe two theories that could not be deduced from each other because no deductive relationship existed between their respective basic concepts. Now, Feyerabend also considered the worldviews of the Homeric poems and those of the early Greek philosophers to be incommensurable: no logical or perceptual relations could be established between them, and their respective basic concepts could not be used simultaneously. All this led to a relativistic view that embraced the whole spectrum of ways of seeing the world: the scientific view of nature that arose with the Ionian philosophers had not been defeated by argument but by history. From there, Feyerabend went so far as to question even the existence of a general criterion demarcating science from non-science: the latter could be distinguished neither on the basis of method, nor on the basis of norms of rationality, nor on the basis of content. Any criterion for distinguishing science from non-science could only be identified 'locally', that is, in certain particular contexts.

#### ART MYTH AND SCIENCE

In a 1963 letter to the Australian philosopher Jack Smart (1920-2012), Feyerabend revealed that he had always been interested in the nature of myths, which he regarded as completely autonomous and independent ways of perceiving the world. According to some scholars, this conviction made possible the radicalization of the last phase of Feyerabend's thought, that is, the shift from defending the proliferation of theories as a means

of progress in the sciences to more relativistic views concerning the scientific tradition as such (Heit, 2016, p. 71). But for similar reasons, one cannot help but attribute to Feyerabend's studies on the history of art an equally crucial role in the evolution of his thought. In 1947, in Vienna, the young Feyerabend had attended the lectures of the art historians Otto Demus (1902-1990) and Karl Swoboda (1889-1977). The latter, a student of the influential art historian Alois Riegl (1858-1905), had drawn his attention to Giotto's style and the transition to pictorial realism. An essay on art and science appeared in 1967, followed by a collection in 1984; and in 1993, the new edition of *Against Method* was expanded and revised to incorporate new reflections on the subject, also present in *Conquest of Abundance* (1999), which came out posthumously. In these writings, Feyerabend explored the similarities and differences between art and science, rejecting the thesis that the latter is the only valid form of knowledge; suggested that the creativity and flexibility of artists can offer useful lessons for scientific practice; argued that it is crucial to take different perspectives into account in research; and criticized various methodologies considered scientific. Of his writings on art and science, *Wissenschaft als Kunst (Science as Art)* (Feyerabend, 1984) is the most important because it is there that Feyerabend outlines a notion of 'scientific style' in analogy with the notion of style in art proposed by Riegl. This move, not only allowed him to show that one cannot speak of progress in science, but also to characterize the scientific enterprise more precisely, thus reaching the radical conclusions mentioned above.

To argue for these claims, it is useful to start from the fact that in the late 19th century several German-speaking thinkers brought forward a radical historicization of Kantian transcendental aesthetics. Among them, Alois Riegl, the art historian most cited by Feyerabend, claimed that in distinct epochs human beings have 'looked at the world' in different ways. With this in mind, in 1901, Riegl joined what was a long discussion about the Arch of Constantine, which is located in Rome and was dedicated to Emperor Constantine in 315 A.D., rejecting the narratives of decline in art history. In fact, bas-reliefs from two different eras appear in this triumphal arch: some, dating back three centuries earlier, were probably dismantled from

earlier monuments and added as an ornament at the time of the arch's construction. Comparing the bas-reliefs from the two different periods, both Raphael Sanzio (1483- 1520) and Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) argued that they showed a regression from one artistic era to another. In contrast, Riegl argued that the reliefs of the age of Constantine instead revealed a new way of perceiving space and symmetry rather than an age of regress. For Riegl, the transition from one style to another marked a change in the creative intention of the artist [*Kunstwollen*] as a consequence of a mutation in the worldview of an era. The artist was not looking at an already constituted world, but constructing the world.

### STYLES IN ART, STYLES IN THOUGHT

In the wake of these ideas, Feyerabend asserted that 'in art there is neither progress nor decadence, but only different stylistic forms. Each stylistic form is in itself accomplished and obeys its own laws. [...] This conception was founded and developed with great clarity by Alois Riegl in 1901' (Feyerabend, 1984, p. 115). And then he argued that 'they [the sciences] have also developed a number of styles, including styles of verification, and the evolution from one style to another is quite analogous, let us say, to the evolution of art from Classical Antiquity to the Gothic style' (Feyerabend, 1984, p. 154). An example of a transition between two different styles of thinking is that, as Feyerabend puts it, from Homer's 'universe of aggregates' to the 'universe of substances' of Greek philosophy and science, that is, from the way of thinking of mythological writers to that of the early Greek philosophers. When the rational way of thinking of the early philosophers emerged, it brought with it a 'movement tending toward more abstract and schematic concepts' (Paul Feyerabend, 1984, p. 140). Thus, if myth explained God with a series of episodes rich in detail, the new rational thought replaced this wealth of description with 'a concept of power, or being' (Feyerabend, 1984, p. 141). New ideas or concepts thus emerged, such as that of 'soul'. In fact, the man of Homer's time had no unified concept of what we call 'soul' or 'personality' (Feyerabend, 2016 [2009], p. 71). In Feyerabend's terminology, that was the transition from a 'universe of aggregates' to a 'universe of substances', one in which an aggregate of events,

actions, descriptions was replaced by an abstract concept.

Moreover, for Feyerabend 'the strange events described in the myths, as well as the strange creatures with which they populate the world, were *truly perceived* in it' (Feyerabend, 2016 [2009], p. 38). For example, in the mythological way of thinking 'the world really appears to this early thinking as a "You", not as an "It", the sky as a "picture book" rather than a "computation book"' (Feyerabend, 2016 [2009], p. 38) as in the style of rational thinking. Finally, the *method* used by mythological writers to represent the world differed from that of rational thought. This point can be explained with a comparison: 'where Euclidean science used circles, squares, lines, points and the like, the inventors of myths [...] used a story represented in pictorial images' (Feyerabend, 2016 [2009], pp. 37-38). Just as a physical theory introduces a model without being interested in all aspects of what it describes, so a myth may use social or zoological episodes with the purpose of illustrating only some general cosmological structures (Feyerabend, 2016 [2009], p. 38).

In this sense, if on the one hand the Greek gods were an inseparable part of mythological thought, on the other hand the method of representation in rational thought introduced new abstract entities such as circles, squares, lines and points, which were in use in the geometric demonstrations of the Greek mathematicians. The trend toward more abstract concepts determined 'the discovery that with their help new kinds of stories could be told, so to speak new myths with surprising traits. The development of these new myths was no longer subject to the external constraint of a tradition, but was regulated from within, it "followed" by the nature of things' (Feyerabend, 1984, p. 141). Feyerabend alluded to the 'discovery of proof', of which the theorems contained in Euclid's *Elements* are the most emblematic example. Between 410 and 360 B.C. Greek mathematical texts had the peculiarity of consisting essentially of diagrams, that is, graphic representations of geometric figures, of letters, for example those placed at the vertices of a triangle, and words. Logically, these three elements were combined to form logical-deductive chains that provided knowledge of general validity (Netz, 1999). A 'sort of independence' was thus achieved, i.e. a sort of 'development regulated

from within', which 'follows from the nature of things'. 'For the intellectuals of ancient Greece there thus arose [with the emergence of proof] a new and extremely fruitful possibility of finding one and only one truth in the contrast of traditions (Feyerabend, 1984, p. 143). Ultimately, proof is the *criterion of objectivity* that characterized the Greek philosophers' style of thinking, the one on which a community of human beings in Ancient Greece achieved consensus.

The 'birth of rationalism' is thus not a transition from a closed worldview to an open one or from a worldview that is a figment of the imagination to a worldview that is the only one in accordance with truth, as the early Feyerabend believed. On the contrary, for Feyerabend 'science is much closer to myth than a scientific philosophy is prepared to admit. It is one of the any forms of thought that have been developed by man, and not necessarily the best. It is conspicuous, noisy, and impudent, but it is inherently superior only for those who have already decided in favor of a certain ideology, or who have accepted it without having ever examined its advantages and its limits' (Feyerabend, 1993 [1975], p. 129). In summary, for Feyerabend a style of thinking is characterized by new *ideas*, new *methods*, new *goals*, new *perceptions*, and new *criteria of objectivity* (Paul Feyerabend, 2016 [2009], pp. 3-4), and the transition from myth to logos can be seen as the transition from one style to another. The scientific enterprise thus becomes a succession of autonomous and independent styles that come about over time with their own methods and criteria of truth. According to Feyerabend, in the history of science it is possible to recognize other styles, such as, for example, that of Aristotelian science and that of Galilean science. Later thinkers such as Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking, also drawing on other sources, developed in more detail the notion of style of thinking in the sciences (Sciortino, 2023).

#### THOUGHTS BEFORE THE END

Feyerabend died in Genolier, Switzerland, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February 1994. In some way, he suggested how we should remember him: 'My concern is that after my departure something remains of me, not papers, not final philosophical declarations, but love' (Feyerabend, 1996, p. 181). Feyerabend wrote this sentence, perhaps one of

the most humane ever written by a philosopher, in the clinic, in his last month of life, when he was partially paralyzed by a brain tumor and was being cared for by his wife Grazia Borrini. In those same pages, he explained that by 'love' he did not mean ideals such as 'love of truth' or 'love of humanity'. If anything, he alluded to that complex of actions, gestures, expressions and behaviors directed toward a human being whom one wishes to help and support along a lifetime. Love thus understood had nothing theoretical or universal about it, it was for Feyerabend a concrete gift granted only to some lives because it depends on accidents such as parental affection, some kind of stability, friendship, and—following therefrom—on a delicate balance between self-confidence and a concern for others' (Paul Feyerabend, 1996, p. 209). Feyerabend felt that he received that gift in the latter part of his life and preferred to be remembered more for a gesture of love than for writing in defense of an abstract ideal. ■

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FRONTIER ETHOLOGY

# CULTURE AMONG ANIMALS?



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*Recent research highlights cultural “sensitivity”  
in many species, not just mammals or vertebrates,  
signaling learning ability.*

**Stefano Colonna**



Culture in animals can be broadly conceptualized as the collective behavioral traditions of a given population. These habitual tendencies are defined as behaviors transmitted through social learning and persisting over time in a population (A.D. Bridges et al., *Nature*, 2024, 627, 572).

While culture was once believed to be unique to humans and a key explanation for our evolutionary success, the existence of evolving nonhuman cultures is no longer in question. Changes in the songs of Savannah sparrows and humpback whales have been documented for decades. Similarly, the washing of sweet potatoes by Japanese macaques has undergone various changes since 1953, when the behavior was first observed in Imo, a young female.

Initially, Imo's behavior involved immersing sweet potatoes in fresh water and using her free hand to remove sand. Over time, however, this behavior evolved into repeated washes in seawater instead of fresh water, taking intermediate bites to enhance the taste. In the 1980s, further variations appeared among the macaques, including stealing already-washed potatoes from other individuals and digging new puddles in secluded areas to avoid freeloaders.

In a comparable example, the manufacture of wide and narrow pandanus tools by New Caledonian crows, used to extract larvae from stumps, appears to have diversified from a single point of origin. In this way, cultural evolution can lead to the accumulation of new traditions. Beneficial innovations or modifications of behavior are socially transmitted among



individuals in a population, a process that can occur repeatedly and lead to sequential enhancements or elaborations. Based on these criteria, evidence suggests that certain animals are capable of forming cumulative cultures in specific contexts.

For example, pigeon pairs returning repeatedly from a new location discover more efficient routes when their pairings are progressively exchanged, compared to fixed pairs or isolated individuals. This improvement seems to arise from innovations introduced by new individuals, leading to enhanced path efficiency. Similarly, bumblebees (*Bombus terrestris*), as social insects, can acquire complex, non-natural behaviors through social learning in a laboratory setting. They can learn, from a trained demonstrator, how to perform specific tasks for a reward, even if they are incapable of doing so on their own.

These findings challenge the widely held belief that only humans are capable of learning socially innovative behaviors through trial and error. Various types of adaptation have evolved in the animal kingdom, enabling species to access otherwise inaccessible prey (B. C. Klump, *Science*, 2024, 384, 740). These adaptations range from morphological ones, such as the elongated fingers of aye-aye lemurs (*Daubentonia madagascariensis*), to behavioral ones, such as tool use by corvids and gulls, or prey-dropping behaviors in birds and mammals.

The use of tools, such as sticks and stones, not only allows animals to access highly nutritious prey but also saves time and energy. Law and colleagues found that tool use enables South Sea otters (*Enhydra lutris nereis*) to increase foraging success while reducing tooth damage, thereby directly linking the physical benefits of tool use to improved fitness. Sea otters are one of the few species that regularly use tools in marine environments. Their diet includes a wide range of prey, such as sea urchins, mollusks, and snails, which vary in size, quantity, and shell hardness.

Sea otters often use stones or other hard objects as hammers or anvils to break the tough shells of their prey. Some otters do not use tools at all, favoring softer prey, while others use them almost exclusively to obtain food. Law and collaborators also studied the impact of tool use on dental health, investigating whether it reduces enamel wear. While otters have strong teeth sufficient for some prey, they rely on tools for larger or harder-shelled prey, preventing the damage that could lead to bacterial infections like endocarditis.



As expected, frequent tool use results in less dentin exposure. Female otters benefit particularly from tool use, compensating for their comparatively lower bite strength due to their smaller body size. Another significant finding is that otter pups learn how to use tools from their mothers, allowing them to adopt the same diet. Furthermore, the use of specific tools helps otters meet their energy needs by targeting alternative prey, which would be inaccessible through biting alone. This suggests that tool use is essential for survival in environments where preferred prey is scarce.

### RETHINKING ANIMAL CULTURE

Crows, chimpanzees, elephants, and many other mammals as well as birds exhibit behaviors that indicate that they may possess some form of consciousness. The scope of potential animal consciousness is now being expanded to include octopuses, bees, and other

insects (M. Lenharo, *Nature* 2024, 629, 14).

A coalition of scientists, supported by recent research, has called for a reevaluation of the human-animal relationship, arguing that if there is a realistic possibility of conscious experience in an animal, it is irresponsible to disregard this in decisions affecting them. On April 19, 2024, researchers in New York published the “Animal Culture Statement,” which asserts that there is a “realistic possibility of conscious experiences” in reptiles, fish, insects, and other animals, even if they do not exhibit the same inner lives as humans. It further states that there is “strong support” for aspects of consciousness in birds and mammals.

While the document, which gathered around 40 signatures, does not offer definitive answers regarding which animal species possess consciousness, it highlights the complexity of defining culture. The group focused on an aspect called sentience, defined





as the capacity to have subjective experiences. For animals, these experiences include perceiving the world around them—through smell, taste, hearing, or touch—and experiencing emotions such as fear, pleasure, or pain. Notably, subjective experience does not require the ability to reflect on one’s own experiences.

Since animals cannot use language to communicate their inner states, scientists rely on indirect observations of behaviors associated with conscious experiences. One classic experiment is the mirror test, which assesses an animal’s ability to recognize itself. In this test, a visible mark is placed on the animal’s body, and it is presented with a mirror. Animals such as chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*), elephants (*Elephas maximus*), and cleaner fish (*Labroides dimidiatus*) often display curiosity about the mark and attempt to remove it, suggesting the presence of self-awareness and possibly consciousness.

In another experiment, crows (*Corvus corone*) were trained to perform a specific head movement when they saw a colored square on a screen, a task they completed with high accuracy. During this test, scientists measured activity in a brain region associated with higher cognition, suggesting that the birds might be experiencing markers of consciousness.

Octopuses (*Octopus bocki*) have also shown behaviors consistent with conscious experience. In one study, they were placed between two chambers, one where they had previously received a painful stimulus and another where they had been given an anesthetic. The octopuses avoided the chamber associated with pain, favoring the one associated with relief.

Similarly, research on the fruit fly (*Drosophila melanogaster*) revealed that its brain activity during deep sleep and active dreaming resembled its awake state. This pattern may be analogous to REM sleep in humans, during which vivid dreams are believed to occur, indicating a possible experience of consciousness.

Although some researchers remain skeptical about the existence of animal consciousness, arguing that there is insufficient conclusive evidence, the New York statement could still have a positive impact on policies concerning animal ethics and treatment. As we confront the implications of artificial intelligence, similar questions about consciousness may arise in relation to machines. Hence, understanding how consciousness evolved in nature remains an essential area of inquiry. ■



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# POETIC RELIGION BY UNAMUNO

*Famous verses that sing a doubtful but at the same time tenacious and passionate faith. Miguel de Unamuno believes in the power of the word and salvation.*

Armando Savignano

Unamuno's reflections on the figure of Christ encompass both aesthetic-literary aspects and philosophical-theological dimensions. The unease inherent in faith defines Miguel De Unamuno's perspective, tied to his unique – and therefore contentious – will to believe (following in the footsteps of James). This belief is an effort to create what we cannot see, and it survives by feeding on doubt. This doubt is not methodical (as in Descartes), but rather a “doubt of passion,” distinct from both skepticism and uncertainty. It centers on the eternal struggle between reason and emotion, between science and life. Not coincidentally, Unamuno argues in his seminal work *The Tragic Sense of Life*, “I believe, Lord, help me in my unbelief. This may seem a contradiction, for if he believes, if he trusts, why would he ask the Lord to come to the rescue of his lack of faith? And yet, that contradiction is what gives all its profound human value to that cry from the bowels of the father of the unbeliever. His faith is a faith based on uncertainty. Because he believes, that is, because he wants to believe, because he needs his son to be healed, he asks the Lord to come to the aid of his unbelief, his doubt that such healing can be accomplished. Such is human faith, such was the heroic faith that Sancho Panza had in his master” (VII,180). Unamuno extols the religion of the word centered on the will to believe and not to die, in accordance with what Robertson had noted that man addresses God with a twofold cry “Tell me your name” and “save my soul”.

The first cry is sung poetically in the famous verses.

*“Why, Lord, do you leave us in doubt.*

*doubt of death?*

*Why are you hiding?*

*...I want to see you, Lord, and then die,*

*dying altogether,*

*But seeing you, Lord, seeing your face*

*... Watch, Lord, for the dawn to break,*

*And I'm tired of fighting with You*

*like Jacob!*

*Tell me your name” (VI,217-219).*

As María Zambrano has pointed out, Unamuno's religion is essentially poetic because it is based on the experience of the creative word. He also can be considered among those who “believed that he believed,” according to an expression somewhat emphasized today.

The cry, “Save my soul!” is echoed especially in Velázquez's famous poem about Christ, but also in the tragic sentiment of life, where Unamuno states that we ask God for “his name so that he may save our souls, so that he may save the human purpose of the universe” (VII,216). Following Robertson, according to whom Christ “revealed the name that Jacob did not know, Love,” Unamuno argues that there is “only one name capable of satisfying our longing, and that name is Savior, Jesus, God who is the love that saves” (VII, 216).

Unamuno's complex and multifaceted reflections on the figure of Christ, considering both its literary-aesthetic and historical-social implications, will be

יהושע נאזרתי מלך המלכות  
IHSOVS NAZOROE BATHMEYZ KORYNAION  
IHSVS NAZARANNVS REX IVDAEORVM



primarily examined from a philosophical-theological perspective. \*\*Setting aside debates about the value of his poetic versus philosophical works\*\*, it is clear that the image of Christ, as presented in his poetry, reaches its lyrical peak when we recognize that his poetic theory, while rejecting aesthetic modernism, is rooted in two main archetypes: the feeling of fatherhood and the incarnation of the Word.

There is a profound unity of inspiration in Unamuno's depiction of Christ, both in his poetic-literary and philosophical-theological expressions—a unity that does not conflict with the Basque thinker's intellectual and existential evolution. Drawing inspiration from the Christocentric humanism of Fray Luis de León, Christ is “the Logos, the Reason, the ideal humanity” (I,848), as Unamuno writes in *Essays on Purism*, where he discusses “Reason made humanity, love, and salvation” (I,850).

It is in his two major works, *The Tragic Sense of Life* and *The Christ of Velázquez*, as well as in his controversial poem on the *Christ of Palencia*, that Unamuno's Christological image is fully expressed, revealing a coherent and unified vision. In these works, the popular and mystical faith of the Spanish people, as well as what Unamuno himself believed, are depicted through different modes of expression.

In the poem dedicated to the *Lying Christ* in the Church of Santa Chiara in Palencia (1913), which inspired such admiration in A. Machado, the Basque thinker refers to the agonizing Christ of the *Theologia Crucis* rather than the triumphant and glorious Christ of the *Theologia Gloriorum*. “*This Christ immortal as death.*

*Does not rise again; for what purpose? It does not wait  
If not death itself.  
From the half-open mouth,  
Black as the indecipherable mystery,  
It flows to nothingness, where it never arrives, dissolution:*

*For this Christ of mine is earth”* (VI, 517).

This image of Christ—who holds no hope except that of eternal nothingness, who neither thinks nor lives, who is without sex, and who is flesh and blood that made the earth—represents the expression of nihilism (*nadism*).

*“There is nothing more eternal than death.  
everything ends - he says to our afflictions -  
not even dream is life;  
all is but land  
everything is but nothing, nothing, nothing  
fetid nothingness that, on dreaming of it, plagues”*  
(VI,519).

To such a gloomily nihilistic view, and therefore devoid of all hope, the poem's ending is an exception:

*“And You, Christ in heaven,  
Redeem us from the Christ of the earth”* (VI,520).

Between the heavenly Christ and the earthly Christ lies the agonizing white body of Christ, with his feet anchored to the earth and the Cross as his support. Unamuno captures this image in what is regarded as “the greatest religious poem written in Spain since the *Spiritual Canticle of St. John of the Cross*”: *The Christ of Velázquez*, composed between 1913 and 1920. This poem continues Unamuno's response to Harnack, which he began in his work on the tragic sense of life. Here, a Christological image emerges that embodies all the characteristics Harnack attributed to popular faith – a faith that, according to Harnack, quickly evolved into a mystagogic theology, a blend of spirituality and sensualism. This transformation began in the late second century when polytheistic and ritualistic underground religious elements merged with early Christianity, influenced by its encounter with Greco-Latin philosophy.

*“In this silent and white Word incarnate.  
That pearls with lines and colors, says  
His faith my tragic people”* (VI,417).

Contrary to those who favor poetic work over philosophical reflection, Orringer emphasizes how the contemplative impetus and the agonistic character are not irreconcilable. As Paoli has noted, the authentic Unamunian Christology must therefore be sought in this poem, which “rather than a popular religiosity, expresses above all the characters of the poet's religiosity.” However, Unamuno does not engage in dialogue with the presence of Christ, leading to the observation that this is a “poem of silence” by Unamuno, whose monologue, because of tragic agonism, has become merely a literary expression of perhaps deeply lived experiences.

In this famous poem, which is not a theological treatise, Unamuno uses metaphors to create and recreate, in the manner of Spanish folk faith, his myth and archetype of the Redeemer, in which the blood of Christ and that of Prometheus are ambivalently mixed. Unlike those who have perceived a “voluntarism”, Cerezo Galán emphasizes that this is not a process of demythicization, but rather “an existential archetype of such high ethical value... that it can be considered the true human face of the divine. It is not possible to go further from agonism and tragic subjectivity”. Therefore, the divine aspect of this agonized Christ

can be found in his ability to transfigure suffering, culminating in the abandonment of God during the dark night of the soul, as he grapples with death.

It was “a certain remorse for having composed that fierce poem, which I wrote in the same city of Palencia and in two days, that prompted me to undertake the more humane work in the poem on *El Cristo de Velázquez*” (I, 486), which can thus be considered an authentic palinodia of the Christ lying in the Church of Palencia. However, as Paoli has noted, these two poems are also irreconcilable in light of the distinct inspirational sources that prelude two opposing Christologies. It is a matter of pointing out the contrast between the virile, non-sickly (anti-Nietzschean) Jesus in one poem and the asexual, puny Jesus in the other. Perhaps Unamuno composed Velázquez’s Christ not so much for psychological reasons but for doctrinal ones, with particular emphasis on agonism, centered on the theory of “sweet and saving uncertainty” expressed in his work on the tragic feeling of life.

Unamuno’s intent in composing the famous poem was to “make something Christian, biblical, and ... Spanish”. Indeed, the synthesis between Catholicism and liberal Protestantism is poetically achieved here, since – much like in his work on the tragic sentiment of life – the yearning for immortality is fused with Lutheran *theologia crucis*. As for the biblical character, this is evident from the detailed scriptural references, which suggest a unique analogy with *The Names of Christ* by Fray Luis de León. Moreover, Velázquez’s Christ is Spanish not only in its subject matter but also in its references to tradition, from which it borrows legends and customs that often form the framework of the poem.

As for the structure, García de la Concha divides it into three parts: the introductory trilogy, the body of the poem, and the final oration. In the latter two parts, the tone is dramatic, while the introduction is more conceptual. This structure can be articulated as follows: the introduction focuses on the proclamation of what Origen called the “Eternal Gospel”, which is developed in the body of the poem into four themes: Christ as perfect revelation, sacrificial death, universal mediation, and apocatastasis. The final oration serves as both a synthesis of the poem and an apocalyptic proclamation: “Come, Lord Jesus.”

The originality of Unamuno’s poem lies in its identification of this eternal Gospel with the tarsal body of Christ, which is the revelation of God in and for humanity.



The opening image is *Jesucristo crucificado* by Diego Velázquez, Museo del Prado, Madrid. Above, Miguel de Unamuno (Bilbao 1864 - Salamanca 1936), one of the innovative intellectuals of the “generation of ‘98,” The photograph, taken in 1925, is preserved at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Quotations within this piece are from Miguel de Unamuno, *Obras Completas*, edited by M. García Blanco, Ed. Escelicer, Madrid 1966-71, 9 vols. The Roman numeral indicates the volume, and the Arabic number the page.

*“Revelation of the soul that is the body.  
source of pain and life  
immortalizer body of man  
body becoming idea before the eyes  
body of God, eternal gospel”* (VI,418).

In Harnack, Unamuno read that, according to Tertullian, “everything that exists is body (God corporeal, material)”. Hence the realism of the poem (VI, 419). “Poetically, we are before the corporeality of the spirit. Body and also blood, for the life of the flesh is in the blood. Christ is the corporealizer of God: the divine light, passing through the body of Christ, comes to us converted into the blood of his bowels”. As Paoli has observed, this leads us to the more properly biological aspect of this humanizing operation – what Unamuno (in the *Prologue to the Cancionero*) once

called a veritable theophagy. The author of the poem is almost obsessed with the tangible concreteness of our spiritual needs and acts, which he identifies with a carnal religion that, from the proto-liberal cave of Altamira, is, at the same time, the cult of death and immortality, of sacrifice and life.

The first part of the poem focuses on the body of Christ through the image of whiteness, expressed through various poetic symbols that together form a veritable “allegorical constellation” based on suggestions borrowed from St. Catherine of Siena – who stated that “this eye sees in that whiteness all God and all man” – and from Fray Luis de León. The bloodless white body represents the suffering God, in contrast to the pagan gods, who reveal themselves in beautiful presence (VI, 422).

Regarding Christological symbols, the lunar Christ plays a fundamental role, not least because it has been interpreted as a symptom of a pantheistic attitude. For such symbolism, Unamuno refers not only to the Platonic myth of the cave but also to Fray Luis de León, who, however, compared Christ to the sun, and especially to Harnack. Symbolically, Christ reveals, as a mediating mirror, what the moon is: the light-darkness of the Father, which he reflects in the white nakedness of his body. However, rather than a reductionist attitude and vague pantheistic Hegelianism, it is perhaps more hermeneutically accurate to speak of influences borrowed from Kierkegaard, as Cerezo Galán has noted, or even – according to our view – of an anthropocentric language to express that God’s light would be blinding without the lunar mediation, the reflection of Christ’s body.

The most original symbol is undoubtedly that of Christ as the “Host / of the sovereign night sky”, culminating in the sacrament of the Eucharist, which, as the “bread of immortality”, constitutes the cor-

nerstone of Catholic popular piety in opposition to Protestantism’s idealistic sacrament of the word (VIII, 148). In the decisive dispute between Arius and Athanasius, Unamuno clearly takes the side of the latter, in whom he sees not only the embodiment of popular faith but, above all, the only possibility for deification from an eschatological – not ethical – perspective. This is achieved through the incarnation and redemption of the Man-God, unlike Arius, who famously reduced Jesus to a perfect and exemplary man. “The Athanasian or Nicene Christ, which is the Catholic Christ, is not the cosmological Christ, nor, strictly speaking, the ethical Christ; it is the eternalizing, deifying, religious Christ. Of this Christ—of the Christ of Nicene or Catholic Christology—Harnack says that, at its core, it is docetic, that is, apparent, since the process of the deification of man in Christ was carried out in the interest of eschatology. But what is the real Christ? Is it perhaps the so-called historical Jesus of rationalistic exegesis, who is presented to us thus diluted into a myth or social atomization?” (VIII, 149). Unlike Harnack – and Protestantism in general – Unamuno affirms that the sacrament of the Eucharist is the ultimate sign of redemption and deification from an eschatological perspective. Therefore, it constitutes a concrete, real response to the desire for the resurrection of the flesh and is, for the believer, “the experimental, mystical proof that the soul is immortal and will eternally enjoy the glory of God” (VIII, 151).

The symbolic power of the first part is followed by the theme of the *mysterium passionis*, centered on the dignity of Christ’s solitude (VI, 451), which implies a mystical attitude. In contrast to Protestantism, Unamuno identifies this solitude as the essence of Catholic popular piety, which, as Orringer has noted, is marked by the rejection of *implicit fides*



#### ARMANDO SAVIGNANO

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(i.e., ecclesiastical obedience) and by a “sorrowful individualism”. This is reflected in the contemplation of Christ’s solitude, particularly in: a) the greatness of the Savior, which is revealed only in the hour of supreme sacrifice; and b) the harshness, yet also the majesty, of Christ’s solitude. However, the mystic, under pain of losing individuality, desires “not absorption, not stillness, not peace, but an eternal approach to the end without ever reaching it, an unfulfillable anxiety without hope, which eternally renews itself without ever completely fulfilling itself” (VII, 245). This implies an intensity of feeling – a burning and consuming experience, regardless of its conclusion. It is, ultimately, about experiencing the feeling rather than acquiescing to union with its object. After all, as Unamuno observes in the *Tragic Sense of Life*, “Christ is dying continuously, without ever ceasing to die, in order to give us life”.

A central role is played by *Ecce Homo*, where, according to Cerezo Galán, an anti-Nietzschean tone rather than a humanist one emerges (VI, 422). The entirety of this celebrated poem must, therefore, be interpreted not in a “crassly humanist” sense but in an agonistic sense, as it represents the only possibility of inspiring a Christian tragedy that, without secularist concessions, can also contemplate the hope of transcendence. There is also a sense of mystical illumination, as the light of Christ radiates within each individual, without neglecting its aesthetic implications.

In the more specifically theological part, Unamuno revisits the theme of *apocatastasis* in light of Pauline theology. With Harnack, Unamuno can affirm:

*“You Christ by death have given  
human purpose to the universe  
And you were at last death of death”* (VI, 485).

This motif is also present in the 1913 work: “If we trust in Christ for this life only, we are the most miserable of all men”, wrote the Apostle Paul (I, Cor., XIV, 19); in fact, every religion draws its historical origin “from the worship of the dead, that is, from the worship of immortality” (VII, 153).

The grand final oration represents a lyrical meditation on the outcomes of Christ’s death and the hope of eternal salvation. Thus, the great hope of this poem is based on the reverse syllogism, expressed in *Cómo se hace una novela*. Christ is immortal, Christ is man, and therefore, every man is immortal. In the closing verses of the final oration, Unamuno eloquently expresses himself as follows:

*“Standing and with arms wide open,  
Stretching out the right so that it does not dry out,  
Make us pass this petrous life  
- calvary ascent - supported  
To duty from the nails. Make that standing,  
We die, like You, our arms open,  
And ascend, like You, to glory  
Standing up for God to speak to us  
And with outstretched arms. Do, Lord,  
That when I eventually leave  
The cavern of this dark night,  
In which dreaming the heart clouds  
You enter the clear day without occaso  
With eyes fixed in your white body,  
Son of Man, complete Humanity,  
In the uncreated light that never dies,  
With eyes fixed in your eyes, Christ,  
With my eyes drowned in You, Lord.”*

To properly evaluate the Unamunian Christological image, particularly as it emerges in the two poems and his fundamental philosophical work, it is crucial to avoid serious misunderstandings. One must emphasize the profound unity of inspiration in Unamuno’s reflection on the Christological theme, despite the complexity of his spiritual and intellectual evolution. Although he highlights different aspects at various times – shaped by differing inspirational subjects, multiple modes of expression, and his personal and spiritual circumstances – these perspectives are not contradictory. Rather, they represent complementary viewpoints that harmonize into an organic and coherent whole. Ultimately, they express the popular faith and mystical piety of the Spanish people in the crucified Christ, emphasizing various pessimistic, despairing, agonistic-tragic, or heroic ideals, always rooted in a deeply lived experience.

While the poem on Velázquez’s Christ is undoubtedly a work of profound feeling and poetic expression – whose complex theological background resists unambiguous interpretation – it remains inseparable from Unamuno’s philosophical work on the tragic feeling of life. The poem continues Unamuno’s critical dialogue with liberal Protestantism, especially with Harnack, while also showing certain sympathies with the modernist movement. What, ultimately, can be said about this Unamunian image of Christ? There is no doubt that, despite its complexities, the poem on Velázquez’s Christ reflects a deeply Christian religiosity, expressed with sincere, if not entirely orthodox, intentions. ■

## EXHIBITION

# SAFET ZEC

*Pain in the skin, an art confronting contemporary tragedy.  
At the Venice Biennale.*

Natalia Tyurkina



Zec intent on finishing the work *Woman (or Mother) with Child*, photo By Hana Zec. Opposite page, *Embrace from the Admira and Bosko cycle*, 2019.

Safet Zec, Bosnian painter and engraver of international stature, is one of the protagonists of the Biennale Arte 2024. His participation in the Venice Pavilion "Domestic Sextant" is a tribute to his talent and to his deep connection with Venice, where he settled in 1998.

Safet Zec's paintings are very intense and dramatic. The first impression brings the spectator to think of sacred art, as if the artist is interpreting the mother's pain during the removal of Christ's body from the cross. Upon a second, more focused look, one realizes that the bloodstains are derived from bullets-timestamps of the contemporary world, namely, the war in Yugoslavia. Actually, it is a timeless image, for the grief of the mother who loses a child spans the millennia without changing sign.

The sense of impending tragedy is conveyed with scrupulous attention to material detail. Contrasts of light on the muscles and ribs, hands and feet of the body of a man who is praying passionately. And the maximally lit red stripe on his hips dramatizes the situation and immediately evokes blood. Minimal and dumbfounding draperies, out of time and nationality, to enhance the arms and hands of a parent who, with his embrace, wants to return the life so precious that has just been stolen. These are arms that do not speak: it is a mute scream. The hands of the father carrying the body of his child are extremely tense, protesting this inhuman reality. And as much as he is alone, the hands are joined, as if in prayer: they speak to them, they are empty and speak of emptiness. Hunger is an inseparable accomplice of war.

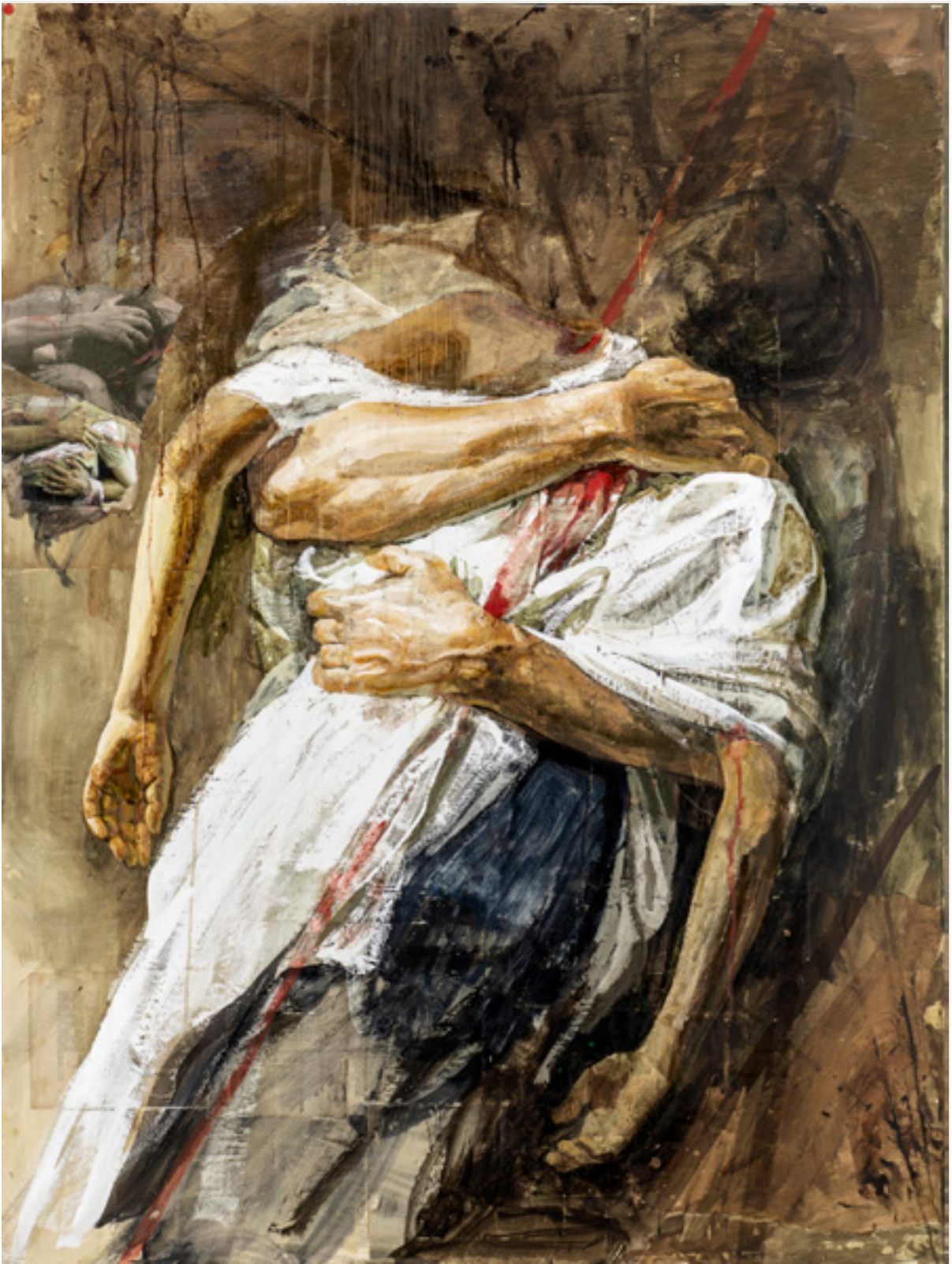
The loaf of bread, like the human body on the white sheet, like the body of Christ, also stands precious and still. It too seems full of pain.

The heads and faces of the sog casts are perhaps not so interesting to Safet Zec. After all, such deep sorrow has great iconographic personality but no individuality: it transcends the events of individual people.

As an environmental element, the hyper-realistic tree frond is so dense that, compared to the other paintings, it looks like the dusty cloud of an explosion. An impression augmented by the muted, almost chromatic colors. There is no green, no blue, even the sky has lost its color along with life, and is so transparent and dusty as to generate a physical sense of oppression. The color palette and transparent glaze recall Italian Renaissance art, especially to Andrea Mantegna's *Christ in Pity*.







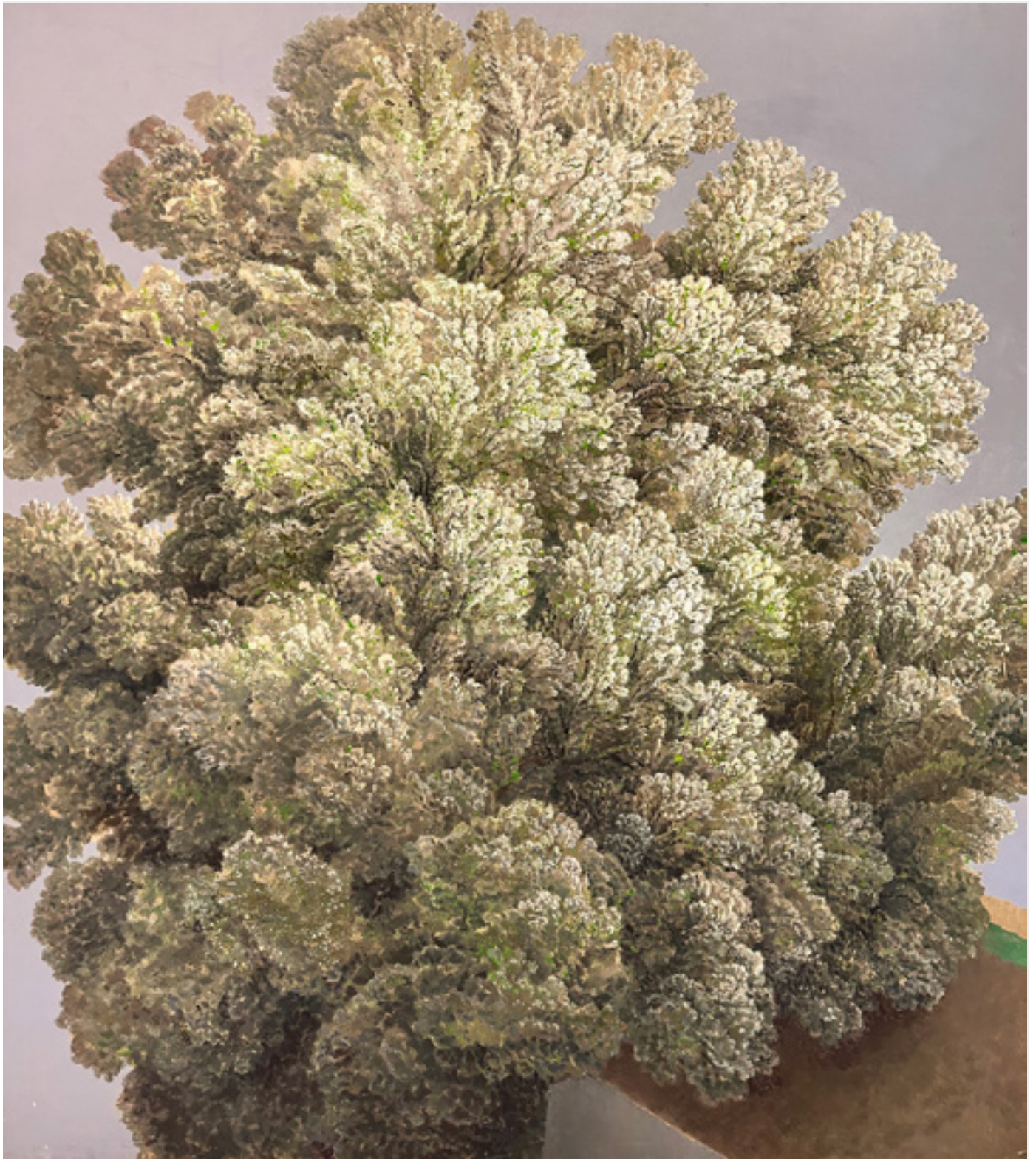
Safet Zec, *Embrace*, 1998. Opposite page, *Man in prayer*, 2006.





Safet Zec, *Bread on the white tablecloth*, 2002. Opposite page, *Woman in prayer*, 2023.





Safet Zec, *Great white hair*, 1984. Opposite page, *Man and child* from the 2016-17 Exodus cycle.



# FOR A NEW THEORY OF WRITING

*In the beginning was ... the end effect. How to write a detective story from the logic and teachings of Edgar Allan Poe. A deductive narratology approach.*

Fabrizio Amadori

Poe writes in one of his famous essays, *The philosophy of composition*, actually not well known in Italy by the general public: “I prefer commencing with the consideration of an effect. Keeping originality always in view... I say to myself, in the first place, ‘Of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?’”

Then, Poe wonders why an article on the procedures leading an author to finish a literary text has never been written before.

And he believes this is due to vanity.

“Most writers prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy — an ecstatic intuition — and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought”. Poe decides, therefore, to write this article himself. And, for that purpose, he chooses *The Raven*, which is a poem. “It is my design to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referable either to accident or intuition — that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem.”

“The initial consideration was that of extent. If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely

important effect derivable from unity of impression, for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and everything like totality is at once destroyed.”

Poe decides, then, to write a poem not exceeding 100 verses. By doing so, Poe actually follows Aristotle, who writes in *The Poetics*, “...As bodies and living things must possess a magnitude that can be well perceived, so fables must have an extent that can all be well understood in memory.”

Thus Poe continues, “my next thought concerned the choice of an impression, or effect, to be conveyed: and here I may as well observe that, throughout the construction, I kept steadily in view the design of rendering the work universally appreciable....”

And since “When men speak of Beauty, they mean, precisely, not a quality, as is supposed, but an effect,” it is clear that Poe wanted and needed to achieve this very result.

His lesson goes on: “Regarding, then, Beauty as my province, my next question referred to the tone of its highest manifestation — and all experience has shown that this tone is one of sadness. Beauty of whatever kind, in its supreme development, invariably excites the sensitive soul to tears. Melancholy is thus the most legitimate of all the poetical tones. The length, the province, and the tone, being thus determined, I betook myself to ordinary induction,





*with the view of obtaining some artistic piquancy which might serve me as a key-note in the construction of the poem — some pivot upon which the whole structure might turn. In carefully thinking over all the usual artistic effects — or more properly points, in the theatrical sense — I did not fail to perceive immediately that no one had been so universally employed as that of the refrain. The universality of its employment sufficed to assure me of its intrinsic value, and spared me the necessity of submitting it to analysis. I considered it, however, with regard to its susceptibility of improvement, and soon saw it to be in a primitive condition. As commonly used, the refrain, or burden, not only is limited to lyric verse, but depends for its impression upon the force of monotone — both in sound and thought. The pleasure is deduced solely from the sense of identity — of repetition. I resolved to diversify, and so vastly heighten, the effect, by adhering, in general, to the monotone of sound, while I continually varied that of thought: that is to say, I determined to produce continuously novel effects, by the variation of the application of the refrain — the refrain itself remaining, for the most part, unvaried.*

*These points being settled, I next bethought me of the nature of my refrain. Since its application was to be repeatedly varied, it was clear that the refrain itself must be brief, for there would have been an insurmountable difficulty in frequent variations of application in any sentence of length. In proportion to the brevity of the sentence, would, of course, be the facility of the variation. This led me at once to a single word as the best refrain.”*

In order to adopt the refrain, the poem, of course, had to be divided into stanzas, and the refrain had to complete each one of them. His remarks continue, *“That such a close, to have force, must be sonorous and susceptible of protracted emphasis, admitted no doubt: and these considerations inevitably led me to the long o as the most sonorous vowel, in connection with r as the most producible consonant.”*

Which word contained both of them? The first one that came to Poe’s mind was *nevermore* (never again). And he explains, *“the next desideratum was a pretext for the continuous use of the one word “nevermore.” In observing the difficulty which I at once found in inventing a sufficiently plausible reason for its continuous repetition, I did not fail to perceive that this difficulty arose solely from the pre-*

*assumption that the word was to be so continuously or monotonously spoken by a human being — I did not fail to perceive, in short, that the difficulty lay in the reconciliation of this monotony with the exercise of reason on the part of the creature repeating the word. Here, then, immediately arose the idea of a non-reasoning creature capable of speech; and, very naturally, a parrot, in the first instance, suggested itself, but was superseded forthwith by a Raven, as equally capable of speech, and infinitely more in keeping with the intended tone.*

To summarize: we now have a raven, a bird of ill omen, repeating a single word, *nevermore*, at the end of each stanza of a poem, of approximately a hundred verses, imbued with deep melancholy.

Poe then wonders which, by definition, the most melancholic subject to tackle is. Death.

And when does such a subject become supremely poetic? When it is related to Beauty. Therefore, the death of a beautiful woman is the most poetic subject in the world. But the most suitable lips to deal with such a topic are those of the lady’s lover (not those of a crow, a creature devoid of reason and heart).

To recapitulate once again, now the two ideas, the one of a lover mourning his dead woman, and other of a raven endlessly repeating the word *nevermore*, have to be combined.

Poe explains, *“I had now to combine the two ideas, of a lover lamenting his deceased mistress and a Raven continuously repeating the word “Nevermore” — I had to combine these, bearing in mind my design of varying, at every turn, the application of the word repeated; but the only intelligible mode of such combination is that of imagining the Raven employing the word in [column 2:] answer to the queries of the lover. And here it was that I saw at once the opportunity afforded for the effect on which I had been depending — that is to say, the effect of the variation of application. I saw that I could make the first query propounded by the lover — the first query to which the Raven should reply “Nevermore” — that I could make this first query a commonplace one — the second less so — the third still less, and so on — until at length the lover, startled from his original nonchalance by the melancholy character of the word itself — by its frequent repetition — and by a consideration of the ominous reputation of the fowl that uttered it — is at length excited to superstition, and wildly propounds queries of a*

far different character — queries whose solution he has passionately at heart — propounds them half in superstition and half in that species of despair which delights in self-torture — propounds them not altogether because he believes in the prophetic or demoniac character of the bird (which, reason assures him, is merely repeating a lesson learned by rote) but because he experiences a phrenzied pleasure in so modeling his questions as to receive from the expected “Nevermore” the most delicious because the most intolerable of sorrow. Perceiving the opportunity thus afforded me — or, more strictly, thus forced upon me in the progress of the construction — I first established in mind the climax, or concluding query — that to which “Nevermore” should be in the last place an answer — that in reply to which this word “Nevermore” should involve the utmost conceivable amount of sorrow and despair.

Here then the poem may be said to have its beginning — at the end, where all works of art should begin — for it was here, at this point of my pre-considerations, that I first put pen to paper in the composition of the stanza:

“Prophet,” said I, “thing of evil! prophet still if bird or devil!

By that heaven that bends above us — by that God we both adore,

Tell this soul with sorrow laden, if within the distant Aidenn,

It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore —

Clasp a rare and radiant maiden whom the angels name Lenore.”

Quoth the raven “Nevermore.”

Poe adds, “Had I been able, in the subsequent composition, to construct more vigorous stanzas, I should, without scruple, have purposely enfeebled them, so as not to interfere with the climacteric effect. And here I may as well say a few words of the versification... originality (unless in minds of very unusual force) is by no means a matter, as some suppose, of impulse or intuition. In general, to be found, it must be elaborately sought, and although a positive merit of the highest class, demands in its attainment less of invention than negation.”

Now, each one of *The Raven’s* verses, individually taken, has already been used before, therefore the real novelty of the poem “consists in their combination in the room.” Another point to examine is the

setting. Poe says: “it has always appeared to me that a close circumscription of space is absolutely necessary to the effect of insulated incident: — it has the force of a frame to a picture. It has an indisputable moral power in keeping concentrated the attention, and, of course, must not be confounded with mere unity of place.”

A room richly furnished to convey the concept of Beauty previously mentioned. Thus, Poe ends, “I had now to introduce the bird — and the thought of introducing him through the window, was inevitable. The idea of making the lover suppose, in the first instance, that the flapping of the wings of the bird against the shutter, is a “tapping” at the door, originated in a wish to increase, by prolonging, the reader’s curiosity, and in a desire to admit the incidental effect arising from the lover’s throwing open the door, finding all dark, and thence adopting the half-fancy that it was the spirit of his mistress that knocked.

I made the night tempestuous, first, to account for the Raven’s seeking admission, and secondly, for the effect of contrast with the (physical) serenity within the chamber.

I made the bird alight on the bust of Pallas, also for [column 2:] the effect of contrast between the marble and the plumage — it being understood that the bust was absolutely suggested by the bird — the bust of Pallas being chosen, first, as most in keeping with the scholarship of the lover, and, secondly, for the sonorousness of the word, Pallas, itself.”

Poe makes a few more considerations, but in my opinion these ones suffice to give a good idea of what it means to “pay attention to the effect,” that is the reader’s reactions, which, finally, leads us to the realm of psychology.

Keep in mind, however, that three years were necessary in order to complete his poetic masterpiece, and it is very likely that the author drew inspiration, for the famous *nevermore* refrain, from another poem of that period.

## THE TEN DEDUCTIVE NARRATOLOGICAL STEPS

1) I plan to write a detective story.

Which is the most plausible language for it? The one used in television, made of short and dry lines.

2) I want to create a relation of confidence and sympathy between my reader and the detective. Indeed, I want the reader to be on his side. I quickly realize, however, that the reader is always

on the investigator's side. But to make him more appealing, I decide to use a well-known technique, the one that precisely creates a sort of intimacy: the first person narrative. It creates a direct connection between the main character and the reader, every opportunity becomes thus precious in order to highlight the personal traits of the character. Then, since it is a detective story, the reader will, even more than in other situations, not miss a single word of the main character: I, therefore, decided to make him always say nice and kind things. My main character, in short, must not sound like a policeman.

3) Not having read much fiction in this literary genre, I decide to turn to movies.

4) I immediately understand that the most loved film of the genre, and the one that could be better adapted to a literary version, is the television series of the Lieutenant Columbo. The beauty of that series lies first and foremost in the main character's ability to investigate, a skill that, I believe, derives from logical reasoning (Derrick's, on the other hand, is rather intuitive, and analyses, to understand the matter, the psychological traits of the suspects). I decide to remove the first part of the movie, the one showing the murderer in action: this is in order to distance myself from the model, and to prevent an easy and risky association to it. The model does not have to be obvious, but I have to follow it in order to be successful: I, therefore, decide not to have my detective speak in Columbo's style, but to preserve, nevertheless, his investigative method.

5) As I said, I thus removed the first part: in doing so, however, I impoverish my work twice. Primarily, because I deprive it of its introduction; and then because I deprive it of an effect that the first part (the one, I repeat, in which we see the murderer in action) defines and introduces: the subtle psychological warfare, admirably expressed through the dialogue, between the detective and the suspect. In fact, since I only focus on one or two characters (besides the detective), the reader of the story understands anyway who the felon is: the psychological warfare has thus not completely disappeared. It has simply been weakened, since one of the "literary fronts" has been undermined. In fact, the back and forth between the detective and the felon is more effective than the one between the detective and a character who is simply viewed

as a potential suspect. His answers will engage us less than those of whom we know, with certainty, to be the murderer. The reader will then dilute the attention that would have otherwise been exclusively focused on just one character. What is thus lost in strength, I must somehow regain in other ways. The verbal exchanges between the two suspects will have to recapture the reader's attention that has been partially lost for the above mentioned reason: that is, they will have to be particularly effective.

6) I believe that featuring Columbo's method is not enough to perfectly identify with the initial model: the effectiveness and popularity of his method consists, in fact, in creating a reaction in the viewer whose nature is so general and universal that it cannot be exclusively linked to a film or a literary product.

7) If I think about the various episodes of the television series "Columbo", I can deduce that the purpose of indicating the murderer, from the very start, is obviously not attained in order to take away from the viewer the pleasure of autonomously discovering the felon. However, this is neither done only to create, as I said before, a psychological war between Columbo and the murderer, because the positive effect of such a dialogue barely balances the displeasure of being deprived of the final surprise concerning the felon's identity. The purpose, in my view, is to show that each detective's reasoning underlines a contradiction in the opponent's argument, something which is particularly effective since it not only follows a logic that we understand and share ("Yes," we think each time, "that's right. Yes, that's the point."), but because we clearly know that Columbo is targeting the true guilty party. From this point of view, in retrospect, what I stated earlier is not even correct: there is certainly no final surprise concerning the identity of the guilty party, but a final surprise still awaits the viewer. A surprise which is not based on the identity of the criminal, but on the development of a reasoning process: that is, which will be the final analysis that will make the culprit fall? The suspense, as we can notice, has absolutely not been eliminated.

8) Recalling the various episodes of the TV series, I realize that, although I see the murderer in action, I do not understand everything he does. My admiration for Columbo is, therefore, due to

his ability to understand what the murderer has done, despite the fact that he, unlike me, didn't see him committing the crime. Moreover, his ability lies in his capacity to explain things to me, that is who had the opportunity to "witness" the murder but was nevertheless unable to understand it. Often it is indeed not enough to see a person act in order to understand the reasons behind his actions: but it is, however, even more difficult to understand what he is doing, or what he has done, if you do not see him or have not seen him in action. The scriptwriter (actually the screenwriters) of the series, however, always tries to make it difficult for us to understand the initial actions of the murderer because it is certainly not convenient for us to figure things out before our witty detective has been able to explain them. There is no question that Columbo as an investigator is far more capable than I am: this is certainly the final result which has been sought, and that is indeed the feeling we all get from watching the episodes of the show. And the risk of disliking him, deriving from this acknowledgment of inferiority, is removed by the fact that Columbo is an extremely modest, clumsy and pleasant character. He is not an intellectual; he only makes use of logic. Having said all this, I, in any case, decided to remove the first part, that is, the part where I witness the murderer's actions. In this way, however, my detective's reasoning will create a less effective impression than the one produced by Columbo's deductions precisely because I eliminate the contrast I mentioned earlier: the gap between Columbo's ability, who understands even though he has not seen the crime, and my capacity (mine as a viewer) to sort things out. But such is the price I pay for not revealing my model.

9) Thus, my investigator's reasoning must also be particularly effective, like the one of his opponents.

10) And since, in order to evaluate a reasoning, like anything else in fiction, I have to keep in mind the final effect produced, I decide to put aside all this reasoning process, that, in spite of all its wittiness and complexity, would not create a successful final effect.

In this case, in my modest way, I start, like Poe, from the end: he started from the end of the poem, I, on the other hand, start from the

end of the reasoning, meaning its final effect, in order to decide later which effect I will ultimately choose.

#### **MORE GENERALLY**

I start thinking about the effect. But not like Poe - for whom the effects to which the mind is sensitive are countless, and the problem becomes, in this case, to figure out which would be the best effect under a given circumstance - but in the sense that, as far as the construction of the detective plot is concerned, I estimate the effectiveness of a passage from a psychological (not a logical) point of view. If, for example, I have to choose between two passages that seem equally logical to me, I certainly choose the one that seems more plausible, or the one that inspires me the most for the development of the story. In fact, each one of us is captivated by a specific kind of logic, but that has nothing to do with the consistency of the respective logics.

I have often noticed that there are some kind of logics that are preferred to others not because of their intrinsic strength - of which they are, in reality, sometimes even deprived - but because of their capacity to captivate the readers, and to convince them of their truthfulness. Now, such truthfulness is questioned even by professional experts, who firmly assert that the logic behind real crimes is very different from the one described in many good detective stories. The writer, however, knows that the reader is led to project the described events into an imaginary world, into a world that is similar to the real one only in its external appearance, but whose substance is completely different. The laws that regulate such an imaginary world are not the real ones - the ones of physics, for example -, in this sense, we can even violate these laws without ruining anything, if such violation is carried out in the full respect of the psychological laws that exist within us, and that govern our imaginary world. It is as if, since we are immersed in an imaginary world, that is, a world invented by our mind and existing within us, we can take all the liberties we want vis-à-vis the realities of an external world, an external world that we cannot completely eliminate because of our incapacity to recreate an imaginary world from scratch.

**LOGIC AND PSYCHOLOGY**

But let's talk again about my favorite logic, a logic which develops itself through dialogue.

If a suspect's observation seems unconvincing, we might think (we, the writers) that we are not allowing the detective to take any special credit when he criticizes him effectively, and thus forgo creating in the reader the admiration that is a necessary condition for the detective story's main character to succeed. But since I am the one who writes the detective story, I have an advantage over the reader who can only read it (and knows nothing about the author's opinion on this matter), and, being well disposed towards a book he has chosen to distract himself with, the reader will even consider the second reflection necessary (that is the detective's one). With this we will have momentarily won his esteem towards the main character.

What is viewed as necessary, in fact, is not considered as such on an absolute level: in fact, the story could have taken, from there, another direction, and the observation revealed itself in retrospect to be a mistake, perhaps the only one made by the detective, may be the very thing around which the whole plot of the detective story revolves.

There is no doubt that the observation process seems necessary in perspective, in the light of what is yet to come: for the detective is destined to win, and he who wins is always right. This is why his observations are "by definition" the right ones, and even when we advance another ones, maybe equally convincing but opposed to the detective's point of view, and we do so through a different character's words, this version is set aside in favor of the hero's one, a version that has the power to make us feel particularly stupid if it is completely different from what we had previously imagined.

But, on close inspection, we enter into a vicious circle because the point of view appears to be excellent since it is destined to succeed- the detective's success (= the final solution of the case) - but it is a success based on psychological, not logical motives, that is, on the fact that a success has already been prepared, and that, therefore, the considerations leading to it appear more logical and necessary than they actually are, and it matters little if the logical component of it is weaker than the psychological one. That is, it doesn't matter if what is even supposed to be the logical necessity of the observation is not due to logical

reasons but to psychological ones: what matters is that such an observation appears to be the most logical to the reader.

Having said this, it's obvious that we must still talk about the logic behind our arbitrarily chosen reasoning, but it is a reasoning that has no particular value other than the one of meeting the reader's expectations. And, since the reader's expectations are on average not very high, we should not give the audience more than what is required: except in a few cases, which, with some luck, we can obtain the satisfaction of a more demanding (= critical) audience.

My priority is to find a way to make the logic for my detective story captivating, and I assume I can do so through the dialogues, with my characters continually competing with each other. Of course, the logic which has to prevail, for the already mentioned reasons, must be the detective's one, and even when he does not seem entirely convincing, or convinced of what he is saying, I do not allow other characters to overcome him with a better argument (what does this remind you of? See Poe and *climax*, the previous rooms must not be better than the last one).

The second reason that makes me choose dialogue as an instrument for expressing logic, - in addition to the fact that I can easily captivate readers through the competition building up between characters, - is because I am familiar with dialogue as a literary device, and with the kind of logic which is expressed through it, and that I myself usually express through dialogue. I am, therefore, obliged to use it as the main instrument to create my detective story.

**FABRIZIO AMADORI**

Genoese, an expert in communication for companies, he loves German and Russian literature. From a cultural and philosophical point of view, he is mainly concerned by the theory of writing, and on this as on other topics he has composed several essays published in important journals (*Ideazione, Avanguardia, Filosofia*, and others). He has composed a number of poems including *Gemelli*. He first introduced the concept of "deductive" or creative narratology (*Prometeo* No. 145). He coined the term "dermocracy" (*Micromega*, newsletter Aug. 4, 2023). He has a blog, [nerosubianco.blog](http://nerosubianco.blog)

So, I have always known which kind of logic is within my grasp in order to create a detective story, which is not the one expressed in the long run by the plot, but the one expressed through the direct verbal interactions of the main characters, the very one that characterizes my daily conversations with people. Therefore, what Poe said for another genre, seems to be valid, to me, for the detective story genre, that is to say that it is nothing but a succession of little “discoveries,” due to the detective’s witty observations, before the final discovery.

It is obvious that such a final discovery is the most important one, since it is the definitive one; and in order to strike the reader, it has to come from afar. For this reason, at least one of the detective’s discoveries must not tease (only) the reader’s psychological needs (we have already said that the reader must often say to himself “yes, it is so”), but it must impress him on a deeper level, it has to be really effective on the logical level.

It is, therefore, clear that if one lacks the ability to succeed in this, he/she can never aspire to become a good mystery writer, - at least for the kind of plot I have described: essential but requiring a logical basis compensating for its general simplicity, as it does not happen in texts where, from the start, the logic expressed is reasonably solid, being more connected with the plot.

After having decided which logic will be featured, - in my case, it is the one that is created through the main characters’ dialogue, never losing sight of the need for a deeper intuition that I somehow know I cannot have -, I ask myself which style I’ll use for my detective story.

This choice is also not fortuitous: since it is meant to be, in my intention, a very logical detective story, I need a style that does not enhance action, but, on the contrary, the thinking process. After having necessarily discarded the easy literary *behaviorism*, I adopt a style that limits the action but not to the point of hindering it - it has to remain a detective story - and I, therefore, decide to adopt a style defined by broad, but not baroque, sentences.

#### FINAL NOTE ON CHARACTERS

Once I have chosen the type of logic, I wish to make my detective look good by putting the best remarks in his or her mouth. They don’t have to

be complex but easy for the reader to understand, in accordance with the simple logic I have decided to adopt.

Having clarified that, I think it is important to give depth to my characters. In fact, I realize that if I didn’t do so, they would be mere wind instruments for my reasoning, completely devoid of psychological depth. Choosing to use the first person narrative, that generally creates a sense of intimacy, has precisely this specific purpose: to make us feel closer to the detective, the narrative voice. The main result has thus been achieved because, indisputably, the primary target of such a humanization process is the main character.

Now the problem is to confer humanity to all the other characters. I obviously cannot make them give long speeches, destined to reveal important aspects of their personality, but I immediately realize that this is not necessary, because a character’s vitality arises from the dialogue, not by a particular kind of content, and by their ability to express sensible and coherently composed sentences, which are pivotal in a detective story. Vitality simply comes from wisdom and rigor. The character is like a machine: if he/she gives mechanical and predictable answers, he/she is not a real person - however, unlike the machine, his/her purpose is indeed to seem real, the machine has, if anything, other purposes. The subject that does not seem real disappoints us and we no longer follow the story. If, on the contrary, it seems “clever”, we will like it. I think this does not mean giving depth to the characters’ personalities: in fact, one thing is to give life to a character, another thing is to convey his deep inner self. But, in a detective story, it is absolutely not wise to create characters who are more complex than what is required by the literary genre itself, which endorses reasoning and action over psychological depth. Nevertheless, I wish to add here a psychological note related to the main characters. Since I cannot do it through the dialogue, caught up as I am in expressing reasoning, nor through action, having chosen to write a quite static detective story, I think I might succeed through the description of some characters’ everyday gestures. For example, after having my second suspect speak, I might write, “(...) and she ended her speech with a note of satisfaction in her voice. A satisfaction which was also evident by the way she crossed her legs after talking.” ■

# THE SEARCH FOR PURITY

*A tremendous image of the world filled with microbes as terrifying as they are invisible. The twentieth century saw a ghostly coterie of figures that stigmatized “dirt” and championed the need for cleanliness.*

Gianfranco Marrone

Who remembers Tombolino? Very few likely, perhaps no one at all. Tombolino is the protagonist of a short, subversive educational film commissioned in 1932 by Benito Mussolini for a major anti-tubercular campaign launched by the Regime. The film was directed by Luigi Liberio Pensuti, a pioneer of Italian cartoons.

Tombolino is a quiet, endearing little boy, but he never bathes. He detests water and loathes soap above all else. One day, he ventures on a school trip to the Zoological Garden (where the Fascist salute is obligatory). There, among monkeys and giraffes, he encounters Dr. Perticone, a tall, lanky man with thick glasses and a conspicuous white beard, who roams the zoo scrutinizing everything—animals and plants alike—through a powerful magnifying glass. Perticone, as explained by the intertitles in the silent film, is a great hygienist, so he does not miss the myriad bacteria and various germs that proliferate among the hair of the caged beasts. Nor does he overlook the chimpanzees, who spend their days grooming themselves. He also notices Tombolino’s black fingernails, which, when viewed through the magnifying glass, reveal themselves to be teeming with horrid little black bugs that squirm uncontrollably. “Your nails are full of bacilli that cause infections and terrible diseases”, the doctor informs the child in another intertitle. But Tombolino pays him no heed and runs off to join the other schoolchildren. While

running, he falls, skins his knee, and is forced to limp on the way home. He also loses his Balilla cap.

Once he reaches his bed, his knee is in severe pain. He holds it tightly with one (very dirty!) hand and barely manages to fall asleep. Inevitably, a nightmare ensues, where millions of germs, so large as to be visible to the naked eye, attack his burning knee. Flames engulf the knee, and in this dreamlike tale, Tombolino is lassoed by a devil who drags him to a hellish cavern—“The Lair of Filthy Hands”—where enormous microbes (a terrifying oxymoron) beat wild drums and wear nose rings. The leader of the devils orders the verdict: “Let him be fed to the bacilli”. And lo and behold, thousands of sharp arrows—launched by hideous, bearded, filthy-black balls—pierce the knee, while the grief-stricken boy weeps hot, bitter tears. A cage opens, and out come millions of tiny creatures of all shapes—round and hairy, curvy, threadlike, horned, bony...—who, dancing, sneak in droves into the still-open wound.

The awakening is dramatic. A black cat is even perched on the bedside. The child is crying his heart out, so much so that his poor mother—clad in a patched cape and bonnet—calls the doctor for help. Perticone, pulled from bed, grabs his bag with the tools of the trade and rushes, on a scooter, to the child’s house, where the boy is wailing at the top of his lungs. He lays out a saw, hammer, and drill on the blanket (fortunately, there is also a bottle of ether),



Don't let them whisper behind your back!

Lifebuy Health Soap is the *only* soap especially made to stop "G.C." germs. Remember, **LIFEBUY CONTAINS AN EXCLUSIVE PURIFYING INGREDIENT.** A daily Lifebuy bath gives you such *lasting* odorous protection! And Lifebuy is so satisfying and refreshing, you'll be delighted with your exhilarating **LIFEBUY** bath. Use Lifebuy for a week and you'll see it *for life!*

*Used in the homes of 40 million Americans.*

The refreshing bath that gives lasting protection!  
The Soap of Considerate People  
*use it daily*

ANOTHER FINE PRODUCT OF LITTON BROTHERS COMPANY

**Crowds Breed Contagion**

**H**UMAN beings were meant to live in the open, guarded by the prophylactics of sunshine and pure air.

There is always danger of contagion in crowds—in factories, elevators, street cars, theaters.

Diseases and great health institutes have proved that most disease germs pass from one person to another by actual contact. Things which many people touch are always dangerous—for kinks, public telephones, door knobs, books, school money, street rails. Germs are carried by hands to mouth, nose or food.

In every crowd there are almost certainly several "carriers" of disease germs.

A "carrier" is a person who is perfectly well but who secretly had a mild, undiagnosed case of diphtheria, influenza, measles, or some other illness. The person soon recovered and became immune to the disease but the germs multiplied by millions, harmless to the "carrier" but of deadly menace to everyone else. "Carriers" move about in every class of society. There are thousands of them.

There is only one protection from this danger—perfect, scientific cleanliness.

If you will purify hands and face frequently with a true health soap, especially when associated with crowds, there is less likelihood of the germs entering your body through

mouth or nose or passing on to your wife and children.

**Lifebuy Protects**

Lifebuy is a true health soap. Its creamy, organic lather removes a wonderful antiseptic ingredient which goes deep down into every pore, purifying—removing body oils—eliminating the menace of dirty things.

Soap cannot be made that is more pure, more bland, more benefiting than Lifebuy. Its rich, nourishing oils of palm fruit and cocconut keep the skin soft, free from blemishes—and purified.

You know Lifebuy is a health soap by its wholesome, pungent odor. The odor vanishes quickly—but the protection remains.

Mothers—you who are "health doctors" to your families—guard those you love by placing a slab of Lifebuy at every place where there is running water. *Leavitt Bros Co., Cambridge, Mass.*

**MORE THAN SOAP—A HEALTH HABIT**

"How use doth breed a habit"

USE  
**Pears' Soap**  
IT'S A GOOD HABIT

il "traspirodor" può rompere un'amizizia

oggi Safeguard - sapone deodorante - elimina totalmente il "traspirodor"

See Safeguard full-size deodorant soap advertisement page 100 in the "Yellow Pages" Safeguard soap deodorizes, kills germs, keeps skin soft, and is "fragrant" in an "elegant" perfume which is "pleasant" to all. Safeguard soap is "Safeguard" in every way. Safeguard Soap is made in the U.S.A. by The Gillette Safety Razor Company, Boston, Massachusetts.

"Look, Mom—no cavities!"

Check Cavitech with your little brother's little brother—because he has been the prettiest and healthiest. And Cavitech makes your mouth—preserve your beauty.

**Cavitech**

From 1915 to 1969: some of advertising pages that helped to build the collective imagination according to the exigent need for "purity".

preparing to settle the matter himself—while the cat watches, sneering at the gruesome scene.

A montage cut spares us the moment of amputation, which we can infer shortly afterward as we see Tombolino sitting in a chair, his legs covered, reading a large hygiene book while the other children play on the rides. The moral is written by the little golden-haired schoolteacher on the blackboard in the schoolroom: “Children, always keep your hands and nails clean if you don’t want to end up like Tombolino”. And with a close-up of the soap with which the poor boy has learned to clean his hands daily, this ten-minute tragedy with an uplifting moral comes to a close.

Rummaging through old vintage films—amidst sticky grandparents in their youth and early American comics—an aunt of mine, for laughs, would often show us children this film on summer afternoons (if you type in “Tombolino’s Hygiene”, you’ll find it immediately on the Web). And I, terrified, would not sleep at night. More than 30 years had passed since its first appearance; the economic boom had already arrived, bringing with it an entirely different culture of hygiene. But to me, those awful little beings that swelled Tombolino’s knee to the point of requiring amputation were pure terror. Viewed again today, filled as it is with stereotypes from the Ventennio, the video is disturbing for additional reasons: the undiligent child is implicitly compared to a monkey,

the bacilli are black, akin to colonized peoples, and the devils resemble the so-called savages of nascent evolutionary anthropology. But above all, hygienism is insidiously linked with a bad conscience, one of those threats typical of repressive education (“if you don’t eat, you’ll get rickets,” “if you don’t do your homework, you’ll end up in the mines,” “if you’re naughty, I’ll send you to boarding school,” “if you masturbate, you’ll go blind...”) that today appears as a caricature of itself, and that only a sleazy cartoon, even then, could still convey.

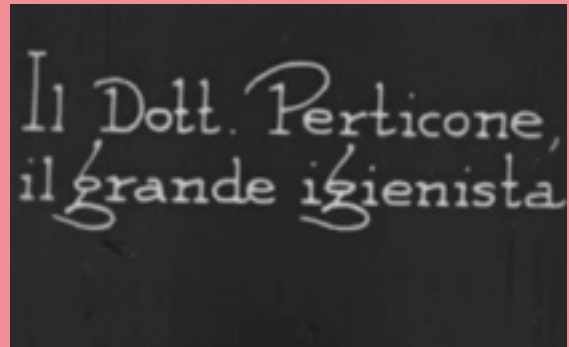
But there is one element of this grim story, in particular, that prompts further reflection—more interesting, perhaps, and certainly more original. An apparent minutia: Dr. Perticone’s magnifying glass. It allows one to see dirt where one would not think there is any. Dr. Perticone, an unabashed hygienist, always carries it with him in his overcoat pocket. And it is thanks to this magnifying glass that, like a novice Sherlock Holmes, he finds the culprit—not of murder, but certainly of a great misfortune like amputation. Where the little schoolteacher with the golden curls, always ready to display the Roman salute, thinks Tombolino is to blame for her troubles and indeed mourns him, Perticone does not. As a good clinician, he knows very well that the child is merely a victim, the unwitting victim of a more treacherous, meaner culprit: the tiny bacillus, the invisible microbe, the subtle germ that infiltrates the body and thrives without our knowledge. Thus, Perticone is not merely linking filth to disease, as one might say cleanliness to health, which is quite obvious. Far more profoundly, he is searching for the visible in the invisible, the most brute matter in the world in what is intangible and spiritual. Health and salvation, body and soul, understand each other all too well, and it is hygiene—this all-too-recent discipline—that notices this constantly. The devil, as Pensuti’s cartoon so aptly illustrates, is no longer in the detail, according to the traditional saying, but in the imperceptible, in the immeasurably small. The clinical eye, such as that of our big doctor, cannot detect it alone and needs the support of technology that opens up new worlds—universes as unknown as they are lethal.

### GIANFRANCO MARRONE

An essayist and writer, Marrone works on contemporary languages and discourses. He is a full professor of Semiotics in the Department of Cultures and Society at the University of Palermo. He has taught courses at the universities of Bologna, Bogotá, IULM, Jyväskylä, Limoges, Madrid, Meknès, Paris Descartes, Pollenzo, São Paulo, among others. He directs the International Center for Semiotic Sciences in Urbino and the journal *E/C* ([www.ec-aiss.it](http://www.ec-aiss.it)). He is president of the Sicilian Semiotic Circle. A publicist, he contributes to *Tuttolibri*, *doppiozero*, *Prometeo* and other publications. He is on the scientific committee of *Versus*, *Carte semiotiche*, *Lexia*, *Actes Sémiotiques*, *Ocula*, *Lid’O*. He directs the series “Insegne” at Mimesis and the “Biblioteca di Semiotica” at Meltemi. His latest book is on the *Semiocene* (Luiss 2024).

### THE COMBINATION OF HEALTH AND SALVATION

It is no coincidence, as Bruno Latour astutely demonstrates in an older text of his recently republished (*The Microbes: A Scientific-Political Treatise*, edited



Some stills from *L'igiene di Tombolino* (1932-34), one of the first Italian cartoons made by director Luigi Liberio Pensuti and distributed by Istituto Luce, with sharp didactic intent.

and with an afterword by Ilaria Ventura Bordenca, *Mimesis*), that the discovery of a microbe (the notorious anthrax) by Louis Pasteur in late 19th-century France not only preserved entire herds of animals and hundreds of human lives, but more importantly, transformed the very concept of collectivity, thereby altering the concrete social order. Thus, even the invisible began to play an effective role in structuring what was then termed the superorganic—a role all the more powerful the less visible it was to the naked eye. Indeed, the famous Pasteurian revolution polarized public opinion in a manner comparable only to the Dreyfus affair shortly thereafter: on one side were the hygienists, who, like our Perticone, hunted for bacilli wherever they might lurk; on the other side were the staunch Pasteurians, who identified anthrax as the singular cause of many of the world's ills. The former stoked fears of every kind, while the latter invoked medical science as the sole possible healer, not only of individual human bodies but also, more broadly, of the social body. The physician emerged as the celebrated hero of the positivist age, to the extent that even Homais, the obtuse pharmacist in

*Madame Bovary*, was awarded the Legion of Honor.

Benefiting from all this, unsurprisingly, was politics—the organization and management of power—which found at its disposal an additional authority: that of the scientist/medic/technologist, an authority that only seemingly replaced earlier divine legitimacies. “Science says so”, proclaimed the politician of the day at every turn, justifying most of his decisions concerning that reality—the reality that the institution of knowledge declared to exist. But this myth of the fact-in-itself, which so pleases politicians, is, as Latour reiterates on every page, not grounded in actual scientific practices (the locus of debate, conflict, and methodical doubt, as the very challenging history of Pasteur’s own statements demonstrates), but rather in a retrospective idealization of them—a notion of science that is entirely abstract, as airy and nonexistent as it is politically potent.

And where, then, does the nexus linking health to salvation, the care of the body to the care of the soul, lead? Looking back, as the eminent anthropologist Mary Douglas demonstrated in her time in the masterpiece that is *Purity and Danger*, the perception of

dirt is neither universal nor absolute; it depends on the relationship between objects, environments, and their internal organization. A shoe on the floor is not dirty; it becomes so if placed on the dining table. A bunch of lettuce looks fine in the kitchen sink, but it is repugnant if found on the bed. Dirt is disorder; cleanliness is order. And order is far from trivial (as Georges Perec taught us), reaching deep into the metaphysical organization of the world, and with it the theological thought that sustains it. Thus, dirt evokes contamination, confusion, and chaos, while cleanliness signifies order, and therefore salvation—of both body and soul.

In the context of modernity, secularization does not negate this connection but rather shifts it to another realm, one that is in some respects more prosaic and in others even more powerful: that of consumption and marketing, and thus, on the one hand, towards innovation related to design and, on the other, towards advertising communication related to brands. The fascinating book by Ilaria Ventura Bordenca and Giorgia Costanzo, recently released by FrancoAngeli, bears the definitive title: *Clean! Branding, Advertising, and the Cultures of Hygiene*. The text precisely illustrates how, roughly from the late 19th century to the present, the increasing focus on cleanliness and hygiene in self-proclaimed modern societies has paralleled the multiplication and diversification of hygiene products (both personal and household) and, further upstream, the technology—washing machines, dishwashers, vacuum cleaners—that underpins what the authors term “hygiene cultures”. By shifting the focus from the realm of medicine to that of culture, and thus to an anthropology that follows Douglas’s conclusions while keeping in mind Latour’s insights into the factual role of objects and technologies, Ventura and Costanzo reconstruct the dual history of soaps, detergents, dust catchers, shampoos, and various cleaning products, as well as brooms, polishers, vacuum cleaners, and technologies of all sorts. This history is dual because it is recounted once by advertising (those of the early 20th century are as hilarious as they are embarrassing: suffice it to say that at that time, hand soap and floor soap were the same) and a second time by the objects themselves, in the way they are perceived, employed, and experienced in homes (but also in urban streets) by consumers. We discover, for instance, who these consumers actually are (or were), who uses these products daily hailed as innovative, and according to whom these products

must be used. The stay-at-home wife, who was once tasked with pleasing her husband, gradually hands over to him the scepter of cleaning power, as if to say the vacuum cleaner; and it is he who now hunts not only the mess caused by adored children but also the filth left on floors and sofas by beloved pets—dogs, cats, budgies—that have taken the place of those children. As the family changes, so does the detergent that keeps it orderly and safeguards its inner purity.

And the underlying values, as well as the reference cultures, change in parallel. This is well illustrated by the story of Sir James Dyson, a wizard of the cleaning industry (and thus of purity), who gave his name to a series of technologies as innovative as they are expensive and that today represent what is known as the top of the line in the world of household appliances. And so they are very much in vogue. Dyson is an inventor who became a brand (his story is recounted in the book), producing everything from construction site wheelbarrows (made of red plastic) to audio headphones, vacuum cleaners, hair dryers, straighteners, fans, home heaters, lamps, airport towel dispensers, and more. But it is above all the vacuum cleaner that has become a true object of desire: its technology (also meticulously recounted in the book) does not merely suck up dust into a bag but separates the particles to be eliminated from the positive ones in the air it sucks in, thanks to a device called a “cyclone.” Rather than simply cleaning, then, it purifies (Douglas would be thrilled), not just removing dirt but also everything in the house that might contaminate it (we will draw a veil over the political implications of this). Thus, on the one hand, we have the invention of the air purifier, now a must-have in every self-respecting apartment, and, on the other, the extension of its work to include not only germs and bacteria but also viruses. The arrival of COVID-19, needless to say, caused a surge in sales of this device, which seems to have been built directly by some benevolent hygienist deity. And here we are back to Dr. Perticone’s magnifying glass. Dyson vacuum cleaners, as sophisticated as they are stylish, detect extra dust (revealing it to us through precious fluorescent lights), find dirt where we would never imagine it, and, as if that were not enough, change our very concept of dirt, including within it particles and substances—microbes!—that we did not think could even exist. Now, the enemy to combat is everywhere, and anything could happen to us—just like poor Tombolino. ■



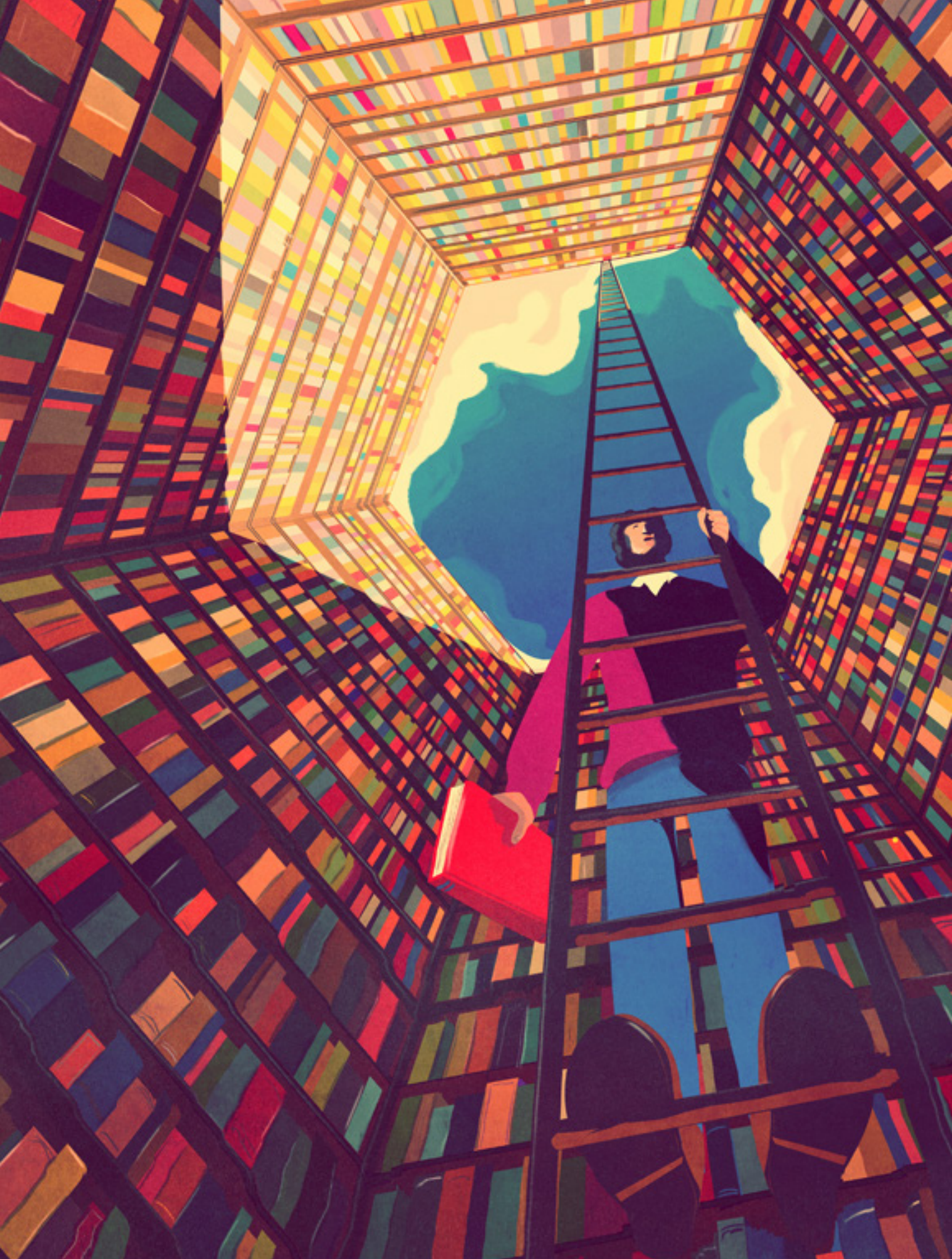
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DULCIS IN FUNDO

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# THE NOUVELLE VAGUE OF BIOGRAPHIES

FROM LEONARDO DA VINCI TO KURT GÖDEL, VIA JOHN VON NEUMANN. A NEW NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION TO TELL THE STORY OF THREE MEN OF SCIENCE FROM THEIR LIVES.

By Matteo Moca

Until not too long ago, biographies belonged to a particular niche market that lived, rather than on literary value, on the protagonist of the book: this led on the one hand to the consideration of biographies, in most cases, as books of questionable aesthetic value or, at any rate, of little interest, and on the other hand to the uncontrolled proliferation of portraits of personalities pertaining mainly to the world of entertainment, television in primis, politics and sports. Like any general discourse, this too obviously brings with it inaccuracies (think for example of the luminous biographies written by authors such as Pietro Citati, Serena Vitale or Edgardo Franzosini) but there is no doubt that the genre has suffered somewhat from the literary point of view (but not, as is often the case, from the sales point of view): this is a consideration that nonetheless holds up if one compares it, for example,

with today's panorama because even narrowing the point of observation to recent years, a change of pace, and of quality, of the genre appears glaringly obvious. It might be interesting to ask about the reasons for the interest these stories generate in readers: certainly there is the fascination with lives spent continually crossing the boundaries of normality, the interest in issues that, cyclically, return to occupy the public debate (this is the case, for example, with a film such as *Oppenheimer* that has led a wide audience to seek in books an extension of what the film tells), and the possibility that these books offer of approaching complex themes and issues, far removed from one's own background, that carry with them the fascination that only the unknown can unleash. If then these already intriguing factors are combined with writing capable of breaking away from mere documentary value and becoming part of the

project as well, then the result is guaranteed.

## BETWEEN BOOK AND FILM

One of the most interesting recently published biographies afferent to the scientific universe is *The Man from the Future. The Visionary Life of John von Neumann* by Ananyo Bhattacharya (Adelphi, translation by Luigi Civalleri) centered on the scientist who was the protagonist, and here the Christopher Nolan film returns, also of the Los Alamos retreat where the atomic bomb will be developed and Von Neumann will have a starring role since he calculated (sic) the way by which the bomb could achieve maximum destructive results. Bhattacharya's book fits neatly into the roster of late biographies referred to a little earlier, on the one hand because indeed the scientist's life is punctuated with peculiar situations and original attitudes, and on the other hand because of Bhat-



tacharya's affabulatorie skills, which he insists on, without ever treading too lightly, on even the most spectacular aspects of this existence and its discoveries (not coincidentally, Von Neumann would be a source of inspiration for Kubrick's Dr. Strangelove and his ideas would guide some of William Burroughs' reckless literary experiments). Born in Hungary, it is said that from an early age he learned Latin and ancient Greek, as well as memorizing large tracts of a forty-five-volume universal history, he moved, partly because of the rise of Nazism, to the United States ("The golden age of German science was over, and America was about to receive an injection of talent that would change its destiny. Within a few years von Neumann was reunited with many of his colleagues from Göttingen: this time not to debate the subtleties of quantum mechanics, but to build the most powerful bomb ever seen," writes Bhattacharya): he would settle at Stanford, a colleague of Einstein and Kurt Gödel (who

would invite him, of all people, to the Institut for Advanced Study), where he would lead a very different existence from that of other scientists, amid luxury cars (which he regularly changed because of constant accidents), women and parties.

Bhattacharya's portrait renders well the continuous movement of Von Neumann's thoughts, who after the war became convinced of the necessity, in order to stop the Soviet Union, of a device capable of unleashing the destructive degree of a supernova, but, above all, he began to understand the implications of computer systems understood as "the abstract version of a neuron, deprived of its physiological complications" thus building a bridge between biology, artificial intelligence and computer science. From these aspects also moves Benjamin Labatut's book *MANIAC* (also *Adelphi*, with translation by Norman Gobetti), which after the success of *When We Cease to Understand the World*, a book that revealed him to Italian readers, an extraordi-

nary investigation into the origin of modern science, returns to analyze how scientific revolutions and their legacy shape our world and our imagination. Labatut's book is ontologically different from Bhattacharya's, partly because it is not simply a biography of Von Neumann, and secondly because Labatut is, first and foremost, a writer, an author capable of precisely inserting the folds of science into an imaginative narrative. Von Neumann, whose darting mentality and his study of the MANIAC calculator, the first "life" after Turing's discoveries and one of the first steps toward AI, is investigated here, is told through a chorus of voices from which his alien character emerges on the one hand ("A joke circulated among colleagues: John belonged to a superior species and had studied humans in depth to imitate them to perfection," Bhattacharya recounts) and on the other his coldness and discreet inability to connect with other people. But Von Neumann is not the only protagonist of



this book, which focuses its attention on other exceptional scientific existences, that of Paul Ehrenfest (the book opens with the scientist killing his own son before taking his own life, a devastating sign of his depression and inability to understand the world) and that of *go* player Lee Sedol who will be defeated three times by artificial intelligence until he manages to win thanks to a move unknown even to the computer. What is fascinating about Labatut's books, but it is a discourse that can be expanded precisely to other more or less canonical biographies, is the tale of existences that revolve around the limit of the human mind, continually generating the possibility of its slipping into madness, around the mechanisms that collide with the boundaries of our thinking opening, precisely, to a dark and irresistible space.

#### **THE CHILDHOOD OF GENIUS**

This is the same fascination that triggers Carlo Vecce's biography dedicated to Leonardo da Vinci published by Giunti, *Leonardo. Life*. Vecce, among the greatest scholars of Leonardo and who discovered the Circassian origins of the scientist's mother, with his book, in which the most diverse sources are interwoven with accuracy and precision, opens to the reader the possibility of delving into the more or less known meanders of Leonardo's existence by fully inserting his events within the time in which he lived, insisting on the traumatic value of his birth, for Vecce at the origin of the restlessness that would mark his life, and above all demythicizing many inaccuracies

generated by the idea of a man isolated because he was too different from other men and incapable of living everyday life. This work does not detract from the image of the Renaissance genius but rather helps to make his ideas, discoveries and works even more luminous. Animated by the same rush to search for the mystery of these superhuman minds is also Deborah Gambetta's book on Kurt Gödel *Incompleteness* (Ponte alle Grazie), which is in similar terrain insofar as it treads the border between biography and *autofiction*. *Incompleteness* in fact is not only the account of the life and works of the Austrian logician and mathematician, but it is also an autobiographical account, the narrative of the writer's obsession, this is basically what it is about, with Gödel ("the greatest logician after Leibniz, or even after Aristotle" according to some of his contemporaries), a mystery that Gambetta feels she must probe even as she begins to study his theorems, the only way to delve into his secret. Here, then, is material belonging to Gödel's life and discoveries mixed with Gambetta's obviously profoundly different life and works: from his participation in the activities of the Vienna Circle to his tragic death due to malnutrition, Gambetta analyzes all the main events of his life that are reread and interpreted through his peculiar point of view, a search for meaning within his own existence (made up of crises, a complex relationship and whatever might cloud the well-being of existence) that contrasts or collides, depending on the situation, with the biographical

oscillations of the logician born in Brno at the beginning of the twentieth century.

#### **BETWEEN LIFE AND WORKS**

This book is precisely a plastic proof of that fascination with the superhuman lives and minds of these characters that is enriching the biographical genre with works that testify to this irresistible attraction to the unknown, to limit experiences that are even more unimaginable because they are the product of human thought. Gambetta in fact introduces himself into Gödel's existence with the same sentiment that animates Labatut's book and that, by extension, he shares with those who will be the readers of these books: analyzing and constructing narrative spaces around the lives of scientists, physicists and mathematicians who have succeeded in launching their thought (the formula is René Daumal's) into a horizon that surpasses it, even running the risk of ending up in paradoxical situations and perhaps untenable *cul de sacs*, a risky price to pay for this journey to discover unknown senses of reality. Perhaps it is precisely in this combination, between a Faustian desire to transcend one's own boundaries and a challenge with life itself, that lies the reason for the interest of writers and readers who try, each with their own means, to focus on the unfathomable, to pursue the same obsessions as the characters portrayed, to search for the same wonder toward the ultimate meaning of things and existence that is the deepest nature of all human action. ■

# THE REASONS FOR LATIN

TO REAWAKEN FROM PETRARCH'S DREAM.  
A CLASSICIST AND COMPARATIST  
QUESTIONS THE REASONS FOR STUDYING  
LATIN TODAY.  
A CLEAR, SOLID AND NON-NOSTALGIC  
PROPOSAL THAT SEES LATIN AS MUCH  
MORE THAN THE LANGUAGE OF CICERO.

By Giacomo Berchi

Why study Latin? The reader can stop and try to answer. Probably, the question will evoke in most people a vague mixture of teenage memories: afternoons spent studying the uses of the subjunctive, cyclical debates on the disinterested value of the Humanities, Cicero's subordinate clauses, and discussions about the uselessness of a dead language that nonetheless has the merit of improving logical reasoning.

Whenever there is a debate about the study of Latin, the general voices are along these lines. However, the impression is often one of an old *liceo classico* pride – but nothing more. Such pride is often paired with a hint of superiority towards new generations who, supposedly, seem not to understand the intrinsic value of the Humanities – not to

speak of studying Latin (*o tempora, o mores*). But what if the problem were addressed head-on and without concessions? Without a sense of superiority but also without a sense of inferiority in respect to other disciplines? That is, what if one were to ask: what are – really – the reasons for studying Latin today?

The valuable volume by Guido Milanese, *Le ragioni del latino*, presents this opportunity. A book for non-specialists that has the merit of getting to the heart of the matter and doing so in a crystalline way. Guido Milanese is a professor of Latin Language and Literature at the Catholic University of Milan and a professor of Latin Literature at the University of Italian Switzerland in Lugano, and former professor in Kansas and Lecce. Throughout his career, Milanese has had

the opportunity to engage with students of various backgrounds. His current position at Languages Faculty in Milan is where the issues related Latin's purpose, relevance, and pedagogy have sparked his personal reflection on questions whose answers can no longer be taken for granted. Hence a YouTube lecture series (2021), and now this book. The book begins with a question (chapter 1, *Old Problems?*), goes through a cultural and linguistic history (chapter 2, *Latin Over Time*), addresses the structure of the language (chapter 3, *How Latin Works*), returns to a continuing history (chapter 4, *Latin and Christian Civilization*), and to another question (chapter 5, *Can Latin Be Taught?*), to finally conclude with a clear proposal (chapter 6, *The Reasons for Latin*).

**ANSWERS THAT ARE NOT ENOUGH**

The hope for a discipline lies in its specialists not being afraid to question what are considered, rightly or wrongly, the indisputable cornerstones of the discipline itself. Milanese engages with other popular books that to the question of why studying Latin today give aesthetic, cultural, and technical answers. In the first two cases, this still seems insufficient, while in the third, it might have been enough in a time when Latin allowed to start an ecclesiastical or legal career – clearly no longer the case. Even the idea that studying Latin helps logic reasoning is seen for what it is, a banality: “All subjects studied seriously teach reasoning” (p. 6). As a scholar of classical literature – curator of the translation of Lucretius’ *De rerum natura* for Mondadori – Milanese does not hesitate to point out the weakness of the typical classicist response: “One has to study Latin because there are many important writers in classical Latin literature, like Virgil, Lucretius, Cicero... this is true, but it is not a sufficient reason. Classical Latin is not the only literature in European history; French literature, for example, is a very rich literature: should we then all feel obliged to study French because French has beautiful literature? This would frankly seem like a weak hypothesis” (p. 11).

**LATIN: A EUROPEAN LANGUAGE**

This is Milanese’s proposal: studying Latin today makes sense because Latin is the language of over two thousands years of European culture: “The study of Latin is not justified if it is reduced to studying just a couple

of centuries of cultural history (only the centuries of Cicero and Virgil, perhaps reaching the early imperial age); a constitutive role of this study in the European cultural horizon is possible only if Latin is understood as the language of our entire cultural tradition up to Romanticism” (p. 22). Cicero and Lucretius, certainly. But what about Boethius, Dante, Nicholas of Cusa, Descartes, Newton? Latin is not only useful but fundamental as a gateway to that same European culture that today seems unable to find ways to define itself.

Throughout the volume, Milanese repeatedly addresses the theme of cancel culture, which seems to specifically target classical studies. A vision of Latin finally freed from the elitism of classical studies would have the double advantage of serving as a gateway to the entire European culture and, in doing so, allowing for a mature and historicized awareness of it that, as such, frees one from identity closures and fanatical oppositions: “An acquired, mature historical distance, regardless of personal adherence, must now allow us to position ourselves concerning the Middle Ages and in general, European Christianity and its language, Latin, truly *sine ira et studio* [...]. The identity of European culture does not mean identity closure, but, on the contrary, the possibility of establishing a dialogue with those who have been formed in other cultures” (p. 132).

On the contrary, we still live inside Petrarch’s classicist dream, idealizing the cultural and linguistic perfection of a historically changing and rich language. With the side effect of freezing it into

a museum and turning it into a truly dead language.

**DANTE. LATIN. AN EXAMPLE.**

A few months ago, in Italy, a controversy arise over the news that some Muslim students in a high school were exempted from studying Dante, as he was considered offensive to their culture. Instead of the usual sterile polemics and political manipulations, and beyond the specific case, this would have been a useful opportunity to rethink some critical and didactic cornerstones considered immovable. A branch of Dante Studies has long shown the dialogue existing between the *Commedia* and the *Book of the Ladder* of Muhammad – an example of the Islamic tradition of *mi’rāj*, that is, the narration of the ascension to Heaven of the Prophet of Islam. Dante was probably aware of the Latin translation of this text, whose consonance with some structural elements of the *Commedia* is impressive. We are talking about a Latin text, thus an example of the secondary nature of this language as a cultural mediation element well analyzed by Milanese. So why not emphasize this connection beyond the circle of scholars? The gains are evident: a greater historical understanding of the past and a vibrant cultural proposal for our global present. However, it would be necessary to have a broad vision of European and Mediterranean cultural exchange, put an end to a rigidly nationalistic sentiment towards Dante, and embrace an idea of Latin literature that goes beyond Tacitus. Until this happens, a certain understanding of Dante and a certain classicism will continue to be the continuation

of Petrarchism by other means.

For this reason, the proposal of this book seems to me to go far beyond mere popularization of Latin for non-specialists. Milanese is aware of the type of audience he is addressing: “It is one thing to train specialists; it is another to establish a dialogue between ancient and modern with young people who are dedicated to different fields of study” (p. 11). Milanese’s proposal is, in fact, primarily aimed at those who are training in other literatures or humanistic disciplines. But are we sure that even today’s and tomorrow’s scholars of Classics do not need have some strong reasons for studying Latin?

#### LATIN... AND GREEK

Additionally, Milanese identifies what he considers a decisive (and negative) moment in the history of Latin pedagogy over the last two centuries: “I believe the breaking point was the introduction of the so-called ‘scientific teaching’ of Latin in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which

created the ‘Greek + Latin’ pair that did not exist before, at least in Italy, imposing that ‘scientific’ method of German origin, which was far removed from the rather empirical and reading-based teaching that one gathers from the memories of individuals who had been students up until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century” (p. 119). The creation of this dyad – Greek and Latin, precisely – has thus proven extremely negative for Latin in the long term: a living and used language was paired with another belonging to a cultural elite (we are, of course, talking about the Latin-speaking West), collapsing descriptive and normative views of language in a way that ultimately prevented focusing on the very reasons for learning it. Milanese continues: “The response for a long time was the great variety of teaching methods, in the unfortunately vain hope that a methodological update would bring with it a reassessment of a subject considered useless and sterilely selective” (p. 120).

#### EUROPEAN CULTURE

Milanese offers a strong way to carry forward the horizon of Curtius and Brague in today’s world, without despairing over an idealized past now lost (and never existed – as Milanese recalls, even Professor Giovanni Pascoli noted the scant study of Latin in his time). It is a courageous and clear proposal, opening up to the present after a proper historical analysis. Taking it seriously would mean looking with new eyes at disciplines, texts, teaching methods, and daring a Copernican revolution where it is usually thought that nothing can (or should?) change. Yet, something must change urgently if we do not want to lose not just a method for training logic, but the key to a treasure chest full of old and new things. It is enough to leaf through the catalogs of collections such as Lorenzo Valla, *Les Belles Lettres*, or *I Tatti* with their medieval and Renaissance Latin texts to realize the potential of a vision of Latin for what it is: the millennial language of European culture. ■



#### THE AUTHOR

Guido Milanese is Professor of Latin language and Literature at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan where he teaches Classical Culture, Comparative Literature, and Digital Humanities, and Professor of Latin Literature at the University of Italian Switzerland in Lugano. He recently published a manual of Digital Humanities (*Filologia, letteratura, computer. Idee e strumenti per l'informatica umanistica*, Vita e Pensiero, 2020) and a translation of Lucretius' *De rerum natura* (Mondadori 2007 2ed.).

# MARCONI THE MAN WHO CONNECTED THE WORLD

By Giovanni Paoloni



## THE AUTHOR

Marc Raboy, Professor Emeritus of Communication and New Media in the Department of Art History and Communication Studies at McGill University, lives in Montreal. For his biography of Marconi, published in English by Oxford University Press, he was a finalist for the prestigious Charles Taylor Prize.

Published by Oxford University Press in 2016, Marc Raboy's biography of Guglielmo Marconi is now available in Italian, in a slimmer version. Published by Hoepli, *Guglielmo Marconi. L'uomo che ha connesso il mondo* meets the expectations of those in Italy who are interested in a non-hagiographic reconstruction of the personality and biography of the Bolognese experimenter, inventor, entrepreneur, politician, and 1909 Nobel laureate in Physics. The occasion for this biography in translation is the 150th anniversary of Marconi's birth, which has among other things led to the production of an eponymous TV miniseries, although the televised biographical narrative differs from the content of Raboy's biography.

Raboy structures the biography in five parts, the first of which *The Boy Wonder (Il ragazzo prodigio)* is devoted to the history of the Marconi family, outlining a family constellation that is indispensable for understanding his upbringing, passions, and idiosyncrasies. The son of a Bolognese father, Giuseppe, and an Irish mother, Annie Jameson, he grew up straddling the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines, which he crossed continually to attend Italian elementary school in Florence and visit his English cousins in Livorno (where he had his scientific training as a private

pupil of Vincenzo Rosa a high school teacher with great experimental skills that he passed on to his pupil). Marconi felt and declared himself to be Italian all his life, but he was always poised between the Bolognese prominence to which his father belonged and the Anglo-Saxon world of his maternal cousins. It was on his father's estate at Villa Griffone that he developed his penchant for invention and tested its potential, (with his father's support, despite a firm legend that Giuseppe was hostile to his son's activities). Yet, it was in the United Kingdom that Guglielmo went on to patent his technology and build its industrial future.

Within six years, Marconi went from transmitting between the worm room at Villa Griffone (where Marconi had his laboratory) and Celestine Hill, to transmitting across the Atlantic, a feat deemed impossible according to the theoretical predictions of the time that the young Bolognese accomplished. His achievement paved the way for the study of the upper layers of the atmosphere, which we now know as the 'ionosphere'. Raboy devotes much attention in this part to the pioneering conditions of Marconi's work, rather than the technical aspects, with interesting and innovative insights. First, the construction

of the company's technostucture: Raboy notes that during these five years, Marconi gathered around him a group of technical, administrative, and financial collaborators who would accompany him throughout his life. Among them, it is worth mentioning Luigi Solari and Richard Vyvyan, who would dedicate two important biographical accounts to him, and who, with Charles Franklin, John Fleming, and George Kemp, would assist him in the development of various technologies and networks. Raboy also analyzes the relationship between Marconi's experiments and Tesla's contemporary activities -- a provocative subject, characterized by scientific aspects but also marked by patent conflicts. Raboy recounts that "an irascible Nikola Tesla fan in California strenuously challenged the entire premise of the book, claiming that Marconi was nothing more than a bully and a fraud".

The second part of the biography *The Player (Il giocatore)* deals with the period in which Marconi Co. built its international network, even reaching a silent *modus vivendi* with the cable companies, until 1909, the year of the awarding of Marconi's Nobel Prize. It is a crucial period in the biography of the Bolognese inventor and entrepreneur, who had to defend his patents in court and negotiate internationally for a new global order in radiotelegraphic communications, facing substantial hostility from the Germans. During this period, however, Marconi demonstrated his skills as a communicator, already evident in the aftermath of his arrival in England, but in these circumstances put to use, in effect giving rise to the myth of the "marconist", the

adept radiotelegraph operator who could make a difference in naval disasters. On the personal side, he also married, in 1905, Beatrice O'Brien, an Irish noblewoman from the Inchiquin family of barons. Raboy reconstructs, by comparing the documentation with recollections written in the 1950s by his eldest daughter Degna and Beatrice, the difficulties Marconi had encountered in establishing a balance -- which apparently remained lopsided -- between family life and work. The Nobel Prize, Raboy observes in concluding this part of the biography, added nothing to Marconi's popularity, but it provided him with the "academic legitimacy" that had always eluded him up to that point despite numerous *honorary* degrees.

The third part of the biography *The Patriot (Il patriota)* opens with what Marconi made of the Nobel award. He allocated those funds to ameliorate the company's recurring financial difficulties, an event that coincided with a break from his cousin Henry Jameson Davis, until then his trusted man in the administrative and financial management of the company, who was working alongside him in the role of general manager. The break in relations with his cousin Henry led Marconi to bring in Godfrey Charles Isaacs, who would remain with the company until his death in 1925. This was a long and crucial period in which Marconi found himself shifting from a situation in which his work and his company could count on state protection both in the United Kingdom and Italy, to the gradual attenuation, especially on the English side, of those privileged operating conditions: a choice that in a short time, between 1912 and

1914, led him to leave England, where he declared to the tax authorities that he no longer wished to reside, establishing his base permanently in Italy.

The detachment was actually not so abrupt, as Marconi would continue to shuttle between the two sides of the English Channel, as well as between the two coasts of the Atlantic, but it corresponded to a life choice: from that moment on, Marconi not only officially became an Italian politician thanks to his lifetime appointment as Senator of the Kingdom of Italy, but he began a partnership with Francesco Saverio Nitti that would lead him to the head of the Banca Italiana di Sconto. The financial institution was a creation of the statesman from Lucania that was geared toward coping with the financial burden of the European conflict into which Italy would enter in 1915 and later in 1917 seeking U.S. funding for Italian military needs. The war involved Marconi directly, and Raboy notes that he was deeply troubled by it. Moreover, at the end of the conflict, Marconi bought a yacht, the *Rovenska*, that he renamed *Elettra*. The yacht was not only a representation and a *status symbol* for Marconi, but also a floating laboratory for experimenting with a new technology he had developed during the war: *shortwave "beam"*. Ties with Nitti were severed at the end of the conflict, when Marconi was part of the Italian delegation to the Paris peace conference in 1919, the outcomes of which disappointed him, leading him to become very close to Gabriele D'Annunzio whose Fiume venture he supported, quite visibly visiting him with the *Elettra* in Fiume in September of 1920.

In the fourth part entitled *The Outsider (L'outsider)*, Raboy examines the personal and ideological premises of Marconi's sympathy for Mussolini. In a chapter significantly titled "Il padrone", it is shown that both had been scarred by the experience of war, but while Marconi operated at the level of diplomacy and international relations, Mussolini devoted himself to the pursuit of a *law and order* program that the Bolognese inventor could not fail to appreciate. These were the years – it should also be remembered – in which Marconi promoted the birth of broadcasting, in Italy and the United Kingdom. On the other hand, for the entrepreneurial Marconi, the moment was extremely difficult: the success of the *shortwave beam* had broken the peaceful co-existence with the cable companies, and after the creation of an imperial radiotelegraphic network set up by the Marconi Co. between 1924 and 1927, the British government intervened, forcing the Marconi Co. to merge with the cable companies, in a reorganization of the system that took cash flows from commercial traffic away from Marconi. A situation Marconi had to cope with without Isaacs, who died in 1925. The new company management found a financial situation so dire that Guglielmo had to answer to a commission of inquiry charged with probing the company's accounts.

The extreme stress caused him to suffer from a heart attack, while his family situation and relations with his children were increasingly strained, eventually resulting in a divorce from Beatrice -- something she vigorously sought out (or at least the equivalent of the time, 'the annulment of the marriage'

by the Sacred Rota). It was in this situation that Marconi met Maria Cristina Bezzi-Scali, to whom he became engaged after obtaining the consent of her parents despite being divorced. Maria Cristina proves to be a lifeline as Raboy calls her. The marriage, celebrated in June 1927, bound Marconi to the Catholic Church and many of the most prominent ecclesiastical figures, from the reigning pope, Pius XI, to the future pontiff Eugenio Pacelli. But above all else, this marital bond, underscored in 1930 by the birth of his fourth daughter, Elettra, transformed the new Marconi family into an icon of the regime. The iconic status is the focus of the fifth part of the biography *The Conformist (Il conformista)*, in which Raboy examines Marconi's relationship with fascism, a relationship that saw him at the top of the cultural organization of the fascist state, as president of the Accademia d'Italia from 1930 until his death. Yet the link between fascism and nationalism did not, in the end, solve Marconi's identity problem, which was always poised between two worlds. On this matter, Raboy's opinion is lapidary: "As I worked on this book, I think I developed an obsession with this connection between Marconi's sense of foreignness, his attraction to power and, ultimately, to that particular form of power that was fascism".

For that matter, Raboy was himself obsessed with the relationship between Marconi and fascism, which prompted him to devote a great deal of work to writing this biography: he explains this himself in the introduction to the 2016 English edition. Moreover, the biography closes with a circular return to the theme of family: Raboy

briefly outlines the biographies of Beatrice O'Brien Marconi Mariognoli, who died in Rome in 1976; his daughters Degna and Gioia, who died in 1998 and 1996, respectively; and Degna's son Francesco Paresce, who died in 2019 after a remarkable scientific career; of Giulio, who did not marry and died in 1971 after working all his life for the Italian Marconi; of Maria Cristina Bezzi-Scali Marconi, who died in 1994; and finally of Elettra, the only surviving daughter, who dedicated her life to "promoting", Raboy writes, "the heroic version of her father's memory". Elettra still lives in the house on Via Condotti where she grew up and where her father died on July 20, 1937, the day before her youngest daughter's seventh birthday.

Marconi profoundly transformed, through his invention and initiatives, the lives of people in the 20th century. In order to write this book, based on a careful examination of sources, Marc Raboy worked on an enormous census of the Marconian historical heritage, which has always been the object of intense collecting, as well as of preservation at a number of institutions: in particular the Marconi Foundation in Pontecchio (BO), the Bodleian Library and Science Museum in Oxford, the National Museum of Science and Technology 'Leonardo da Vinci' in Milan, and the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei. But as Raboy himself candidly confesses in the introduction to the Italian translation, "The Marconiana, that body of writings, letters, photographs, objects, and memorabilia concerning Marconi, of which I learn since writing the book continue to increase". It is easy to predict that they will continue to do so, for who knows how long. ■



# ANNOYANCES OF HISTORY

## WHAT DO MONUMENTS TELL AMERICA

By Enrica Salvatori

**A**mong the many troublesome monuments that Arnaldo Testi's book surveys, two best capture the intent of the volume. The first—which we find mentioned several times precisely because of its founding character—relates to the toppling of the equestrian statue of British King George III in Manhattan on July 9, 1776, only five days after the *Declaration of Independence* was published. Erected in 1770 to strengthen relations with the colonies after the *Stamp Act*, the monument was immediately perceived as a symbol of oppression and illegitimate foreign presence. Indeed, the revolution led to its sudden destruction: the head carried on a pike around the city and the remaining lead melted down to produce bullets

for the revolutionists. Far from being marginal, the episode has become a founding act in the patriotic narrative, an icon of American independence. Although the author is at pains to point out that in periodic commemorations, “rarely is its significance and thus its subversive message identified as such”, the countless examples in the volume seem to attest to a relationship between American society and monuments very different from the one we experience on the old continent. Instead, the violent elimination of a monument from public space, the acts of vandalism that can be exercised against it, silent removal or overt protest emerge from Testi's book as almost genetic characteristics of American history. There is a kind of

recessive DNA that resurfaces from time to time and manifests itself when certain balances reach a breaking point. Let us say that, compared to the much more traditionalist European mentality, where the defense of the historical monument *no matter what* predominates, the picture that emerges from *The Annoyances of History* is certainly one of a society that reads monuments and civic calendar as for what they actually are, namely, “controversial objects even when they are conceived ... presentist performances, they pretend to speak to the past but they always speak of the present and to the present”.

A good example of evidence for this emerges in the second case highlighted: the disappearance from the exterior steps of

the Capitol (Washington) of two marble groups, *Discovery of America* (1844, Luigi Persico) and *Rescue* (1853, Horatio Greenough). The first placed a heroic, muscular Christopher Columbus in the center of the scene as he holds up the globe with a wary, half-naked native person beside him. The second, inspired by the Vatican's *Lacoon*, featured a pioneer family under attack by natives, where yet another half-naked indigenous person threatens mother and child but is stopped by the family's father with quiet confidence. Both monuments that outwardly embody the belief in the superiority of white civilization over native barbarians were repeatedly challenged throughout the twentieth century with calls for their destruction, removal, or replacement with works of opposite significance. In 1958, a massive restoration operation had all the statues on the Capitol façade removed, but when the work was completed, these two monuments never returned to their original position. Instead, they were placed in storage, in effect silently forgotten.

Two emblematic cases - that of George III and the Capitol - masterfully summarize one of the main assumptions of the volume: the monument is a nuisance from the moment of its installation and consequently an easy object of contestation and criticism in a society characterized by very different, often conflicting and certainly rapidly changing perspectives.

The book develops the theme by collecting various troublesome stories in the mac-

ro-themes that represent U.S. history.

It begins with the depiction of presidential power, which, interestingly, was not characteristic of the earliest moments of American history. Indeed, Protestant culture and the republican matrix itself saw monuments as "pernicious acts of ostentation" (Nathaniel Macon 1800), objects somewhat antithetical to the very concept of democracy. However, this perspective changed in the second half of the nineteenth century, after the trauma of the Civil War, which led to "the first and most impetuous wave of granite, marble, and bronze memorials in national history". Prominent among these is the incredible story of Mount Rushmore (South Dakota), the native land of the Sioux who called the range Thunkášila Šákpe ("Six Grandfathers"). Since 1941, it has been home to four great fathers of the white homeland (Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Theodore Roosevelt). This is a land saturated--as the author puts it--with searing memories, betrayals, and disputes that have challenged the operation from the beginning. Today it sees millions of tourists admiring "an outsized tribute to the national civil religion that is also an insult to the ancestral religious traditions of local residents".

This is followed by the chapter dedicated to the struggles for freedom and civil rights, from the allegorical depiction of Liberty itself to Rosa Parks, the latter illustrated with two monuments: the first in Mont-

gomery, Alabama, 2000, (Erik Blome) placed in the museum dedicated to her, depicts her seated in the act that made her famous, portrayed as a middle-aged, respectable, non-aggressive lady, tired after an honest day's work. This pacifying portrait, however, overlooks her activism in the field of civil rights, and her commitment as a militant woman. In contrast, Rosa Parks stands in Grand Rapids (Michigan, 2010 Ed Dwight) in a hesitant posture, ready to sit or march, as she did otherwise throughout her life.

Two entire sections are devoted to the relationship between Native Americans and colonizing immigrants as well as the contrasts between whites and blacks, reflecting the prominence of these phenomena in American history. In the first, the story of the aborted (thankfully) National American Indian Memorial stands out. Conceived at the dawn of World War I, it was intended to surpass the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor. It was an expression of a patchwork of contradictory narratives that sought to honor Native culture only because it was ultimately considered inoffensive. It was harshly criticized from the time the cornerstone was laid (1913) and then disappeared into obscurity. Regarding the thorny issue of slavery and racism, the Emancipation Memorial (Washington, 1876, Thomas Ball) serves as an exemplum, where a perfectly adorned Lincoln holds up the Emancipation Proclamation with his right hand and extends his left arm toward a freed slave, half-na-

ked and kneeling at his feet. This was no hypocrisy, but a conscious choice to illustrate what the ruling class of the time believed to be proper race relations. Even this monument was criticized on the very day of its unveiling by none other than Frederick Douglass, the best-known African American leader of the day. Unlike the Indian civilization memorial project, the Emancipation Memorial still stands, and Frederick Douglass died in 1895 without having seen a monument with a “Negro” represented in an upright posture.

Instead, the difficult relationship between war (to condemn) and warriors (to remember) is explored in the book chapter that opens with the very famous *U.S. Marine Corps Memorial* (Virginia)-inspired by Pulitzer Prize winner Joe Rosenthal’s photo *Flag Raising on Mount Surichi* (Feb. 25, 1945)-and extends to the various *Memorials* for those forgotten by history: women, interned Japanese, and native combatants. The book concludes with a fascinating section on iconoclasm and anti-monuments, which effectively highlights the contradictions and stimuli that have characterized the last quarter century. On the one hand, there are those who attack monuments precisely because they are extremely troublesome to a changing society, but in doing so, demonstrate an acute understanding of their message and relevance. On the other hand, there are those who develop forms of anti-monumental public memory, such as Do Ho Suh’s *Public Figures* (1998)

or Karyn Olivier’s *The Battle is Joined* (2017), which are, however, presented as temporary art installations, often moved quickly from public spaces to art galleries, thus stripped of their intended public significance.

The collection of monumental histories flows smoothly, thanks to precise but never overly academic writing and it dismantles some clichés about episodes of mass iconoclasm in the United States, which are actually in inverse proportion to the media echo they have occasioned. The monuments truly obliterated are, in fact, counted at around three hundred, or 0.6 percent of the approximately 50,000 that dot the country. However, the impact of these relatively few destructions has been very strong both in the U.S. and in old Europe, precisely because of the message conveyed: that of a contested public space, “not entirely pacified and not entirely governed by permanent and

unquestionable superordinate authorities”. In my opinion, the greatest merit of the volume is its clear demonstration, through concrete examples, that monuments are—as Robert Lowell wrote—“a fishbone [stuck] down the city’s throat”, from the moment of their erection. Neither innocent nor neutral, they celebrate patterns of the present and propose visions of the future through opportunistic commemoration of the past. They are born controversial from their conception. Rightly, the author criticizes those who oppose cancel culture by labeling it as “rewriting history”, arguing that it is the monuments themselves that rewrite history, selecting and promoting the facts of the past that are most consonant with the institutions that erect them. Or reflecting gender, given that, until the end of the last century, U.S. monumental space was—as Rebecca Solnit wrote in 2016—“a horde of dead men” ■



## THE AUTHOR

Arnaldo Testi has taught U.S. History at the University of Pisa.

Among his most recent publications is *Capture the Flag: The Stars and Stripes in American History* (New York University Press, 2010), *La formazione degli Stati Uniti* (il Mulino, new ed. 2013) and *Il secolo degli Stati Uniti* (2009 Sissco Prize for Contemporary History, il Mulino, new ed. 2022).

# ARABS

A CULTURE THAT SPANS HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY. FOR MILLENNIA, LONG PREDATING ISLAM, THE ARABIC WORLD DEVELOPS ON MANY LEVELS WITH MANY DERIVATIONS. YET IT HAS A VALUABLE ASSET: THE UNIFYING FEATURE OF LANGUAGE.

By Giovanni Porzio

The story of the Arabs begins many centuries before the birth of Muhammad: marked by an inscription from 853 B.C., 1,400 years before the advent of Islam. Despite this historical fact, a large portion of scholarship focuses on the Arabic world following the Prophet's emergence. The time before the new religion, known as the dark period of ignorance and paganism, or *Jabiliyya*, receives less critical attention. Tim Mackintosh-Smith does exactly the opposite (in Italian version *Gli arabi. 3.000 anni di storia di popoli, tribù, e imperi*, Einaudi). The work carefully examines the centuries preceding the great epic of the Islamic *umma* to define and consolidate the cultural identity shared by Arabs. Mackintosh-Smith, an Arabist, essayist, and erudite in language and literary classics as well as Arab historiography, is by no means your conventional academic.

He ideated and drafted this book in a tower apartment in the old city of Sana'a, where he lived from 1982 to 2019. There, he observed from its windows the civil war ravaging Yemen. With the narrative flair and the writer's

sharp approach, redolent of Bruce Chatwin, takes the reader through an extraordinary multimillennial journey: from Bedouin tents to the Palaces of Granada, from Mecca to Jerusalem, and from the universities of Baghdad to the mosques of Damascus and Cairo. The book contains a remarkable itinerary, densely filled with anecdotes and curiosities, unexpected juxtapositions, digressions of etymological, epigraphic, and geographical nature, as well as stories of poets, caliphs, and sailors.

Such a space-time spectrum is a matter, of course, that could not be dealt with comprehensively in one volume, despite its 700-plus pages. And this was not the author's intent. Eminent scholars, from Francesco Gabrieli to Philip Hitti, from Jacques Berque to Albert Hourani and Eugene Rogan, to name a few, have undertaken more concentrated studies on events that are only sketched out in this book, such as the Crusades, the trade and cultural exchanges with Europe, the development of the arts, music and sciences, customs, agricultural techniques and naval, medicine, mathematics, the

transmission of wisdom Greek, the decline of the Ottoman Empire, decolonization and contemporary conflicts.

## THE COMMON DENOMINATOR

The centerpiece of Mackintosh-Smith's innovative analysis is particularly insightful. His research pinpoints a certain common denominator that forges the Arab identity and maintains it throughout the centuries: the Arabic language.

The entirety of the book revolves around this basic thesis: "While history is often seen as a succession of men of action, Arab history is likewise, or even more, a series of men (and some women) of words: poets, preachers, orators, authors; in particular, the author (or, for Muslims, the transmitter) of the first Arabic book, the Quran".

The language - "not the daily language, but the rich, strange, nuanced, subtly hypnotic, magically persuasive, immensely difficult high variety of the Arabic language that evolved into the languages of the soothsayers and tribal poets" - has been and continues to be the amalgamation and the catalyst behind pan-Arabic identity.

The tongue is the hidden link, the common thread that all Arab leaders have tried to grasp: "their goal has always been that of creating *'asabiyya*, that ability to cultivate "bonding" or unanimity, to "gather the word" of their peoples and tribes". It is on the word, sacred and unchanging, that reverberates every second reiterated in all the madrasas, from the Moluccas to the Atlantic shores, which renews the sense of belonging to the Arabic nation. *Iqra'* (act!) is the first word revealed to the Prophet. The recited word, the language, is the foundation of Arab identity and Islam. "Memory and idiom still unite the Arabs where borders, wars and doctrines divide".

And again: "...of the three outstanding achievements of Arab history, that of the weapons, Islam and Arabic, the first and most enduring was the victory, over oneself, of language named after them." Another key and recurring theme in Mackintosh-Smith's analysis is that of eternal duality inherent in the Arab world since the beginnings of the pre-Islamic age: the clash/encounter between *hadāra*, the "sedentary life" of settled peoples and agricultural traditions of the Fertile Crescent and South Arabian Felix, and *badāwa*, the "nomadic life" of the *bādiya*, the "steppe," and the desert.

Stasis and mobility, union and fragmentation, *sha'b*, people, defined by a place, and *qabila*, tribe, circumscribed to the ties of kinship: they are the forces that have shaped the path of the Arabs in history.

Forces that are set in motion long before the astounding territorial achievements following the death of Muhammad in 632 AD. As early as the first millennium B.C. the nomadic camel herders

of the Arabian Peninsula used a shared language to designate wells, pastures, places of worship, and genealogical ancestry: there is testimony to the epigraphs and graffiti rupestrian. But it is in the encounter with the sedentary Southerners that the Arabic went on forming until it became the glue of the Bedouin tribes of the desert, the language of choice of the merchants in the caravan cities, the verse of the pre-Islamic poets who challenged each other at literary fairs, and finally, the word of the Prophet of Mecca.

And if the shared language gave the Arabs the knowledge of belonging to an ethnic group, the Qur'an, the word of Allah, certified of its supremacy over every other idiom.

The Umayyad caliph Abd al-Malik, who at the end of the Seventh century reigned from Damascus over a rapidly expanding empire, could not refrain from adopting it as the language of bureaucracy and administration, ensuring its longevity for centuries to come.

Arabization went hand in hand with the achievements and at the time of Harun al-Rashid and the splendor of the Abbasid, when

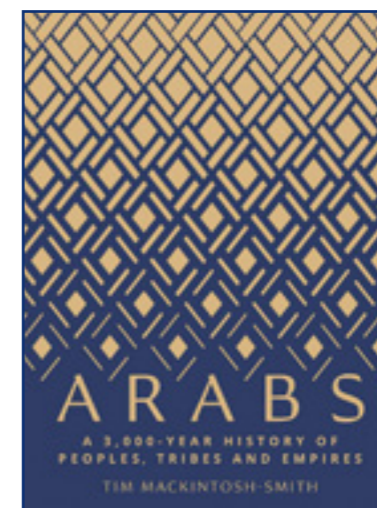
Baghdad was "the navel of the world." Arabic was the English of the time: the sacred language had become the lingua franca of an empire that stretched from India to Southern Europe. It is surprising to see how deep and enduring the legacy of the Arab language and culture is

not only in Turkish and Persian but also in the neo-Latin languages.

The Spaniard counts no less than 4 thousand "loanwords" in his lexicon. Similarly, the Italians speak Arabic every day with "caffa, alcol, caffè, zucchero, sorbetto, scirocco, divano, giubbotto, mafia, cotone, arsenale, facchino, assassino, ragazzo, zerbino, bagarino, sciroppo, limone, taccuino, algoritmo..." all coming from the Arabic language.

Today Baghdad is a marginal city: razed to the ground by the Mongols of Hulagu in 1258, suffered the Turkish and English domination, then the armies of George W. Bush, the terror of the Islamic State, the plagues of civil war, the corruption and armed militias.

But in the new university building, *Mustansiriyya*, heir to the



## THE AUTHOR

Tim Mackintosh-Smith is an Arabist, translator, and traveler. He has lived in the Arab world for thirty-five years and is an honorary member of the Library of Arabic Literature. His previous publications recall the contents and history of the Arab world: *Travels with a Tangerine; A Journey In the Footnotes of Ibn Battutah; Yemen. Travels In Dictionary Land.*

madrasa founded at the beginning of the 13th century, one continues to teach the grammar of classical Arabic: “the base,” writes Mackintosh-Smith, “of the one true unity of the Arab world.” That tenacious glue, surviving all the tragedies and revolutions of history, was unable to prevent the disintegration of the empires, the post-Ottoman fragmentation and today’s conflicts between Arabs. Yet, the hidden thread of the tongue has never broken.

In Mackintosh-Smith’s book, the term *‘asabiyya* recurs frequently, “bonding” or “group solidarity,” used by the great historian the 14th century Ibn Khaldun to explain the rise and fall of the dynasties.

It was the *‘asabiyya* that united the pre-Islamic tribes, to support the message of the Prophet, the momentum of the conquests, the triumphs of the caliphates of Damascus and Baghdad, the awakening of nationalisms in the last century. And eventually, it was its cyclical weakening that brought about its decline.

Yet, the *‘asabiyya*,’ the author insists, cannot do without the *arabiyya*, the shared language of the Arabic world.

#### FROM NASSER TO PETRODOLLARS

Today, Mackintosh-Smith, notes with bitter sarcasm, the new Mecca are the oil wells and “Group solidarity” is imposed with weapons and torture. The powerful and symbolic appeal of the language, however, did not ever turn off. This was seen during the so-called, and – with the exception of Tunisia – rueful “Arab springs.”

In Cairo, the slogans of the protesters in Tahrir Square, relaunched on the uncontrollable social media. They broke the monopoly of the

word that belonged to Pharaoh and they forced Hosni Mubarak to abandon the throne.

Even earlier, still in Egypt, the power of the word had manifested in all its strength with Gamal Abdel Nasser, the leader who had humiliated Britain in Suez. His radio speeches, and the poetic odes sung by Umm Khultum, resonated – and in the case of the “star of the East” still resonate – in all the streets, in all the souks and in all the umma coffee: Radio Cairo was quite literally the voice of the Arabs.

The mirage of political unity, clouded by rivalries and divisions, clasped onto linguistic unity. The failure of nationalisms pushed many Muslim Arabs to put their religious identity before their linguistic identity.

In the polls, nearly 80 percent of the respondents declare themselves Muslim before Arab, and many, including al-Qaeda groups and Jihadists, look beyond the borders of “artificial” nation-states.

According to Mackintosh-Smith, three major factors external to the Arab sphere have politically energized Islam: “The first was those crushing victories, so beneficial for Judaism’s politics and military in 1948 and in 1967. The second was the Islamic Revolution in January 1979 in Iran, and the third factor came into operation when, at the end of that same 1979, the Soviets under Brezhnev swooped down on Afghanistan.

In all three cases, the pressures exerted by foreign empires – the United States, the Soviet Union and that third empire artificially grafted in miniature, Israel – were shaping the region and molding Arab identity. Or better yet, they were remodeling it as a Muslim identity.”

The paradox, which the author rightly highlights, is that not even language escapes the dichotomy union/division. The same word for “unity, people.” *sha’b*, also has the meaning of “division, separation.” It is true that knowledge of today’s Standard Arabic, that of newspapers and television, allows for indifferently reading novels as contemporary as the poets of a thousand years ago. But continuity and linguistic unity are not enough to bridge the gap between written language and everyday speech: “very few Arabs feel comfortable writing in their national language.” Almost no one speaks it as a native language.

Will the internet be the force to stitch the thread back together of the *arabiyya*? The author doubts it. “If you eliminate that one shared territory,” writes “that incredibly difficult language, you eliminate the one aspect of unity that is not a mirage”. But he fears that even on the social diglossia will eventually accelerate disunity, digging a dangerous gap among young people who tweet in dialect and the holders of the ancient sacred language, That language “that still beguiles, mystifies and silences the masses as it did in the mouths of the poets and pre-Islamic seers.” Propaganda, from al-Qaeda to al-Sisi, is in classical Arabic and “The dinosaurs,” as Mackintosh-Smith calls them. Those who have always known best how to “collect the word,” they now have “the perfect tools to do that, and to instantaneously insinuate that word in all minds tethered to smartphones.”

Words are weapons: “doses of morphine,” said the Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani. “Drugs for rulers who drug the masses since the 7th century.”

# POWER OF ANOTHER GENDER

## WOMEN, FEMINISMS AND POLITICS

By Ludovica Taurisano

Is it enough to be a woman to call oneself a feminist? Is there an inherent contradiction between feminist and right-wing thinking? How can equality be reconciled with respect for differences? Has the left really abdicated its fight for social and economic rights?

With her latest publication *Potere di altro genere. Donne, femminismi e politica*, Giorgia Serughetti succeeds in rooting a refined understanding of political philosophy in the most pressing current events. The volume, published by Donzelli Editore, is a pamphlet that could be defined as radical in several respects, because the author does not make allusions or generalizations, but instead she quotes, thus she challenges and calls into question facts and statements from the Italian political scene—with several references also to the European scenario, which would perhaps have deserved even more in-depth study.

Serughetti's book has the characteristics of immediacy, as it arises from a vivid contradiction of this recent historical time: one would say, with a rhetoric that too often alludes to merit without problematizing the concept, that "some women have made it", that they have broken "the glass ceiling." Instead, although it is not within the intentions of the publication to delve exhaustively into what is meant by "gender," the author does not neglect its degree of complexity as a category: in fact, the position of a theoretical and political strand that has introjected the purpose of "equality" within representative democracy, hoping for greater equali-

ty understood exclusively between the sexes, is problematized. Instead, beyond the confines of a dual order, the author stands at the dawn of a part of Anglo-Saxon women's thought that calls for a "politics of presence," as defined by Anne Philipps, to restore the "what" over the "who." This passage is a crucial node in answering the contradiction in terms, as above explained: is it essential to be women (the "who") in order to defend women's rights? And what are these rights, how are they understood (the "what")? At this point, the author brings to bear a timely knowledge of the history of feminist thought and its more recent developments, dwelling on the relationships between feminism, the politics of ideas (which risks slipping into identity existentialism) and the politics of presence.

With an examination of the thought of difference within feminist history, Serughetti critically questions the efficacy of any reasoning articulated exclusively from a man-woman identity binomial, typical of the essentialist strand of representation based on definitions of sexuality: instead, it is on a democratic representation that is authentically egalitarian that one should position oneself. With analytical rigor, she carefully delimits her own field of intervention: mastering Hannah Fenichel Pitkin's masterpiece on the concept of representation, she does not place herself in the descriptive dimension of representation (the "who" symbolically "standing for a similar other who"), but digs into the substantive possibilities that women's interests receive adequate responses.

Above all, that they receive them from those presumed to be similar in natural characteristics and intent, from those who broke the glass ceiling: not in the name of others ("the many" of the text), but by instrumentalizing with consensus purposes a thought that used to be radical, revolutionary and aimed at the horizontality of achievements, and not at the apex verticality of the winning individual, within an individualist and unequal race.

In its extraordinarily lucid argumentation, the book does not skip on the use of categories that are scarcely present in contemporary debate, but which reveal the intrinsic contradictions of a pseudo-feminist propaganda allowed to circulate in the right-wing camp, with all its aporias and ambiguities. Marco d'Eramo had already pointed this out with acuity in *Dominio. La guerra invisibile dei potenti contro i sudditi*, arguing how the holders of the production resources of capitalist neo-liberalism, starting in the 1980s, had launched the definitive counter-offensive, creating a 'counter-intelligence' of Gramscian memory. In essence, the heralds of productivism at all costs, the 'Lenins of capital', the defenders of regressive conservatism, would have at some point manipulated the categories, principles, and declarations of Marxism and socialism to implement their own cultural guerrilla warfare, taking advantage of the destabilising confusion generated by the twilight of the bipolar world.

Similarly, Serughetti does not make the mistake of derubricating the electoral strategy of the right and divertis-

sement for the hungry belly of an angry country: she recognises its solidity in continuity, its argumentative structure and self-justification, which, while logically and philosophically fallacious, is rhetorically effective.

There is no need to use words such as class struggle or ideology: the battle of ideas was won on the terrain of the disconnected and undue appropriation of the manifestos of others, where others showed themselves - Serughetti confirms - incapable of defending a faithful circulation.

Perhaps it is the book's most outstanding merit to write with clarity about the instrumental and ambivalent appropriation of ideas, languages and goals of feminism, which, despite its internal evolutions and fragmentations, has never misunderstood its ultimate purpose: not to generate a supremacy of the 'voice' of women over others, but to give voice to marginal groups for the ultimate goal of substantially equal representation. The author picks up on Norberto Bobbio's text, an irreplaceable theoretical reference, on the distinction between right and left, arguing that there is an insoluble friction in the way equal is understood. The egalitarians believe that inequalities are above all a social product and, as such, can and ought to be corrected; for the non-egalitarians, they are natural and, therefore, not only understandable but also ineradicable. Feminism, even in its proliferation in irreconcilable rivulets, has never lost sight of this *telos*, indeed, this double aim, which the contemporary left should harmonise. The cultural battle, on the recognition of differences and the fight against discrimination (misrecognition), is insubstantial if it is not accompanied by a redistribution of resources, not symbolic and of recognition, but of material and contingent factors (maldistribution).

In right-wing pseudo-feminist radicalism, there is no attempt to place

oneself within the history of ideas, or to grasp its profound implications: it is perhaps the most intolerable injustice done to historical and contemporary feminism, this haphazard turning of lexicon and scattered thoughts with the aim of generating consensus. This is why this volume vibrates with a timing that should encourage its circulation and which could also serve as a resource for self-criticism and self-discovery on the part of left-wing thought, which is guilty of abdicating the legacy of feminism's troubled, but pregnant and fertile relationship with politics *tout court*. As Lea Melandri has also lucidly pointed out, feminism has called for greater democracy not only because of the illiberalities that women carried within, but in order to widen the boundaries of the city all a round; while running the risk of atomisation in a restricted circle, feminism in the past and present is trying to re-establish that communicative capacity that is now almost entirely dominated by the rhetoric of the right-wing parties. And this synergy can be enriching and prolific, because in the invisibly cultural struggle of those holding power, as Marco d'Eramo titled in his book, this interlocution remains a 'history of others', and history cannot, must not be rewritten.

When Giorgia Meloni defines herself as a 'woman', when she alternately shuns feminism, she assumes and alludes to the fact that the latter has not already plumbed the tensions between the transformations of the female self and the world around it. The natural characteristic of being a woman is a privilege placed at the service of others: not other women, but other Italians. Meloni's is an identitarian, reactionary maternalism with respect to crucial issues such as abortion or the rights of the LGBT+ community that she glosses over and politically proves uncertain and contradictory. Meloni denies being a feminist, because the women's people

are part of the people as a whole, but she never explicitly positions herself as anti-feminist, because she wants to reserve the prerogative of using certain claims expertly, in order to mobilise that slice of the electorate that in Meloni identifies exclusively as a woman (biologically speaking). Lastly, and this does not escape Serughetti's analysis, Meloni is the leader who has made it and who, as in the theorisation of the triple down economy, will drip privileges for others like herself: therefore women, therefore Italians, therefore mothers. Too bad that theory turned out to be very fragile and of abject consequences.

With acuity, the author of the text captures the ongoing process of identification between the representative leader and his electorate, and the next step she takes in her writing is to weld this empathic dynamic to the more general mechanism at work in all populist parties. Indeed, in the construction of the specific Melonian ideology, the people are doubly excluded. It is the return to politics by the people of women, who are presumed to be represented synecdotally by the single leader; strictly Italian citizens, but of a citizenship that has a biopolitical value, because it is substantiated with meaning as the progenitor of other Italians. Meloni stands as the representative (the who for the what) of the women of the people, a buzzword that is filled with a meaning always suited to the propaganda strategy of the moment, but which for our populisms has a shade of *ethnos* rather than a class-belonging meaning. Italian women, the founding cells of society - not the civilised and democratically empowered one, but the vital one that ensures the demographic consistency of the country, are thus twice removed from the corruption of the degenerate exercise of political power. Meloni would embody them, in the indistinct exercise of the undifferentiated representation of the whole, as she herself has

fulfilled her function as the fundamental reproductive cell of the national fabric to be revitalised, now lending her qualities to the political function: one might say, in the words of Baudrillard, that 'naive is every movement that believes it subverts systems through their infrastructure'.

In the triad "God, country and family", only the first one is overtly male: the nation is female, because while it wishes for the common good, it is ethnically defined and therefore requires biopolitical management of the woman's body, the focal point of the traditional family arrangement. It is maternal nativist and reactionary, avowedly incompatible with sincerely egalitarian feminism.

Having thus revealed the conceptual deception, whereby a right-wing feminism is oxymoronic, Serughetti therefore asks where is the so-called left, too lost in the culturalist turn to care about the connections between the patriarchal system and capitalist oppression? Perhaps, but this is not a condemnation, but rather the challenge of the time made up of multiple and global crises, therefore in need of intersectional and cooperative interventions. Picking up on Fraser, the author opens a chink in the controversy: in order for everyone and everyone to participate in democracy, objective and intersubjective conditions are needed, and there is no contradiction between the two paths, as long as we remember to wage the battle on both tracks.

"Potere di altro genere", while maintaining the highest elaboration of political and philosophical thought, would deserve to be expanded more consistently in its European and international examples, to highlight even more sharply the cross-reinforcement between populisms, weaknesses of other political parties and intrinsic characteristics of the political system of reference, in which even the distinction between left and right must be histori-

cally contextualized and understood.

This global outlook is moreover the child of a feminist movement that has benefited from transnational alliances and that today sees Western politics threatened by an ancient poison: the expulsion of the woman's body from its arena. With an incisive pen and constructive *vis polemica*, Serughetti brings bodies back to the centre of the discourse: 'bodies under siege', as she calls them. One almost wants to know more, to read more about those bodies, because Serughetti enucleates how through bodies all the boundaries between the private and public space collapsed; also, she foresees the dangers related to the plundering of intimate life and feelings by the public realm. Aware of the overexposure of women's bodies, not just politically but also in the media ecosystem, she alludes in closing to the inadequacy of the exclusively binary distinction, in which the erotic exaltation of the female body is straightforwardly followed by a maternal corporeity. However, if feminism evolves and understands itself as a critical action towards equality, it can find common ground with queer theories and overcome the divisions that arise from any kind of exclusionary ideological confinement, such as the reactionary and nativist

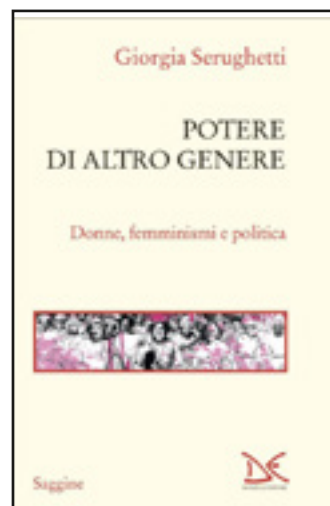
feminism of the right wing politics. The options witnessed for the future are many: a politics of affinity, without barriers and confining rooms, a pure exercise of being together, Serughetti hopes, which is the most beautiful game we have been able to invent, which is then the political game in its wholeness.

For the time to come, the author glimpses three fundamental objectives: the articulation of the above-mentioned "politics of presence" that is able to accommodate the demands and needs defended by feminist mobilisations; the reconstitution of a relationship between an immobile political sphere and a dynamic civil society (which exists!, author claims); the reformulation of the objectives and gears of political parties, so that they learn to also accommodate dual militancy, for themselves and for any others wishing to take part to the fight for equality, for the perceived body of women and for the social body as a whole.

And finally, Serughetti leaves us with one last wish: that there may be more and more bodies that welcome, bodies that care, bodies that form alliances with other bodies different from their own, in the name of the most radical equality, which is based on our common human nature. ■

## THE AUTHORESS

Researcher in Political Philosophy at the Department of Sociology and Social Research of the University of Milan-Bicocca. She has published the books: *Democratizzare la cura/Curare la democrazia* (ebook Nottetempo, 2020); *Libere tutte. Dall'aborto al velo, donne del nuovo millennio* (with C. D'Elia, minimumfax, 2017); *Uomini che pagano le donne: Dalla strada al web, i clienti nel mercato del sesso contemporanea* (Ediesse, 1st ed. 2013, 2nd ed. 2019); *Chiedo Asilo: essere rifugiato in Italia* (with M. Calloni and S. Marras, Egea, 2012). *Il vento conservatore* (Laterza 2021), *La società esiste* (Laterza, 2023). She collaborates as an editorialist with the newspaper *Domani*, and is part of the editorial committee of *Prometeo*.





# ROSALIE BERTELL: OUR PLANET UNDER ATTACK

ACCORDING TO CLAUDIA VON WERLHOF “PLANET EARTH. THE LAST WEAPON OF WAR” BY ROSALIE BERTELL IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT BOOKS OF THE 21ST CENTURY AS IT ADDRESSES A FATAL ISSUE FOR THE HUMAN SPECIES, THAT OF THE SURVIVAL OF OUR ONLY COSMIC HOME THREATENED BY MILITARY EXPERIMENTS, ABOUT WHICH THE PUBLIC KNOWS LITTLE OR NOTHING, BEING COVERED BY SECRECY. THE CRUCIAL ISSUES IT ADDRESSES ARE STILL LARGELY UNKNOWN TO PUBLIC OPINION AND THE SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY.

By Mariagrazia Pelaia

**Who is Rosalie Bertell?** – The name of this scientist circulates little, despite the fact that in 1986, the year of the Chernobyl disaster, she received the alternative Nobel (Right Livelihood Award) for her anti-nuclear activism and nine honorary degrees. Born in Canada in 1929, trained as a biometrist, epidemiologist and Catholic nun, she actively participated in the founding of various organizations for the protection of public health,

including the International Institute of Concern for Public Health in Toronto, of which she was president until upon retirement in 1986. Since 1958 she has been a member of the congregation of the Gray Sisters of the Sacred Heart.

She was a researcher at the Roswell Park Cancer Institute from 1969 to 1978. She held various positions of great responsibility and prestige: consultant in the US Nuclear Regu-

latory Commission, co-chair of the working group on ecosystem health at the International Joint Commission on the Great Lakes (USA and Canada), etc.

She collaborated internationally with institutions for the protection of victims of military, industrial and technological pollution (Japan, Germany, Malaysia, India). She participated in the investigations of the International Medical Commission-Bhopal and Chernobyl. She

helped the Filipino population dispose of the toxic waste from military bases abandoned by the Americans who, with legal loopholes, escaped the environmental reclamation and recovery works.

It reveals the background to the wars in Kosovo and Iraq, supports the compensation cases for veterans with Gulf War syndrome and denounces the health problems affecting soldiers exposed to depleted uranium. She is always on the side of the populations who suffer the indignity of war and the environmental and health disasters that accompany it.

The research and commitment of a lifetime as a scholar and activist bring to light what lies behind military secrecy, denounced in her main works: *No Immediate Danger: Prognosis for a Radioactive Earth* (1985), *Handbook for estimating health effects from exposure to ionizing radiation* (1986) and *Planet Earth: The latest weapon of war* (2000), partially translated into Italian by Asterios Edizioni in

2018. As Gustavo Esteva writes in the Italian Preface: “Now readers have a dangerous book in their hands. Reading it they could lose sleep and even many illusions”.

Six years after the release of the Italian translation, it should be noted that public opinion and the scientific community are still sleeping blissfully in the slow or delta wave phase, the deepest one. Not one of the thorny issues raised by Bertell has found the space it deserves in the public and academic debate. The same applies to the English edition of 2000, in that case also due to the bankruptcy of the publishing house shortly after the release of the book, and the German one of 2011.

Arthur Rimbaud, *Democracy*, from *Illuminations* (translated by A.S. Kline):

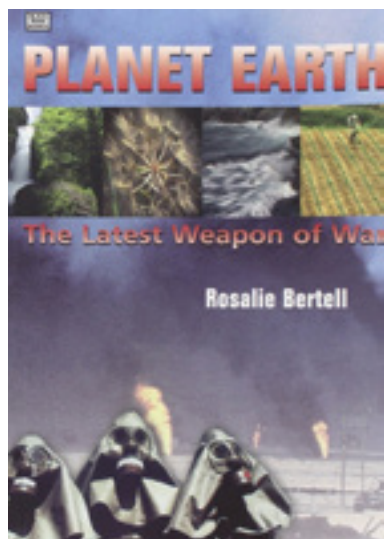
[...] *In the Interior we'll nourish the most cynical prostitution. We'll massacre logical rebellions.*

*To the spiced and sodden countries! – In the service of the*

*most monstrous exploitations, industrial or military.*

**Slowly wrecking our planet** – “We are all children of the universe”. Stars and supernovae billions of years ago provided the ingredients to our planet which four billion years ago, covered in water, drew proteins and molecules from a chemical soup. Once the waters have receded, the life of animals, plants and then human beings develops on the emerged lands. “How grateful we must be for this magnificent gift of life and all we have needed to sustain it over the last hundreds of thousands of years! Yet, today it is under threats never felt before in its entire unfolding journey!” (R. Bertell, *Slowly wrecking our planet*, 2010, p. 1).

It is known that in every war weapons not used in the previous one are tested. Although the earth's civil community has sought to free itself from nuclear weapons for the past 65 years, the armies of richer countries have moved on to experiment



## THE AUTHORESS

Rosalie Bertell (1929-2012) was an American scientist, author, environmental activist, epidemiologist, and also a religious member of the Order of the Grey Sisters of the Sacred Heart. She is best known for her work in the field of ionizing radiation. She held dual Canadian and U.S. citizenship and has worked in the field of environmental health since 1970. Among her publications *No Immediate Danger* described the dangers of radiation from the nuclear industry. She has received numerous awards, including the Right Livelihood Award in 1986, for “raising awareness of the destruction of the biosphere and the human gene pool, especially from low-level radiation.”

with geowarfare. “Geo-weaponry has recently been introduced to the public as a ‘new’ high tech way to mitigate the effects of global warming, and it is being called ‘geoengineering’ ” [...] “Geoengineering is defined as planetary scale environmental engineering of our atmosphere: that is, manipulating our weather, our oceans, and our home planet itself” (Bertell 2010, p. 1). These methods have become a reality without going through adequate public debate, without “democratic supervision”. In defiance of the principles on human experimentation established after the Nuremberg trials, according to which “Persons involved should have legal capacity to give consent; [...] without the intervention of any element of force, fraud, deceit, [...] or other ulterior form of constraint or coercion” (Bertell 2010, p. 2) having sufficient knowledge to develop an informed consent.

But what are the experiments that took place without humanity’s knowledge? In 1946, General Electric discovered that by releasing dry ice into a cold room, ice crystals could be created, and this was tested directly in the sky by releasing the dry ice and then the silver iodate, which was regularly followed by artificial snow.

From here begins a flood of destructive experiments, rising to the limits of the layers of the Earth’s atmosphere, namely the Van Allen belts, which protect us from the harmful particles of solar and cosmic rays. In 1958 with Project Argus “the U.S. Navy exploded three fission type nuclear bombs 480 km (300

miles) above the South Atlantic Ocean in the lower Van Allen belt” (Bertell 2010, p. 3).

“The Purpose of Project Argus appears to have been to assess the impact of high-altitude nuclear explosions on radio transmissions and radar operations” (Rosalie Bertell, *Planet Earth. The Last weapon of War*, Black Rose Books, 2001, p. 64), in fact the military discovered that nuclear explosions in this area generate an electromagnetic pulse (EMP) that eliminates radio communications. Furthermore, the USA wanted to understand whether it was possible to transform charged particles into a source of unlimited energy for destructive purposes.

These explosions, conducted in absolute secrecy, tampered with a complexly delicate mechanism for the vital system of our planet. Also because the Van Allen bands had recently been discovered and little or nothing was known about their functioning. It was presented to the press as “the biggest scientific experiment ever undertaken” (New York Times, 19 March 1953) (Bertell 2001, p. 64). And the long-term results of such unspeakable destruction have never been made public. Scientists stated that the van Allen belts would not return to their original state for at best a hundred years. However, the truth began to leak out. The artificial radiation belts could still be observed five years later and generated artificial aurora borealis upon contact with the atmosphere near the North Pole. Coinciding with these strange phenomena, the Inuit of Baker Lake near Hudson Bay in

Northwestern Canada suffered a terrible famine in the winter of 1957-58 due to the failed migration of caribou, their main source of sustenance. Many died of starvation. They were moved to another location in prefabricated structures, where the Inuit were colder than in their traditional igloos. Furthermore, over the years an anomalous quantity of caesium 137 from radioactive fallout was detected, absorbed by human bodies through contaminated food. Swedes who lived in the Arctic also had abnormal levels of caesium. In 1960 the “Canadian Medical Association Journal noted that cancer rates in the central Arctic appeared to be up to 20 times higher than in the eastern or western Arctic” (Bertell 2001, p. 66).

Rosalie Bertell, with her many years of experience in commissions for assessing the damage caused by radiation following nuclear explosions, is extremely concerned about human health as a consequence of these clandestine experiments. In an interview in 2010 (*Are we the last generation? Radioactivity as the gradual extinction of life*) Rosalie Bertell describes the damage resulting from x-rays as an acceleration of the aging process. When asked about the position of governments in the event of radioactive leaks from nuclear power plants, she replied that they are wrong to minimize the risks, given that DNA and RNA are molecules that can be destroyed by 6 to 10 electron volts of energy and uranium which it is not considered highly radioactive, it contains 4 million. The small doses of environmental radiation that are deposited long-

term in our organism produce selective aging of the organs and a general weakening of the immune system. The situation of the dispersion of depleted uranium in the atmosphere is particularly serious, which in addition to having affected war veterans with Gulf syndrome, continued to kill the Iraqi population for years after the war was over. According to Bertell, who studied the case of the Marshall Islands where people were exposed to the fallout from nuclear tests, the consequences are serious not only for the people present at the time of the explosion but for several generations to come. The Rongalap, the inhabitants of the Marshall Islands which were the site of a famous nuclear test, are at risk of extinction. For several years women have not been able to carry pregnancies to term, infertility has been increasing, mortality strikes early at 30-40 years of age.

“What I think we are doing is that our generation is making a decision on how many future generations there will be”. [...] When you are talking about constant low radiation exposure, what you are doing is introducing mistakes into the gene-pool. And those mistakes will eventually turn up by killing that line, that cell line, that species line. [...] We have shortened the number of generations that will follow us. We have shortened that already. So we reduced the viability of living systems on this planet, [...] We don't have any outside source to get new DNA. So have the DNA we have, whoever will live on this planet in the future is present right now in the DNA.

So if we damage it we don't have another place to get it” (<https://www.cnj.it/home/sr-yu/informisanje/jugoinfo/7856-7893-verso-il-15-mo-anniversario-szamuely-wimmer-bertell.html>).

Arthur Rimbaud, *War*, from *Illuminations* (translated by A.S. Kline):

*As a child, certain skies refined my perspective: all characters shaded my features.*

**Escalation of military experiments** – In 1958 there was a moratorium on nuclear tests which did not stop experiments in the ionosphere, this time it was a question of creating a “telecommunications shield” to eliminate interference caused by the solar wind. The idea was to bring 350,000 million copper needles positioned 100 m apart into orbit and it was actually carried out, but no one knows the outcome of the experiment. They certainly interfered with the Earth's magnetic field. Non-military geophysicists were excluded from the experiment, astronomers strenuously opposed it.

In 1962 the ban was lifted and Us started again with the Starfish project, a new nuclear test in the ionosphere, and the Soviet Union was no exception. Only in 1975 did a study come out (*Long-term effects of multiple detonations of atomic weapons*, US National Academy of Science) and it was discovered that the 300 megatons of power released in all the explosions from 1945 until 1963 had thinned the layer of ozone by 4 percent.

In 1963, peace movements forced Great Britain, the Unit-

ed States and the former USSR to sign the Partial Test Ban Treaty. But it continued with explosions underground. Furthermore, France, China, India and Pakistan, which did not sign it, continued another 25 years.

However, the space race does not stop, despite accidents, such as that which happened to the Saturn 5 rocket in 1973, in which once again scientists demonstrate that they do not have a clear understanding of the functioning mechanisms of the ionosphere. The rocket's second booster catches fire and causes a hole in the ionosphere, caused by a reaction of the exhaust gases with the oxygen ions of the ionosphere, surprising scientists who were not expecting any reaction. This was followed by the usual artificial Northern Lights, which however does not have the compensatory mechanisms that mitigate the ultraviolet rays of natural ones.

In the meantime, rocket launches continue, up to 500-600 per year, introducing chlorine and nitrogen oxide into space which destroy ozone. To compromise the protective effect of the ozone layer, an aerospace engineer, Valerji Brudakov, calculated that 300 Space Shuttle launches would be enough.

But beyond this there are Pentagon projects to be kept secret from the US Senate Control Committee, the so-called *black projects*. And with these a return to nuclear propulsion, experimenting with RTGs, Radioisotope Thermal Generator. The accidents during the execution of the tests in this case are really serious because plutonium is released into the Earth's atmo-

sphere, a mineral which does not have minimum acceptable quantities in causing lung cancer... In the case of the accident which occurred on the Challenger in 1986, those responsible of the project had estimated a disaster risk with a probability of one in a million, while an independent laboratory calculated that it had a 4.3 in 10,000 chance of falling on New Zealand.

In short, military and aerospace research institutions tend to minimize the risks of their enterprises as much as possible, almost to the point of eliminating them, in order to have access to the increasingly large funding they need for their experiments.

In 1989, during the Galileo Project, in which a probe reached Jupiter, scientists once again proved that they did not know stratospheric processes: they sighted fragments of a comet hitting the planet's southern magnetic field, and did not expect the effect that occurred at the pole opposite to the point of impact... that is, the generation of thousands of volts of electricity.

Bertell points out that in the universe "[...] a collision on one planet can reverberate throughout the whole solar system. As a Native American saying goes, 'all things are connected' " (Bertell 2001, p. 77).

Despite ten years of public protests for Galileo, NASA immediately afterwards prepared the new Ulysses mission (1990), again a nuclear vehicle (RGT, radioisotope generator), this time producing a "Draft Environmental Impact Statement", which was not easy access not even for scientists, who defined

it as "misleading" as it was intended to justify the decision already taken. Even less favoured is the participation of citizens in the examination of the project, given that in space projects the dangers do not appear as immediate as those on Earth, and then there is the military secrecy which makes the situation even more serious. Official risk statistics are in fact unreliable.

During the Cassini mission in 1997, for the first time, some NASA employees joined the protests of scientists and activists. Alan Kohn, officer responsible for emergencies in the Galileo and Ulysses missions, revealed once he retired that the order in case of disaster was to take all the protective measures which however did not exist... and above all it was not necessary to let the protest groups know that the danger existed. Kohn disobeyed orders, took all protective precautions for staff, set up bunkers, decontamination cells, provided protective suits and above all prohibited the presence of visitors, receiving applause from colleagues who were officially against these alarmist positions.

Another employee, James Ream, concerned about the risk of plutonium release, urged a resolution against the launch by the town of Titusville, and NASA suspended him for two days without pay. Fortunately the disaster did not happen that time and the Saturn probe was launched. But there were studies by the European Space Agency based on which it was demonstrated that Cassini could have achieved its objectives with solar energy.

The Americans prefer RTG generators fuelled by plutonium, because they probably can produce a surplus of energy for the propulsion of armaments in a conflict situation.

Rosalie Bertell, who has many years of experience with environmental damage assessment commissions, is very critical of this way of proceeding. She would compare society's dependence on the military to the situation of a family in which a family member suffers from an addiction demanding much of the money and resources available to the family. But she believes that we do not need this "military dependence" to achieve a satisfactory progress in the sciences.

The military needs the support of the civilian population but the civilian population does not need the military, so military research is linked to leading civilian industries to raise funds, stealing the brains of the brightest young people who could solve the most serious survival problems of our biosphere. We have no certainty that uncontrolled trials are safe. However, it was understood that space is the next battlefield. General Joseph W. Ashy, commander in chief of the United States Unified Space Command, expressly stated this: plans to attack ground targets in space from space are ready (1996).

In the next Prismatic Readings we will continue this fateful review with space plans, electromagnetic weapons and military geoengineering, which have transformed our planet into a weapon, a projectile that could be launched into deep space... ■

# EVELINE

*Love as redemption or at least as an escape route?  
A short story with delicate words and psychological acuity.  
But then the classic Joyce nonsense bursts in.*

James Joyce

She sat at the window watching the evening invade the avenue. Her head was leaned against the window curtains and in her nostrils was the odour of dusty cretonne. She was tired.

Few people passed. The man out of the last house passed on his way home; she heard his footsteps clacking along the concrete pavement and afterwards crunching on the cinder path before the new red houses. One time there used to be a field there in which they used to play every evening with other people's children. Then a man from Belfast bought the field and built houses in it--not like their little brown houses but bright brick houses with shining roofs. The children of the avenue used to play together in that field --the Devines, the Waters, the Dunns, little Keogh the cripple, she and her brothers and sisters. Ernest, however, never played: he was too grown up. Her father used often to hunt them in out of the field with his blackthorn stick; but usually little Keogh used to keep nix and call out when he saw her father coming. Still they seemed to have been rather happy then. Her father was not so bad then; and besides, her mother was alive. That was a long time ago; she and her brothers and sisters were all grown up her mother was dead. Tizzie Dunn was dead, too, and the Waters had gone back to England. Everything changes. Now she was going to go away like the others, to leave her home.

Home! She looked round the room, reviewing all its familiar objects which she had dusted once a week for so many years, wondering where on earth all the dust came from. Perhaps she would never see again those familiar objects from which she had never dreamed of being divided. And yet during all those years she had never found out the name of the priest whose yellowing photograph hung on the wall above the broken harmonium beside the coloured print of the promises made to Blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque. He had been a school friend of her father. Whenever he showed the photograph to a visitor her father used to pass it with a casual word:

"He is in Melbourne now."

She had consented to go away, to leave her home. Was that wise? She tried to weigh each side of the question. In her home anyway she had shelter and food; she had those whom she had known all her life about her. O course she had to work hard, both in the house and at business. What would they say of her in the Stores when they found out that she had run away with a fellow? Say she was a fool, perhaps; and her place would be filled up by advertisement. Miss Gavan would be glad. She had always had an edge on her, especially whenever there were people listening.

"Miss Hill, don't you see these ladies are waiting?"

"Look lively, Miss Hill, please."

She would not cry many tears at leaving the Stores.

But in her new home, in a distant unknown country, it would not be like that. Then she would be married--she, Eveline. People would treat her with respect then. She would not be treated as her mother had been. Even now, though she was over nineteen, she sometimes felt herself in danger of her father's violence. She knew it was that that had given her the palpitations. When they were growing up he had never gone for her like he used to go for Harry and Ernest, because she was a girl but latterly he had begun to threaten her and say what he would do to her only for her dead mother's sake. And no she had nobody to protect her. Ernest was dead and Harry, who was in the church decorating business, was nearly always down somewhere in the country. Besides, the invariable squabble for money on Saturday nights had begun to weary her unspeakably. She always gave her entire wages--seven shillings--and Harry always sent up what he could but the trouble was to get any money from her father. He said she used to squander the money, that she had no head, that he wasn't going to give her his hard-earned money to throw about the streets, and much more, for he was usually fairly bad on Saturday night. In the end he would give her the money and ask her had she any intention of buying Sunday's dinner. Then she had to rush out as quickly as she could and do her marketing, holding her black leather purse tightly in her hand as she elbowed her way through the crowds and returning home late under her load of provisions. She had hard work to keep the house together and to see that the two young children who had been left to her charge went to school regularly and got their meals regularly. It was hard work--a hard life--but now that she was about to leave it she did not find it a wholly undesirable life.

She was about to explore another life with Frank. Frank was very kind, manly, open-hearted. She was to go away with him by the night-boat to be his wife and to live with him in Buenos Ayres where he had a home waiting for her. How well she remembered the first time she had seen him; he was lodging in a house on the main road where she used to visit. It seemed a few weeks ago. He was standing at the gate, his peaked cap pushed back on his head and his hair tumbled forward over a face of bronze. Then they had come to know each other. He used to meet her outside the Stores every evening and see her home. He took her to see *The Bohemian Girl* and she felt elated as

she sat in an unaccustomed part of the theatre with him. He was awfully fond of music and sang a little.

People knew that they were courting and, when he sang about the lass that loves a sailor, she always felt pleasantly confused. He used to call her Poppens out of fun. First of all it had been an excitement for her to have a fellow and then she had begun to like him. He had tales of distant countries. He had started as a deck boy at a pound a month on a ship of the Allan Line going out to Canada. He told her the names of the ships he had been on and the names of the different services.

He had sailed through the Straits of Magellan and he told her stories of the terrible Patagonians. He had fallen on his feet in Buenos Ayres, he said, and had come over to the old country just for a holiday. Of course, her father had found out the affair and had forbidden her to have anything to say to him.

"I know these sailor chaps," he said.

One day he had quarrelled with Frank and after that she had to meet her lover secretly.

The evening deepened in the avenue. The white of two letters in her lap grew indistinct. One was to Harry; the other was to her father. Ernest had been her favourite but she liked Harry too. Her father was becoming old lately, she noticed; he would miss her. Sometimes he could be very nice. Not long before, when she had been laid up for a day, he had read her out a ghost story and made toast for her at the fire. Another day, when their mother was alive, they had all gone for a picnic to the Hill of Howth. She remembered her father putting on her mother's bonnet to make the children laugh.

Her time was running out but she continued to sit by the window, leaning her head against the window curtain, inhaling the odour of dusty cretonne. Down far in the avenue she could hear a street organ playing. She knew the air *Strange* that it should come that very night to remind her of the promise to her mother, her promise to keep the home together as long as she could. She remembered the last night of her mother's illness; she was again in the close dark room at the other side of the hall and outside she heard a melancholy air of Italy. The organ-player had been ordered to go away and given sixpence. She remembered her father strutting back into the sickroom saying:

"Damned Italians! coming over here!"

As she mused the pitiful vision of her mother's life

laid its spell on the very quick of her being--that life of commonplace sacrifices closing in final craziness. She trembled as she heard again her mother's voice saying constantly with foolish insistence:

"Derevaun Seraun! Derevaun Seraun!"

She stood up in a sudden impulse of terror. Escape! She must escape! Frank would save her. He would give her life, perhaps love, too. But she wanted to live. Why should she be unhappy? She had a right to happiness. Frank would take her in his arms, fold her in his arms. He would save her.

She stood among the swaying crowd in the station at the North Wall. He held her hand and she knew that he was speaking to her, saying something about the passage over and over again. The station was full of soldiers with brown baggages. Through the wide doors of the sheds she caught a glimpse of the black mass of the boat, lying in beside the quay wall, with illumined portholes. She answered nothing. She felt her cheek pale and cold and, out of a maze of distress, she prayed to God to direct her, to show her what was her duty. The boat blew a long mournful whistle

into the mist. If she went, tomorrow she would be on the sea with Frank, steaming towards Buenos Ayres. Their passage had been booked. Could she still draw back after all he had done for her? Her distress awoke a nausea in her body and she kept moving her lips in silent fervent prayer.

A bell clanged upon her heart. She felt him seize her hand:

"Come!"

All the seas of the world tumbled about her heart. He was drawing her into them: he would drown her. She gripped with both hands at the iron railing.

"Come!"

No! No! No! It was impossible. Her hands clutched the iron in frenzy. Amid the seas she sent a cry of anguish.

"Eveline! Evvy!"

He rushed beyond the barrier and called to her to follow. He was shouted at to go on but he still called to her. She set her white face to him, passive, like a helpless animal. Her eyes gave him no sign of love or farewell or recognition. ■



## THE AUTHOR

James Joyce (1882-1941), Irish by birth and later a writer marked by a certain existential nomadism, was a giant of twentieth-century literature.

His novels include *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Ulysses*, *Finnegans Wake* (1939) and also *Stephen Hero*, which came out posthumously in 1944. He published only one short story collection, *Dubliners* consisting of fifteen short stories. The story of *Eveline* is part of this collection.



## CONTRIBUTORS

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**Mariagrazia Pelaia** holds a degree in Modern Foreign Languages and Literatures from "La Sapienza" University (Rome), specializing in Slavistics, Anglistics and Germani-

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**Giovanni Porzio**, journalist, writer, photojournalist, was correspondent for the weekly magazine *Panorama*. He studied Arabic language and Arabic literature. He has followed the wars in the Middle East, Africa, Balkans and Latin America. In 1991 he is one of the first journalists to enter Kuwait City, in 2001 he is with the mujahiddin in Kabul on the day of the escape of the Taliban, in 2003 he is in Baghdad during the invasion Americans. He has won numerous awards including the Max David for reporting from Afghanistan. He has published ten books on the Middle and Far East, Somalia, Iraq and Africa.

**Enrica Salvatori** is an associate professor of Medieval History at the University of Pisa and president of the Italian Public History Association (2024). She teaches Digital Public History in the master's degree program in Humanities Informatics, History of Late Antique and Medieval Settlements in the master's degree program in Archaeology, and Medieval History and Exegesis of Medieval Sources in the master's degree program in History. She has also served as the Deputy Director of the Inter-University Center for Research and Development on Public History

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