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Memory loss: a triptych for the theater of poetry

by *Lorenzo Mango*

[...] *Ritratto dell'attore da giovane* appears more intimate, reflective and crepuscular, offering itself almost as a kind of private agreement compared to *Genet a Tangeri*¹. As the latter opened onto a cosmogony, so *Ritratto* turns its gaze inward; an art about art, a theater about theater. The play is built symmetrically. Two acts for two actors: the first dedicated to women – Marion D'Amburgo – the second to men – Sandro Lombardi. Both characters, who keep the names of the actors to emphasize the autobiographical nature of the show, are accompanied by two Mutes who embody the deep spirit that makes the unconscious visible, the pre-intellectual part of the actors. “But even though at first sight more schematic than *Genet* – Lombardi recalls – actually *Ritratto* supersedes the static theatricality that informs *Genet*”²; there is a mobility in the acting that avoids the oratorical tone that pervaded the previous play.

The dramatic action now turns to the present as a stream of consciousness in free fall.

The setting of the drama is a pool that fills almost the entire stage³; a cinematic citation, the pool of *Sunset Boulevard*, but also something else: the therapeutic pool of mental asylums, the symbolic representation of swirling, dark, murky water like that of the unconscious. Marion D'Amburgo's monologue is modeled precisely on the atmosphere of *Sunset Boulevard*, with its dominant themes of waiting for a “final rehearsal,” one last great performance that will be an apotheosis, a martyrdom and a death, and the excruciating return, among the ghosts of the past, of their characters. Writing the text as a Joycean stream of consciousness, Tiezzi weaves this situation through an image typical of Genet: expecting the arrival of revolutionaries. Once more a war that presses at the gates and besieges the theater, like a shadow, a promise, in some sense a liberation. In Marion's character this sentiment of expectation is brought to an extreme: she is an “old, young actress,” an undone star, a sick body that aspires to an impossible redemption. Her only ambition is to destroy and disintegrate the theater; but the dramatic sense of her destiny of death is distorted by piercing flashes of the grotesque that make her impassable even in the sublime space of tragedy, the pristine space that the modern theater can no longer draw on. Her desire for destruction is expressed fully in the relationship that Marion establishes with her Mute, her animal spirit, her feral presence, which accompanies her as her double. It is a heated, dramatic, sometimes comical conflict that offers no peace. While Marion talks, she is euphoric or despairing, devouring the corpses sunk in the pool, the Mute runs, screams, groans and jumps, expressing a physical vitality, an exuberance that opposes the actress's solemn, ponderous, suffering presence. Hence the hatred and love that binds them, being part of a unit that has broken, half of it tragically living an impossible desire to be reunited.

The first part of this portrait of an actress is marked by the dissolution, death and decay of the body. It is the unconscious half, the half of the *Soul*, as Jung would say, which speaks the language of the earth, of a potent, terrible subterranean force. The second part, Sandro's, contains, by contrast, an awakening, a desire for hope and salvation, the air of day. As Franco Quadri justly suggests, we get to see in these two characters “the division of a single character into its feminine and masculine sides, the former highlighting its destructive tendency and the latter its constructive one, the former explicating itself through narrative, the latter through analysis.”⁴ “Sandro too is an actor who speaks in the first person, free of the characters that return at times to populate his mind. His story no longer takes place, as Marion's did, in death's anteroom, but in the exotic atmosphere of a Moroccan casbah, re-written as a vaudeville act. In the pool now a great painting is sunk: Caspar David Friedrich's “Wreck of Hope.” The part of Sandro is more mobile and airy in regard to his acting, all screeches and leaps of pitch. While Marion is totally immersed in the tragic fate of her role, Sandro weaves in and out of it, experiencing it while watching himself doing so, in an analytical perspective that distances him from his art. What issues is a mixture of different tones, at once comic, tragic and meta-reflexive.”⁵ The mix of ironic elements in the full tragic current was already present in *Genet a Tangeri*, especially in the character of Fassbinder, who continually desecrated with gestures, nervous tics and grimaces the dramatic sense of his words, best exemplifying the idea of “acting by contrast” that interacts dialectically with speech, displacing it and thrusting it into a crisis of logical consistency.

The text written for Lombardi has an analytical, meta-theatrical breadth: in the folds of the story, in its warp of illusion, what matters most are the reflections that the character makes on the actor's art, reflections of a Brechtian clarity. The dominant theme is blindness, the mystical, intense light that makes it possible to empty and erase the self in order to open it up to that other, which is the character. The actor's art appears as an art of the mind and the heart, contamination, tonal conflict

¹ Some motifs that inspired *Ritratto* are the famous literary antecedents, from (obviously) Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to Dylan Thomas's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog* and Bernhard Minetti's authentic “portrait of an actor”.

² S. Lombardi, *Una geografia emotiva*, in F. Tiezzi, *Perdita di memoria, una trilogia per Magazzini Criminali*, Ubulibri, Milan 1986, p. 141.

³ Tiezzi derives a picture of strong visual impact from David Hockney paintings.

⁴ F. Quadri, *Introduzione* a F. Tiezzi, *Perdita di memoria, una trilogia per Magazzini Criminali*, cit., p. 14

⁵ I refer to an essay of mine which analyses the “theoretical” peculiarities of the actors' speeches in *Ritratto: Sulla sessualità del teatro e sul corpo dell'attore*, in “Pensiero e società”, issues 27-32, January-December 1988-90.

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and contrast between light and shadow, between the harmony of shapes and the disturbance of feeling. The dialectic between the harmony of composition and the tragic spirit of dissolution becomes, with *Ritratto*, a dramatic material to be experienced directly in the script of a drama that stands out in full relief against the background of other stage scripts. Even Sandro's relationship with his mute companion appears quite different from Marion's, more playful than emotional. The Mute is indicated as a vegetable spirit, a natural force of growth, an acrobat and juggler.⁶ The monumentality of the tragic first part is answered by the sparkling, comic vitality of the second. Dissolution and death are contrasted by the end of art: saving hope, bringing to the shore the painting that is buried under water. The actor's mission is to relive the dream of the world, but it is a mission fraught with doubts: "must we fish it out alive and whole / in this horror? in this love? / is it wise to fish it out or better to leave it / whole at the bottom of the pool grave?"⁷

In the end Sandro chooses. He jumps with his Mute into a small boat in the pool and finally draws the painting to shore. "We have saved Hope." The play's initiatory journey has been fulfilled. Having started out from the *soul* of destruction, from death, we reach salvation, hope, rebirth. It is a symbolic journey, to be sure, but it is also a path that gives meaning to the actor's experience and makes him a human prototype. The actor is one who experiences in himself the androgyny of Being, who combines the *soul* of the earth with the *animus* of thought, the unconscious with reason. Inside the living matter of the actor's body Tiezzi inscribes the symbolic meaning of his theater, highlighted in the finale by his appearance as Simon Magus, in a niche opened in the golden backdrop. Simon Magus evokes an adventure beyond the Pillars of Hercules, a journey into the unknown to which he has pushed and been shipwrecked; he is therefore a Dantean Ulysses, one who has dived into the dark night and wakes up shipwrecked, amid the ice of extreme experience, in the lands where man resembles God. Simon Magus has completed this journey which Fassbinder had promised himself in *Genet a Tangeri*, and now returns from the places of memory to the theater as a fleeting shadow, a spirit of artistic and human research, a recondite voice that speaks behind and inside the words and the bodies of actors. Having started out as a portrait of two actors, *Ritratto* has actually become the photograph of a condition of Being and of art, the biography of an archetype.

[...]

⁶ Acrobatics as a counterpoint to tragedy is another constant element in the trilogy. It already appears in the games the character of Harcamone plays with the bedsprings in *Genet a Tangeri* and returns, again in Rolando Mugnai's athletic abilities, in *Vita immaginaria di Paolo Uccello* as trapeze stunts that suggest an image typical of bird's-eye view perspective.

⁷ F. Tiezzi, *Ritratto dell'attore da giovane*, in F. Tiezzi, *Perdita di memoria, una trilogia per Magazzini Criminali*, cit., p. 94.