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The Dark Shape of the Wind

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The Dark Shape of the Wind

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Let us now take a look at the elastic and complacent canvas, so agreeably resilient and wavy, incapable of withstanding human touch: the surface of the stretched canvas creates a ground for representation claiming the same dynamic rights as the artist's hand. The artist in fact struggles with the canvas as if it were "his brother," aware also that he is perceiving it beyond the phenomenicity into which it will turn and transform at will: the canvas bears no illumination independent of the artist's will, or the surrounding reality.

Silesia. In German *Schlesien*, in Polish *Slask*, in Czech, *Slzsko*. A region in Central Europe extending to the Eastern boundaries of the Bohemian watershed, comprising part of the Northeastern Sudetes Mountains and the Northwestern Beskids, and the upper basin of the Oder river. A land of confluence, subdivisions, rebellions, holocausts, occupations. The soldier—a baker—hails from this region.

A chalk-white dove skims the wing of a chimney top.

Brest. Champ de tir du Bouguen. A kind of gently sloping tableland rounded by tall ilex trees and filiform cypresses. July is ablaze in its full splendor. The light is like a shining dusty membrane into which are condensed—seemingly ready to explode at any moment—all human passions.

[Excerpted from *La forma buia del vento*, Naples, Altri Termini, 1983.]

All about the camp is a stormy din of cicadas, an endless stroll of magnetic lines. And hidden behind the thorn bushes, the anguished and spellbound faces of farmers, fishermen, storekeepers, costermongers, electricians, bachelors, housewives, greengrocers.

Barebacked with his hands tied behind, the soldier is walked toward a huge oak tree, made to lean against its trunk. Some thirty steps away, the firing squad is waiting. Twelve men in summer camouflage uniform, wearing short pants: six of them are kneeling, the other six standing. A few minutes go by. The soldier stands motionless, his gaze fixed on the platoon, former comrades who in a few moments time will take his life away: the entire scene is taken in by the hiding spectators.

From a certain spot in the clearing, a young officer in khaki uniform springs forth. Wearing shorts, he has a slow, gentlemanly gait, and more than Teutonic, he looks like an aristocratic British scion; he dons a Rabbinic goatee. He is accompanied by a military chaplain.

In the imperial city of Moscow and throughout all cities under the imperial will of the Metropolitan, the bishop and the archbishop had to attend to various ecclesiastical functions. This was especially true with regard to the sacred icons and the painters of these icons and other related functions as determined by canonic norms: they attended to the life styles of icon painters and took care of the representation of the carnal semblance of our Lord God and Savior, Jesus Christ and His most Holy Mother and the Heavenly powers and all the Saints who were God's favorite children through the centuries.

The scene takes place without excessive bureaucratic formalities. They don't even indulge in reading the opinion according to which the German High Command emitted the death sentence of the soldier. The chaplain draws near the condemned, whispers a few incomprehensible words, hints at the sign of the cross with his right hand and then goes right back. The officer aims towards

the firing squad a willow stick he must have picked up somewhere nearby, then he recites the well-known words, in German, with a strong rhythm: Load! Aim! Fire!

The soldier falls without any peculiar gestures or expressions: a foul idea shooting itself.

An open place between two green spaces, the crossing of leaves and barbican, the hoofs of fiery horses that saunter through this breach, the haphazard ruins, a tall oak a high outpost of extreme vigilance, the vague shadows of fog, the corona spouting the cold sweat of profound dizziness, the underground channeling in the form of sighs of the wind, the deadened eye at the center of its orbit analyzing the difference and the distances: ancient sedimented weariness, time suspended at a dead angle.

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The spring wind sings by the cowl and down the chimney; facing the window of my study the old fir trees wave their arms in excitement, rustling. Suddenly, in the tiny space of the square visible from my window, some twelve aerodynamically shaped shells plunge down from somewhere up above. They look as heavy as rocks and keep on falling until they almost touch the treetops, then just as suddenly they sprout large black wings and become birds of light plumage that the rushing wind sweeps away from my ken. I draw near the window to better observe the peculiar dance of the jackdaws in the breeze. Is it a game? Yes, a game in the true sense of the word: movements made of pure pleasure without a predetermined aim. And, lest it shouldn't be clear, we are talking of learned movements, not of innate or instinctive gestures. All the virtuosity of these birds, the ability with which they take advantage of the wind's direction, the exact calculation of the distances and, above all, the understanding of the wind conditions and the positions in which, with a willed movement, ascending currents are created, swirls and air pockets—all these traits do not make up an hereditary line, but are the fruit of individual attainment.

Then, one day, walking to the garden at dusk, I saw to my great surprise that almost all of the geese were gone. With dark foreboding I rushed to my father's study, and what did I discover there? On the magnificent Persian rug my twenty-four geese made a ring around my old man who, sitting at his desk sipping tea, was peacefully reading his paper, treating the birds to one piece of bread after another.

History dislocated far in time and space cannot but be mythological. But as such, it is therefore, and necessarily, creator of values: it is exemplary, moral. In this case, style-made-into-substance ushers forth from the shell of doubt, from ambivalence, ambiguity, ubiquitousness in order to become certainty: poetic certainty of the represented thing. For, owing to its being dislocated in a remote little spot in eternity, it presents itself unadorned by any second or third sense. White sails of dreams dreamed in full wakefulness.

It's conceivable that in the garden near the house, or even within the house itself, there might be scorched brushwood, dead leaves, reptiles (a water snake, for instance) nestled in the rocks, fractured walls, cracks and fissures, but this need not concern us. What is of interest is the poetic certainty of the thing in itself, of the event that took place in a far away time and place and which no longer pertain to history, but to the myth of history.

"O my God, o my God, What a massacre, a genocide! do you know what genocide is? you don't? Well, I'll tell you: it is a heap of rubble that bleeds like a wounded mountain, it is a pile of bricks, baby's legs, gashed faces full of earth, people running, shooting, going mad . . ."

"I left my house keys to the Palestinian doorman; I hope he locks himself in and doesn't get himself killed. It was ugly, so very, very ugly . . ."

"The Palestinians kill themselves sometimes. Take that attempt on his life the other day. A group enters an empty building to occupy it. But the doorman kicks them out and they leave. After a while another group comes by that overcomes the doorman's resistance and takes over the dwelling. Then those of

the first group demand that they too be let in. The people from the second group don't want them. So the first group loads the building with dynamite and everything goes up in the air: twenty dead."

"My name is Faun Harun. I am here with my sixteen-month-old baby. My husband is down there. Yes, we are Maronite Christians; it was hell."

"Look, it's hard to understand: half of the city is fine, no bombings, everything normal. Only on the western side are they still shooting. On the East we now have the fleeing Palestinians, armed to their teeth, who run through the city with cars and trucks ready to defend themselves to the end."

At twenty-one I walked through the door, though it didn't last long. Here also, as it happened with Rimbaud, early escapes turned out to be regular disasters. Each and every time I returned willy-nilly back home, it was in a desperate state. It was as though there were no way out, no means to attain liberation. I accepted the most meaningless tasks, in short, everything I wasn't made for: just like Rimbaud at the caves in Cyprus, I began with pick and shovel, I was a farm-hand, an immigrant, a vagabond, incredible things, really, if we consider that when I first ran away from home I had a mind of living my life out in the open air and not touching a book ever again, of surviving through the use of my own hands, of being a man of the open spaces and not a citizen of a village or suburb.

Predictably, though, my language and my ideas betrayed me. Whether I liked it or not, I was a *letterato* from top to bottom. And even though I could walk side by side with the most diverse people, utmost with common folks, it would turn out I'd be singled out and suspect.

For a time now, we've placed our faith in the bomb. The bomb will answer our prayers.

a) Ungrateful star (o you ungrateful star) of midnight, you always bring me half a dozen ships. Ungrateful star, you also bring your pallid face along, the obscure shadows I cut the air with: let us hope we die upon my sparks (one leg over the other, hoping that history pass through writing, that *that*, let's suppose, is the task).

b) poison is calling me is calling me, poison is calling:
I don't want to fall beneath your wing: poison, its wing, my sparks:
I am not alone in the world, poison wants to separate me from the
others.

c) AND WRITING CAN GIVE HISTORY A STRATEGIST
with the will to clarity.

And through so many years, with so much of life already behind and very long periods of silence and isolation, it's true, it's true, I was never fully capable of pinpointing the intuitions that flashed in my soul time and again, between sleep and wakefulness: intuitions, hallucinations, secret messages . . .

Ah, had I been able since childhood, since the time I was six years old—six years old!—to ask myself what was the meaning of the word “consciousness” (I can see once again the city street and the hour of the day when it happened), had I been able to direct, discipline my gift.

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One evening—I had just gone up to my room to take some tobacco—I heard the wheeze of the harmonica rising. They were playing that “VIIIth Prelude and fugue” that my niece used to study before the rout. The notebook was left open at that page but until that evening my niece had not undertaken new exercises. The fact that she had started practicing once again was the cause of much pleasure and wonder: what inner necessity could have ever brought that about so suddenly?

It wasn't her, she had not left her armchair nor her work. Her glance met mine, sending a message I couldn't quite make out. I started observing the long bust before the instrument, the reclining nape of the neck, the long, slender, nervous hands with fingers that danced over the keyboard as if autonomous entities.

She only played the Prelude. She got up and walked towards the fireplace:

“There's nothing greater,” she said in a numb voice barely louder than a whisper. “Great? . . . perhaps this is not the proper word. Beyond man, beyond his flesh. It allows us to under-

stand, I guess . . . no, to foresee . . . foresee what is nature . . . divine and unknown nature . . . nature . . . shorn . . . of the human soul. Yes, it is an inhuman voice.”

In thoughtful silence she seemed to be exploring her own thinking. She was biting her lip, slowly:

“Bach . . . had to be German. Our land has this quality, this inhuman character, I mean, it’s not commensurate to men.”

A silence followed, then:

“I love this music, I admire it, it fills me, it is within me like God’s presence, but . . . it doesn’t belong to me.”

And then again:

“What I want to do, what I want is a music in the measure of man, for this also is a way to attain the truth. It is my way. I wouldn’t want, I couldn’t go any other way. This much I now know, and I know it fully. Since when? Since I live here.”

[Englished by Peter Carravetta]