

In memory of Antonio Vitale

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1. – Introduction

I am pleased to thank the Organizers of IFAE 2009 for their friendly request of remembering Antonio Vitale ahead of the forthcoming scientific Sessions. With particular regret it occurs to me that still at the last-year Bologna IFAE Meeting he gave an outstanding contribution by promoting an important Round Table on the present status and future of research in Italy and in Europe. Seriously sick several months since, he was fighting against illness by engaging himself in the professional activity with an even more passionate commitment than during the years of his youth and good health. Those who had the opportunity of being close to him during the final stage of his journey know that he kept faithful to this choice up to the very last day.

Well acquainted with his reactions and a few years older, I often happened to think that, surviving to me, Antonio would feel somewhat annoyed by my unintentional refusal of writing my own obituary article on *Il Nuovo Saggiatore*. The case was instead that I took care of this task with regard to him [1] and held the memorial talk to the Faculty colleagues, one month after his death. What I already said and wrote outlines his scientific activity effectively. Therefore, I would like to propose today a non-exclusively academic profile of the friend with whom I shared more than forty years of professional life, pointing out other prominent features of his personality. For Antonio was a classy physicist and an authoritative research director, but as to temper and human characteristics he simply stood alone.

2. – Antonio seen by the next door neighbour...

Relations with him did not know light and shade. Currently he loved or hated, without half-measures, whom he met on his way, showing without dissimulation (and rousing as well) quite vivid reactions. His perhaps most envied quality was how easily he got other people's attention, easily capturing liking and appreciation. When he was impressing an unarmed interlocutor, I used to make fun of him with the picture of the snake hypnotizing a young sparrow. Not even in his way, however, I succeeded in diminishing my own consideration for this knack of his.

As I said to the Faculty Council in the memorial talk, *those who met him were frequently attracted by his exuberant personality, dressed by a touch of theatrical Rossini-like attitude* [like the Maestro he was born in Pesaro] *and of Parthenopean fancy* [his family was from Naples]. *However*—let me underline again this point—*the winning*



Fig. 1. – Antonio Vitale (Bologna, 2006).

arrow of his behaviour, a necessary condition for the leader's role which he felt congenial, was his intelligence: self-conscious, prompt, actual, intuitional.

His genuine curiosity for other people's affairs and outstanding capacity of identifying himself in their troubles had no competitors: while taking care of such matters, he showed the detective's instinct for leaving no stone unturned. The person who underwent his interview was currently pleased by the uninhibited context in which was becoming involved, because Antonio was an excellent listener albeit an inexhaustible talker.

As he used to admit, his own sensitivity had remarkable similarities to the feminine one. This was witnessed by his stylist-like taste for clothes and by how much he liked to solve current problems in domestic life. Indeed, no human male within my acquaintances was at the same level familiar with tissues, garments and jewels, perfectionist in gastronomic essays (he used to be a refined cook), delighted of sharing a secret and easily touchy. Surprisingly enough, these attitudes were part of an absolutely masculine behaviour, which easily roused sympathy and confidence within the women who had the occasion of meeting him.

Quite generally, he also was endowed with an extraordinary improvisation skill, a flair which allowed him to free himself in circumstances which would be embarrassing for whoever else.—*I'm sorry, tonight I'll be with my uncle.*—he said once pointing at me (in the middle of the '70 decade) to an attractive young lady with whom he had kept

a thick conversation in the *TEE* train between Milan and Geneva. Actually, he had impressed the girl by the best of his anecdotal silverware in the wordly as well as in the scientific domain; when she asked him whether that evening he had a few free hours, he promptly got out of trouble by making me one generation older.

During one of his many attempts to stop smoking, some ten years later, he continuously transgressed the decision assumed, and after each cigarette he became prodigal in showing repentance. Uselessly I tried to persuade him to enjoy the pleasure of smoking, which he was apparently not prepared to give up, although keeping faith in his healthy decision. Therefore during a trip by car I proposed him the spiritual motto:—*Pecca fortiter, sed crede fortius!*—The sentence impressed him: he asked me who was the author, and having approximate ideas on this subject I answered that probably it was St. Augustine.

I could not imagine that he would propose the exhortation, after a rich dinner, to a catholic Cardinal sitting aside of him and shedding metaphoric crocodile tears because they had been eating too much.—*Pecca fortiter, sed crede fortius, Your Eminence!*—Antonio said in order to comfort him, judiciously adding—*As recommended St. Augustine.*—*But Professor, the maxim was by Martin Luther!*—the Cardinal protested, somewhat indignant.—*I'm aware of that, Your Eminence.*—promptly replied Antonio:—*I just wanted to demonstrate to you that even after such dinner and potations you are perfectly clear headed.*

3. – . . . and by A. B.

Coming back now to the original aim of my talk and to a tone more consistent with the present circumstance, I should like to remind that, in his often provocative approach with the interlocutor, Antonio was also able to accept refusal or dislike. Nothing wounded him, instead, like the other's indifference, since for his part he was unable to keep aloof also from people he did not appreciate at all.

Antonio Vitale sympathized, instead, with individuals belonging to any step of the social scale, and made his own duty to confront himself with the values and rules of tradition. He was unable of doing evil in order to get personal advantages or of enjoying his enemies' misfortunes, he did not cultivate envies, was generous in admiring and drew satisfaction from well-deserving effects of his actions.

He was always more sensitive to the call of affections than how his behaviour would have let one to guess. Unprincipled and seemingly transgressing in his words, he had established an iron rule for his own existence, giving absolute priority to the harmony of familiar life and to the value of friendship. I often told him with appreciation and a slightly envious touch:—*You are a strange kind of intemperate, since you gave to your private life the rythm of a swiss watch.*

In his strategy of pleasing like in his activity, however, what I already called being theatrical remained essential, as if resulting from an unconscious mixture of the coastal lesson by Federico Fellini and of the Neapolitan one by Eduardo De Filippo. The fact that these two messages share a bitter note should not be missed. This feature was constituting, in fact, an essential component of Antonio's temper: a man never satisfied of his own achievements, corrosive in criticizing himself as well as the others, quite anxious—one would have said—to be the most severe of the judges in order to earn the appointment to pronounce any sentence which might concern him.

4. – The last lesson

Antonio Vitale was one of the youngest Italian winners of a tenure in General Physics in his generation. His brilliant scientific journey was characterized by subsequently widening scientific perspectives. This continuous growth could already be guessed from his early participation at CERN to low-energy experiments on the weak interactions of negative muons, headed by our leader Mimmo Zavattini, and from Antonio's eagerness for prosecuting the most stimulating and fundamental research work on this line at the Saclay Laboratories. In the subsequent important commitments to the OBELIX and ATLAS experiments at CERN, and HERA-B at DESY he was always deeply interested in the phenomenological side of physics, to which he dedicated (and from which he got) the greatest intellectual fulfilments.

He never withdrew from active research, in despite of the important institutional commitments assumed, first as a Director of the Bologna Section of INFN, later as a member of the Board of Governors of ENEA, as a Counselor and Vice-President of the Italian Physical Society and recently as a founder and first President of the Fondazione Giuseppe Occhialini.

But I said already that I would not talk at length on the professional life of our friend passed away. Let me remind, instead, something which in its turn deserves an unconditioned appreciation: his struggle against illness and death, the approaching of which he deliberately ignored, imposing to his decease the role of a vital experience. His attitude with respect to this last moment would remind the stoic prescription resumed by Alfred De Vigny in his poem *La mort du loup*:

*A voir ce que l'on fut sur terre et ce qu'on laisse
Seul le silence est grand; tout le reste est faible.
[...] Gémir, pleurer, prier est également lâche.
Fais énergiquement ta longue et lourde tâche
Dans la voie où le Sort a voulu t'appeler,
Puis après, comme moi, souffre et meurs sans parler.*

I said “would remind” because Antonio, never sticking to an ideological (even less literary) scheme, used to pray much in ordinary life and in the days of suffering. With him we regret a peerless friend and a man from whom also on the human side one might learn much more than what one could teach him.

REFERENCES

- [1] See ALBERIGI QUARANTA A., BERTIN A. and RICCI R. A., *Il Nuovo Saggiatore*, **25**, No. 1-2 (2009) 74.