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Enigmas of Italian Temperament

Mario Perniola

THE PULCINELLA ENIGMA

The recognition of Italy's national identity in the Neapolitan theatrical character Pulcinella is the culmination of the opinion that Italy has been for centuries a society of theatre. This conclusion, however, is paradoxical—above all, because Pulcinella's character consists in not having an identity, but in presenting himself in dozens of different and often contradictory roles. But Pulcinella's ambiguity is not limited to his chameleon-like and opportunistic nature. This ambiguity, in fact, makes up his unique individuality, because there is not one Pulcinella who transforms himself, but an infinite number of Pulcinellas who at the same time act in opposite and contradictory ways.

The artist Tiepolo captured this fundamental plurality with great skill in many drawings and paintings of the late eighteenth century. In the drawing *The Firing Squad*, for example, one sees a large group of Pulcinellas executing another group of Pulcinellas, while a third group watches the scene from afar. Which of the three groups is the "real" Pulcinella? This question presupposes

[Translated from the Italian by Aninne Schneider]

that there is a secret Pulcinella that is more Pulcinella than the others. According to the tradition of Pulcinella, however, any secret of his is soon known to everyone! The "Pulcinella-ness" is entirely and simultaneously present, be it in the role of executioner, the role of victim or even that of spectator.

Pulcinella places in front of us not a secret, but an enigma. The search for a national identity is destined to frustration until it aspires to find a content, type, or character: Pulcinella, as Romeo DeMaio rightly observes, is simultaneously good for all purposes. His essence is elsewhere, in a temperament [*modo di sentire*] that is an *a priori* condition to the possibility of all his manifestations. It is this temperament which creates an enigma, because it unites the opposed dimensions of exteriority and affectivity. Thus the two aspects that so many foreign travellers between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries have attributed to Italy come together in the figure of Pulcinella: Italy is both the country of the dead and the scene of frenetic action. The existence of a movement that does not come from one's inner nature and that cannot even be considered as anything automatic, effectively constitutes an enigma that both repels and attracts the modern mentality.

The simplest solution is to attribute this outer liveliness to nature. The nineteenth-century French poet Charles Nodier, for example, saw the essence of Pulcinella in *homo naturalis*, and in a life force with its infinite variations and contradictions. But this answer does not capture the essence of being either Italian or Neapolitan, because Italy has never been a symbol of natural spontaneity—quite the opposite, in fact. Italy is the place *par excellence* of cultural mediation, the seat of a multi-millennial tradition constantly present in ruins and monuments, whose continuity is guaranteed by the Catholic church. Furthermore, in the collective imagination of foreign visitors, Italy remains the country of Machiavelli, of the reason of the State, and of unscrupulous politics and intrigue. Pulcinella is certainly no noble savage, nor the personification of naiveté: Jung saw in him the figure of the rogue. Yet even if one might express some reservation about this judgment, the pretense of knowing how to get around in the world and knowing its reality better than anyone else is implicit in the character of Pulcinella.

To illustrate the case of Pulcinella, it is useful to note Hegel's description of the ancient Egyptians, especially when he discusses their apparently boundless turmoil, agitation and restlessness, an appearance, however, that never reaches the level of inner spiritu-

ality. The tendency to free oneself from every outside restriction creates a mixture of gaiety, superstition and sensuality, which lightheartedly pokes fun at everything. Out of all this material in constant turmoil, however, nothing ever emerges!

ITALIAN CYNICISM: A SPECTACLE WITHOUT SOCIETY

In *Discorso sopra lo stato presente dei costumi degli italiani* (1824), Giacomo Leopardi considers the enigma of this mode of existence [*modo di essere*] that unites an enormous liveliness and a no less enormous indifference when he asks himself about the causes of such a surprising and eccentric affective disposition. According to Leopardi, Italy is by nature the most lively, sensitive, and warm of European countries; however, due to historical and political circumstances that have deadened expectations and oppressed enthusiasm, the nation has become so dead, indifferent, and cynical as to be unique in Europe.

Leopardi very astutely locates the key to Italian difference not in a way of thinking that is different from other peoples, but in a different way of feeling. As far as opinions are concerned, Italy is at the level of other peoples: it shares with them the decadence of moral principles associated with the advent of modernity. "Morality is completely destroyed," Leopardi writes, "and it is impossible to believe that it can come back now or ever, or even to see how it might do so." Nevertheless while in other countries the place of moral convictions is taken up by public opinion, by the need of individuals to be respected, and by the existence of a society aware and able to act in support of its own values, nothing of the kind happens in Italy. Here, in fact, public opinion has no real weight in daily life because the good is rarely rewarded and the bad, rarely censured: an Italian, in fact, is unwilling to sacrifice practically anything to honor and esteem, since "each Italian is more or less equally honored or dishonored." Leopardi thus takes up in another form Tiepolo's depiction of society as a crowd of Pulcinellas.

Leopardi defines Italian temperament as cynical: "Those who believe the French are the most cynical of all are deceived. No one beats or even equals the Italians in this." It is worth noting the reference to nature or to a natural condition in the word cynicism, which is derived from *kúon* (dog). Leopardi also underlines the outward character of Italian life, in which the pleasures of civil conversation are absent: in their place are the entertain-

ments and dissipations of a life wasted in shows and parties. Every social tie is thus weakened: man is reduced to the solitude, desperation, and desolation that create "pure, infinite, profound and overwhelming boredom." On the whole, Leopardi finds Italy to be the example of a spectacle without society, of superficiality not animated by the spirit, conversation, or dialectic: he thus maintains that Italians have habits and practices, but no principles—that is to say, they lack an ethos, or a collective morality.

All things considered, Leopardi's criticism is founded on a spiritualistic presupposition: he takes for granted the inefficacy of individual moral sentiment in modern times, but believes that there has to be a collective spirituality, a common sentiment that takes its place. In this way, the enigmatic character of Italian temperament—which once again is judged and condemned by foreign standards—escapes even Leopardi. The specificity of a feeling without subject, of anonymous affectivity, and of impersonal emotionalism, that constitutes the core of Italian experience still remains unconsidered: man's twofold metamorphosis into a thing and of the thing into a sentient being is hastily resolved with recourse to the notion of cynicism.

In reality, Italian temperament does not consist in simply stripping one's behavior of every relation with emotion and considering it in its blatant nudity. On the contrary, the idea of truth as essentially nude is contrary to the baroque idea, so deep-rooted in Italy, of truth as something essentially clothed.

Under the first layer of clothing there is another layer, and under that, skin, which is also tissue. At the moment in which men become statues, mannequins, and puppets, their sensitivity transfers to the outside, the environment, or the landscape, of which they themselves are still an integral part: the Italian enigma consists in the fact that man is gifted with an outer emotionality, which does not pertain to him intimately, but in which he nonetheless participates. The actors and the audience take part in the scene just as do the stage wings and backdrop: if the scene is permeated with emotion, they, too, are imbued with it. To the foreign eye in search of inner nature, the individual, or a subject, the actors and the audience seem just so many Pulcinellas, or examples of extreme cynicism: but this consideration too drastically isolates the individual from the environment and from the surrounding world, that covers and protects him like clothing.

The pretense of extracting an individual identity from such a mobile and magma-like context can lead to an overly biased and

negative evaluation of the Italian mode of existence. Leopardi, for example, maintains that at the base of Italian cynicism there is a total self-contempt, a profound and deep-rooted lack of self-esteem. This is the source of the tendency to offend those present, leaving them as dissatisfied as possible with themselves and with their interlocutor. Perhaps the Italian neither particularly esteems nor despises himself; but he is in a constant state of suspension, ready to do exactly the opposite of what is expected, for fear of overly categorical determinations. He works constantly on the correction of his own image by means of a process of feedback, a mechanism of self-regulation that holds him in harmony with his environment. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Wilhelm von Humboldt captured this intermediate, barely perceptible dimension of Italian life when he defined the Italian emotive tonality as a continual movement between melancholy and joy, and as a boundary between life and death that allows one to move more easily through life and resign oneself more easily to death. Within Italian culture, others have explored the connection between liveliness and exteriority in a way that is neither caricatured nor biased, but serious and positive. Specifically, I would like to pause to consider two writers from the early twentieth century: the Neapolitan Antonio Sarno, who developed his ideas around the notion of sense, and the Gorizian Carlo Michelstaedter, in whose work the notion of persuasion occupies a key place.

THE ANTI-PULCINELLA: HISTORICAL SENSE IN ANTONIO SARNO

If Pulcinella is known to everyone, Antonio Sarno is known to very few. Born in Naples in 1887, he committed suicide in 1932. His writings were published posthumously in 1943 in *Pensiero e Poesia*, and republished in 1956 with the addition of more writings under the title *Filosofia poetica*.

In the elaboration of his ideas Sarno draws on the work of Campanella, Bruno and Vico. His point of departure is the opposition between an internal feeling [*sensus sui*], that is essentially identical to oneself, and an external feeling that transforms itself into the things of which it has experience, and that wholly lends and sacrifices itself, to the end that they live in it. This external sense is of a passionate nature, in the literal sense of the word, because the passions make the spirit learn new things, and by themselves, they change it into something else: thus this sense

seems to Sarno to be a condition of consciousness, which can be defined as "making or making-into things" [*"un farsi or un infarsi le cose"*], that is to say, changing into them. Sarno writes that the honor and integrity of consciousness consist in not involving oneself even minimally in the becoming of things, but in listening to them and letting them run their course by themselves. This presupposes a sort of asceticism, a gnosiological catharsis, making oneself nothing and no one, the death of oneself in order to accept that which comes from the outside: "one who wants to know makes a huge void in his spirit, in order to accept the thing," to understand it, to speak it. In this way, having dispensed with every pretense to identity and individuality, the conscience becomes a sort of "magic circle" that attracts things and takes on their movement. A loving immersion into things, letting them act and resound, seems to Sarno the conditions of a feeling that is swirling and filled with liveliness.

This is, however, not an appropriation, or an assimilation, of what is outside, nor an empathic process that projects onto things the sentiments of the subject. Just as it is impossible to see the clarity of the sky through a soot-covered window, there can be no knowledge, if the spirit is all "impure and grimy." A drastic experience of estrangement is essential: Sarno repeatedly invites the reader to accept the extraneousness of that which makes an impression on the senses, to welcome things specifically for their strangeness, difference, otherness, and irreducibility to subjectivity. What reaches us is "new, immediate, unmotivated, and dramatic, and it inevitably arouses a sense of wonder."

The experience outlined here, however, has nothing to do with mysticism. While mysticism presupposes a unity between the human and the divine, Sarno's "sense," on the contrary, excludes any rapport of intimacy or confidence with that which reaches and meets us: the void, the nothing we have made in ourselves to accept the other, is not filled by its arrival. This feeling is enigmatic because it implies an indefinite continuance of attention and vigilance: this is not rapture, ecstasy, or departure with a new arrival, but remaining to listen with rapt attention to what happens. As Sarno writes about Bruno's philosophy, "Enthusiasm, not ecstasy, is conceivable, unending conversation, not the suppression of every impulse." This is exactly the opposite of the Pulcinella's perpetual motion: "Men place no value on their intentions, but only on their actions. Good intentions do not exculpate bad actions and bad intentions do not undermine good actions."

The temperament [*sentire*] introduced by Sarno is oriented towards action, the concrete, and pragmatic effectuality: it is thus the antithesis of Kantian rigor, which he reproaches for being the most absurd and dangerous ethic ever conceived, precisely for its utopian orientation that "denies love the right to go where desire calls it." Man's becoming a thing has its point of reference in the historical process: making oneself a thing is the production of history. Adhering to things does not mean being submerged by the indefinite plurality of possibility, indiscriminately taking everything, but rather rejecting the abstract possibility "in favor of the one alone that is realized." Sarno is thus against the philosophy of values precisely because of its abstract character, without content, that either excludes all or welcomes all. Sarno's thought thus finishes by being enveloped in a "destinal halo": "being able to die is an indispensable factor to history." Furthermore, "drawing away from life is a never-ending process. Even the dead make progress in death, moving to an ever more profound death." Between life and death, memory and forgetfulness, success and failure, there remains a middle, barely perceptible space, that of the hidden historical situations suspended. This virtuality is culture's great gift: being able from a huge distance of years to take up again and wake again as much as one has solicited welcome and development.

Thus the place *par excellence* of the Italian enigma is not nature, but history. Its enigma is inexhaustible, because nothing is ever definitive and identical to itself. "The possibility of all things to be different than what they are dictates that they are restless and moving," but this seething of possibility is not a worm's nest; on the contrary, it allows for the experience of difference, of illimitation, and of the unpredictability of history. It is not we who are masters of historical knowledge; rather, towards it we remain in a rapport of extraneity even inasmuch as concerns our existence: Sarno writes, "The hope from which we spring was from other hearts, and what we do until death, the very sense of our entire lives, will be the fleeting memory, or the problematic possession, of other souls."

ANTI-CYNICISM: PERSUASION IN CARLO MICHELSTAEDTER

An equally extreme experience of feeling "on the outside" is that of Carlo Michelstaedter, who was also born in 1887 and committed suicide in 1910. He wrote *La persuasione e la rettorica*, pub-

lished posthumously in 1913.

If the cause of cynicism, as Leopardi maintains, is self-disdain, it is within oneself that one must search for the remedy. This rapport with the self cannot be one of intimacy and abandon, of a natural and spontaneous identity with one's own life force. In fact, according to Michelstaedter, a feeling that permits us to go with the flow of our desires, illusions, hopes, and the spontaneous course of life, cannot create in us any self-esteem. Michelstaedter defines mere love of natural life with the Greek word *filopsuchía*—synonym of cowardice! Cowardice is, in fact, letting oneself be dragged in a never-ending search for something new, never being content with the present, experiencing the present as a non-existent moment between memory and anticipation. Cowardice is surrendering to this continual deficiency for which each thing lives and dies every minute. Cowardice is suffering one's need to live; it is contenting oneself with a chronic deficiency that can never be healed. From this perspective, life is similar to a weight hanging from a hook: it always tends toward the lowest point, and it never succeeds in halting at a point of perfection. The eye never tires: it chases first this flash of light, immediately swallowed by the dark, then that flash, and another, until some obstacle makes this sad game come to an end. Cowardice is the life pain that cannot be appeased. The hedonistic conception of life, in which the important thing is pleasure, is prey to an insatiable hunger that brings ruin and collapse to anyone who relies on it. In short, *filopsuchía* is the moral disposition of Pulcinella. It is not mere coincidence that he is always hungry: "I am so much in love that I'm dying of hunger" [*Io songo tanto 'nnamurato ca me mor'e famme*"].

Nevertheless simple love of life is not enough to create the false consciousness in which cynicism is rooted. There is another much more despicable moral disposition that Michelstaedter calls by the name of rhetoric. While cowardice is, so to say, spontaneous, rhetoric is a reactive formation: it consists in the pretense of claiming an absolute assurance to oppose to the experience of nothing. It could be considered as a decline of cynicism: in fact, while a cynical man shows himself in a certain measure for what he is, the rhetorical man is essentially concealment, mystification, and deception. Social life becomes a "gang of thugs," a place where long-winded flattery tries to hide the complete absence of a destined experience. Rhetoric is also the denial of historical sense, because it pretends to abolish time and promises entrance into an

absolute, eternal dimension. If Pulcinella is cowardly, the man of rhetoric is doubly so, because he is ashamed of his cowardice and his mask of feigned courage. If life force is an illusion, rhetoric is illusion squared. The spirit of a fakir hides in the man of rhetoric: in him we find an unfounded pretext of stability, an inadequate affirmation, and under it all, the very fragile aspects of identity, individuality and certainty. For Michelstaedter there are many kinds of rhetoric: that of authority, that of the pleasures, an artistic one, and a philosophical one . . . but all go back to the will to transform the present into something eternal. There is even a rhetoric of suicide, understood as a need for rest, self-pity.

In opposition to cowardice and rhetoric, Michelstaedter proposes a feeling that he defines with the word "persuasion," whose essential characteristic is an enigmatic convergence of liveliness and exteriority, of energy and peace, of life and death, of movement and immobility. Persuasion is intimately connected to self-esteem: But how can one have self-esteem, if he doesn't recognize himself as subject, as sole originator of his own powers? Michelstaedter does not believe in a unity of consciousness, nor in a continuity of internal experience. To escape the insatiable hunger for life, one must finish with the never-ending yearning for the future and instead consider each instant of time as already complete and perfect: "every one of us at every moment in life, finds himself where it is no longer the moment to linger, but the culmination of the work." He thus introduces an enigmatic mode of feeling in which, on the one hand, the situation asserts a compelling and radical extraneousness from which it is impossible to escape, and, on the other, it creates not passive resignation, but a strongly emotional and affective state that aspires to complete autonomy and self-sufficiency. In one respect, it is not necessary to request that which cannot be given, yet it is precisely this descent into the abyss of one's own insufficiency that generates a spirited sense of freedom that Michelstaedter defines as "becoming flame."

What exactly do "persuasion" and "persuade" mean? The common meaning of these words would lead us off track. For Michelstaedter it is not at all a matter of convincing someone to do or believe something. To understand the sense in which he uses these words, we must look back in time to consider the ancient meanings.

In Greek, persuade, or convince, is *peitho*. Originally the root *peith-* was only intransitive: it did not mean to convince someone,

but to have trust, or to trust someone. The transitive use of the verb does not belong to the ancient Greek and represents a later change.

The fundamental meaning of persuasion is trust. To be persuaded thus means having a great trust, to be or remain in a state of trust. The word and the experience to which it pertains are developed from the Hebrew: in the Greek tradition of the Seventy—the Alexandrian translators of the Old Testament in Greek—the root *peith-* is a translation of the Hebrew root *bth-* that is frequently used in the sapiential books of the Old Testament to indicate the frame of mind of a just man. Trust is something fundamentally different from faith [*pístis*], which is an idea from the New Testament. Faith implies a deferment to the future, waiting for salvation to come, in a word, it implies hope; trust, on the other hand, is something already given, something present, the state of one who feels safe because he can rely on a solid reality. "The man who goes safely, cannot go wrong," Michelstaedter writes. "A just man will never be shaken," says the Bible.

But what protects the man who is safe? The answer is simple: fear of death. To live without persuasion means fearing death. "The dull aching pain that seeps under everything" has its origins in fear of death. It establishes and nourishes itself on an experience of time that privileges the future over the present. The person who lives on hope and waiting necessarily fears death. The experience of a life that is never satisfied, contented, or fulfilled by the present, that is always longing for something to happen, is condemned to setback and failure.

Persuasion thus identifies itself with the conquest of the present: it means having one's own life in oneself, not waiting to find the meaning of life in the future, and putting an end to the sad game that keeps pushing us forward.

Fear of death, for Michelstaedter, is responsible for a whole series of apparently unrelated experiences. Remorse, for example, is not regret for past action, but terror that one's life was destroyed in the irrecoverable past; one is alive, but impotent, in the face of the future. Another example is anger, which is no more than impotence to affect something already finished. He who is persuaded does not ask for life and therefore does not fear death, but "exists in the immediate moment of health." It belongs to the person who, in the middle of things, "exists" and lets thirst, need, and hunger for the future flow away, far from him.

Persuasion is the conquest of the present: it is living free and strong, an accord between "becoming flame" and "becoming stone." Hence nothing merely subjective or vitalist intrudes in this mode of feeling, that has something of what Ernst Bloch defines as "wanting to become Egyptian like stone." In effect, further exploration of the notion of persuasion as trust carries us to the Egyptian concept of *Maât*, which is usually translated as justice, but which can also mean truth, trust, faithfulness, or stability. As the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann has shown, *Maât*—differently from Hebrew trust, which always implies a relation with God—refers to nothing other than oneself. In Israel, Assmann writes, the just man will justify himself by his trust in God; in Egypt, the just man will justify himself by his own reliability. In ancient Egyptian thought, *Maât* is never man's trust in God, but the trust the man himself merits due to his solidarity with others and his own soundness. These considerations allow us to understand more deeply certain of Michelstaedter's comments in *Dialogo della salute*, in which he underlines the connection between persuasion and justice: "If I am to continue, my life must be life to others; 'I' must be just to everything, and towards no one be unjust."

Thus Michelstaedter's persuasion reconsiders in new and very original terms the Italian enigma, the co-presence and simultaneity of liveliness and exteriority: "becoming stone" and "becoming flame" are realized in "becoming sword." Persuasion is not only perfection and trust, but also fearlessness: "The port is the fury of the sea,/ and the fury of the strongest storm/ when death laughs freely/ at he who freely challenged it." According to Michelstaedter, it is necessary "to confront and engage life in the immediate present"; persuasion has a strategic dimension: "the strong man has at each point destroyed the bridges for retreat and left open only that one where he must win or die." Thus the enigma of Italian feeling manifests itself in its purest form in a truly Italian virtue that is exactly the opposite of cynicism: contempt, which is an admirable synthesis of sensitivity and coldness.

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