The Mystery in Daylight

I am thinking of what has aroused my interest in Eugenio Carmi since I first set eyes on him. I speak like a person who pauses to observe someone and, without meaning to, is suddenly induced to interpret signs, glances, gestures, expressions and gait, and abandon the usual 'inattention' (described by Walter Benjamin), the indifference with which one walks in the street and passes close to others. I don't wish to do an art critic's job æ I don't have a good command of their language. One might say I speak like a 'reader' of poetry. I skim the lines and suddenly something catches my eye even before I've focused on the contents and, even before I go back to it, something in those lines is calling out to me, it has got entangled and I don't know what it is. The rhythm of the 'landscape of the text'? Some passages drawn freehand that have attracted my attention, to the extent that I have to stop and go back to the beginning? Something has happened, something is happening that is attracting me æ a temporal being æ in its time. Something that's important for me.

Then it started to become clear to me. Together the series of lines drawn freehand have given shape to a coherent subject: a rectilinear gesture æ the bright light of the Mediterranean, a presence without emotion, the present tending towards the future, a request for another level of interpretation apart from the surface phenomenon æ and, at the same time as all this, the hope existing at the end of the 1960s. There was also an encounter with contemporary Italian poetry, with the first generation of poets that had finished with Romanticism for good.... I remember the encounter with that aspect of Italy very vividly. In 1967 the anthology Preruseny raj *(*The Interrupted Paradise*, a title clearly inspired by Edoardo Sanguineti's poetry) was published in Prague; the thirty-six poets included the majority of those adhering to the Gruppo '63. Although 22,000 copies of the book were printed, it was sold out in three days (but what ever has happened to the legendary days of poetry readers?!) The introductory essay is entitled* Tluco, otevrit! *(*Knock, open!*). In the year of the 'thaw' preceding the Prague Spring, the works were published of almost all those who had met in 1963 in Palermo: Nanni Balestrini, Edoardo Sanguineti, Antonio Porta, Angelo Guglielmi, Alfredo Giuliani, Elio Pagliarini, Angelo Ripellino and Lamberto Pignotti.*

Umberto Eco arrived in Prague for the first time in 1966, I think; a second time was in August 1968 æ but on this occasion he had to flee from the advancing Soviet troops. His Opera aperta was due to be published in Czechoslovakia. But it never came out. For twenty years the door was shut to 'the enlightenment of the Po Valley'. And the Mediterranean light only reached us as a form of touristic nostalgia that was, however, not easily accessible.

A lot of time æ too much æ has gone by. When, many years later at Arpino, during the Ciceronian celebrations that take place every year in this town, I came across Eugenio Carmi's graphic work and painting, I had no idea that the artist was a friend of Umberto Eco's, or that, together with Duncan Macmillan, Eco was the author of a monograph on Carmi or that the latter had illustrated three books of fairy tales by Eco.

It is true that Carmi did not belong to the Gruppo '63 because, evidently, belonging to a group was an idea that was alien to him, although, to tell the truth, the Gruppo '63 involved an encounter between poets, novelists, essayists, painters and composers who had a common interest in the 'open work'. Guided by the

above-mentioned 'enlightenment of the Po Valley', this apparently eliminated 'the last remnants of the Romantic spirit', distanced itself from the hedonism of the consumer society of the day and, rather than to the artefact, gave preference to the moment in which the works took shape, to the presence of the creative act æ in other words, the stripping bare of poetics and the processing of the raw material.

This is a language that Prague so badly needed at that time! How everything becomes clear looking back at it. It needed the clarity of the present. Then one lived in a temporal labyrinth; the forms of existence æ considered as temporal existence, which took the form of time-matter æ withdrew to their own temporal dimension. On the one hand there was fear of the present, the quest for 'pearls on the bottom' forgotten or hidden in the past; only the past was safe æ Hrabal only lived there, where nothing unforeseen could happen, in an Augustinian 'present past'. Or else it was possible to negotiate with the present as if it were an enemy, to maul it in a sort of 'private storm', a sort of base Renaissance perversity that cries: 'If I can't have you, at least I'll destroy you!' It was a sceptical present æ without a past or a present æ that wasn't aiming at anything, even sorrowfully, as in Kundera's Jacques and his Master*; nonetheless, 'the past was everywhere'. It is as if, with the fall of ideology, had fallen not only the sense of history but also the Pascalian desire for light æ the desire of man, who lives in the dark 'yearning for light'. It only lit up the bodies for a moment, before burning out. And then there was the 'future present' æ the somewhat mysterious version of it that doesn't seem to have been chosen, that man doesn't choose for himself, but receives as a burden or as a gift, a burdensome gift. Václav Havel once said: 'I'm not able to write stories, I'm not Hrabal.' I think that this one sentence says it all. This is a picture of Prague at the end of the 1960s æ this was a city that was less enchanting for those living there, less nostalgic and fascinating than it might have seemed at first glance.*

I believe that Carmi has this impetus of the present towards the future, the impetus that we so badly needed at that time. Observe how he has been involved with the real world: he worked at Italsider with iron and steel, he welded together objets trouvés *that no longer work or are no longer being used, he discovered the industrial landscape of the city, peeling doors and walls, the almost tangible light radiating from the colour. Note how Carmi suspends the illusion of perspective, how, through the geometry of signs, he always tends towards the present, resisting utopias and magic. His squares, triangles and circles communicate with each other; Carmi strips them of their individuality. Nevertheless, in them a sort of Racinian tragedy takes place, and this becomes a theatrical performance in which we each participate in our own way. The squares are reluctant and the triangles flee; the circles and squares that attempt to interpenetrate (*Secondo percorso misterioso *[*Second Mysterious Journey*], 1992) approach each other timidly (*Un incontro *[*An Encounter*], 1991). The* Quadrato pudico *(*Chaste Square, 1992*) timidly reveals its colours to the white circle; another is overcome by anxiety (*Stato ansioso *[*State of Anxiety*], 1991); poignant solitude intersects perpendicularly the silence of the circle (*Solitudine *[*Solitude*], 1992); the colours of the rainbow begin to light up the black of uncertainty (*Rivelazione *[*Revelation*], 1991). Elsewhere the squares fall in love (*Quadrati innamorati *[*Squares in Love*], 1990), fall like Icarus, speak of hope (*Speranza, dove vai? *[*Hope, Whither Are You Going?*], 1999); with just a little red corner, they peep out from the circle as if they wanted to ask a question (*Chissà *[*Who Knows*], 1999); they flee before the seduction of utopia (*Utopia/realtà *[*Utopia/Reality*], 1993).*

*And I could go on æ but everywhere the principle applies that reality cannot be dominated, controlled or annihilated by possessing it. But it is reality that causes astonishment and, for this reason, it cannot be described (*Realtà non descrivibile *[*Indescribable Reality*], 1986). Behind the phenomenon there's always 'something else' that has to be respected in the relationships:* C'è sotto qualcosa *(*There's Something Behind It, *1991).*

At the beginning of the 1960s Carmi discovered the iron age (see the book I colori del ferro, *published in 1963), and explored the spaces of the factory, the urban areas and Boccadasse, then on the outskirts of Genoa, his native city. Carmi's abstract works æ and this is symptomatic for him æ are not a form of self-satisfaction, are not addressed exclusively to themselves, but rather they look outwards, towards society, and contribute to the interpretability of the world. We are the object of this interpretation, we, the indifferent passers-by in the social agora of the past, we who have became strangers to each other. In the 1960s, in Spoleto (together with another ten artists, including Alexander Calder, Pietro Consagra, Lynn Chadwick and Arnaldo Pomodoro), he sought to free himself from the anonymity of the urban areas; at Caorle he installed imaginary electric signs in the streets.*

In this period, too, he designed posters promoting factory safety for Italsider with simple, precise abstract images accompanied by exclamatory warnings: 'the eyes!', 'the head!'.

Unlike, for instance, the works of his friend Victor Vasarely, Carmi's abstractions are not rational: the artist works with touch, he comes into contact with objects æ and, together with them, ourselves æ asking where they are going in this world. He has also begun to use watercolour (because 'it's warmer') and jute canvas (because 'it's not so smooth'), painting on the back, on the rougher side.

Carmi casts a bright light into the world. Neither dazzling nor aggressive, it's a soothing light æ as he said: 'There's something behind it.' Something that the light reveals. It's a light that respects mystery. What George Braque said is relevant here: 'Mystery bursts out with the daylight, the mysterious is merged with the darkness.'

With his lines drawn freehand, Eugenio Carmi has reminded us of the atmosphere of the second half of the 1960s. Today he has come to another Prague, where the social situation is similar to the one in Italy at the beginning of the 1960s. He should not, however, arrive in a nostalgic mood, but rather as one whose focus of interest is the future and is seeking to shed light on it.

Everything that I have mentioned with regard to Carmi also applies to ourselves: the meaning of our past lives lies in the future æ or, to put it another way, only the future gives a meaning to the past.

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