

GAETANO PREVIATI¹

Giorgio de Chirico

Ferrara is a highly metaphysical city, though its poet sons seem not to have gotten wind of this yet. Its metaphysical quality is far from its picturesque side; in fact, one may well believe that people have an infinitely greater appreciation for this second aspect since both the peninsula's inhabitants and the tourists who hasten every year to Italy craving for picturesque sites and aestheticism (an additional attraction is found in today's advantageous exchange rate), neglect this solitary and geometrically beautiful city entirely.

Ferrara is a city of surprises. In addition to splendid apparitions of spectrality and subtle beauty offered in certain points such as the ineffable Piazza Ariostea, that astonish and stop the astute passer-by in their tracks (one who is educated in the mysteries of intelligence), the city has the advantage of having preserved in a very special way certain traces of its grand mediaeval night that mysteriously continue to exist. These traces live-on not because surviving ruins raise their ancient walls pierced with arched windows in a theatrical and romantically gloomy manner in various places, but due, rather, to a certain indefinable and inexplicable sensation that stirs over the city in certain areas that holds these traces mysteriously suspended between sky and land, like embalmed vesper bats hanging from the ceiling of an alchemist's laboratory.

The drama of Girolamo Savonarola unfolded in Florence, but it was in Ferrara during a tragic night of fear that he was arrested in the narrow corridors of the San Marco monastery. In Florence he died at the stake, but it was in Ferrara that the dark and bile-corroded psyche of the friar with the facial lineaments of a ram was most clearly revealed. It was in this city, which holds and preserves every trait of mediaeval poetic inspiration, that the drama of Fra' Girolamo

... in corrupt and servile times
of vice and scourging tyrants,
is revealed in all its dark tragic nature.

Several crucial topographical conditions contribute to augmenting Ferrara's metaphysical power: such as the marvellous via Giovecca which to the east terminates at the Montagnone, where

¹ G. de Chirico, *Gaetano Previati*, published in "Il Convegno", Milan-Rome, year I, n. 7, August 1920, pp. 29-36; now in G. de Chirico, *Scritti I, (1911-1945), Romanzi e scritti critici e teorici*, edited by A. Cortellessa, Bompiani, Milan 2008, pp. 368-374. English translation in *Reading de Chirico*, exhibition catalogue edited by K. Robinson, Tornabuoni Arte, Forma, London 2017, pp. 195-199.

a semicircular construction resembling a ship's stern dominates the high sea of the Romagna countryside, giving this part of the city a maritime and seaport air, whereas to the west, on the straight lines of *viale Cavour* and *viale Cesare Battisti*, the metaphysical sense of *via Giovecca* dies away in the nostalgia of the railway station, amid the tangle of iron tracks and the deafening din of trains.

Ferrara is moreover a terribly damp city. Built upon reclaimed ditches and rubble, the walls of its dwellings suffer an ongoing trickling of water.

Munich, capital of Bavaria, has a climate identical with that of Ferrara.

It is not without reason that I compare Munich with Ferrara. This Italian city is, in fact, very northern, not so much for its geographical position as for certain particularly characteristic aspects that make it one of the most intriguing cities in Italy. So being a northern city, Ferrara also instils a touch of northern essence into the spirit of its people. This is an excellent serum and most efficacious antitoxin against the bacillus of D'Annunzianism; it is easier to find a Roman or Milanese affected by D'Annunzianism than an inhabitant of Ferrara. In fact, it should not be forgotten that this terrible disease, which plays havoc in Italy and abroad, is of a purely Latin origin and southern vulgarity. This notwithstanding, it would be a mistake to suppose that the people of Ferrara, due solely to the fact of being less exposed than other Italians to the D'Annunzian epidemic, are of a superior and purer spirit.

The nearness of Bologna propagated other no less harmful bacilli in the city of *Worbas*. These created an epidemic which generally goes by the name of "Pascolism", and almost all of Ferrara's hopeful writers, poets and intellectuals are "Pascolian", which is to say they belong to that species of biped who, with obstinate and above all Jesuitical mind, want at all costs to communicate to us the vague twitches and bleating nostalgias of their babyish and sickly little souls.

Gaetano Previati, [who is] Ferrarese, does not however seem to have been touched by any such bacillus. I find nothing Pascolian in his oeuvre. His Ferrarese nature came out only in his mental state and in the special aptitude he had for expressing, wholly effectively, the most subtly lyrical sides of the mediaeval world.

In Italy, following the fading and disappearance of the Milanese Neoclassicists, the problem of composition does not seem to have troubled painters very much, just as they have not generally been troubled by preoccupations of a spiritual order either. It was sketches à la Morelli or Fattori that triumphed at the time. Previati was the only artist who set about the hard task of treating the human body as symbol and sign, as a formula for expressing the mysterious perturbations of our soul, face to face with oneself or with regard to the enigmas of the universe.

The figure with which Previati chose to express this symbol was neither a male figure nor a nude, but rather, the figure of a clothed woman, and this confirms precisely what I said about him above, that is, that he was a mediaeval spirit. As for its spiritual aspect, the mediaeval epoch is associated with night: so it is natural that the plastic figure symbolising that epoch should be a female

figure, because in fact woman, metaphysically, symbolises night. And let us not forget that “night” is feminine in all languages: the veiled “*núx*” of the Greeks. The plastic symbol of the middle ages is therefore the clothed woman, be she the virgin mother of the man-god or a woman living in a many-towered castle inspiring wandering minstrels.

The plastic symbol for the ancient Greeks was the male nude, symbol of day: Apollo the archer. In fact, in its metaphysical aspects, the Greek era is associated with the idea of light: light of dawn in the prehistoric epochs, midday light in the classical, that is. This occurs through the Homeric poems, the work of the tragedians, philosophers, architects, painters and sculptors.

There exists an affinity between the symbol of the middle ages and the symbol of Greece, eras which are united by the hidden bonds of a mysterious kinship.

Previati, an Italian from Ferrara, could not “feel” the symbol of ancient Greece, but he deeply felt that of the middle ages and was sincere and pure in expressing it. His oeuvre should not therefore be confused, as it has been by some ill-informed individuals, with that of the British Pre-Raphaelites or the aestheticisms of certain Roman painters. Previati was solitary and sincere in his sentiment, and if sometimes this sentiment is related – in its purely superficial aspect – to a certain compromised and compromising art, one must not be deceived by such resemblance, which is due merely to the fact that the heart of his work is similar to great art of all times, which is to say art born of its creator’s need to express joy or suffering.

Previati’s painting technique caused many to link him with Segantini. In fact, like the latter he applied himself to the study of divisionism, of the vibrations and intensity of colour in accordance with the various combinations. But the chromatic effects achieved by Previati are far superior to Segantini’s. The most united tones offer the eye pleasing surfaces of a classical flavour. By eliminating violent colours and increasingly seeking the right balance between the various coloured surfaces, he attained a quality of paint, in some works almost monochrome, of a severe and terse quality reminiscent of the frescoes of certain painters of antiquity.

Like all artists of strong spirit, rather than the effect of colour, he sought its lyricism. In certain uniformly deep blue skies, without a glimmering of light on the horizon, he succeeded in rendering the nocturnal meaning of light, the sense of midnight at noon, which is the meaning the Greeks marvellously expressed in the myth of Pan, god of noontide, Pan, piper behind the crags and reeds at the hottest hours of the day; Pan who frightens shepherds and wayfarers by appearing suddenly before them.

But as with all painters who have a vision to express, Previati’s true value is not to be sought in colour and the efforts of his chromatic research. His true worth lies in the visions and sentiments that he expressed in certain paintings, and especially in certain drawings.

In some of his large canvases, for example the *Sun King*, there is a spectral aspect that characterises all paintings of great spiritual style. Indeed, the figures are not frozen in the patent naturalism of painters who cannot go beyond what they see or believe they see, nor are they lost in the mists

of stylisations and sentimentalisms. Anti-naturalistic par excellence, Previati's figures rest upon the solid platform of spiritual reality, firm and fixed in the metaphysics of the second aspect of nature, that aspect without which an artwork cannot have the breath of greatness. There are few painters who can sense this second aspect, therefore there are few works of art that contain a breath of greatness.

Another sign of Previati's spiritual value can be seen in the sense of nightmare one feels in front of his works. Even when he depicts female figures upright or leaning over in front of skies full of light, or flying in heavens touched by dawn, one always has the oppressive impression that these figures must sooner or later, infallibly, bump into the low, invisible ceiling towering over them. Look at the *Dance of the Hours*, in which he also shares a Dantesque spirit.

The sense of nightmare, of dome or ceiling standing like prison walls over the characters in the drama may also be observed in that series of drawings illustrating legends and historical episodes of the middle ages, such as the series of *Ugo and Parisina*, and that marvellous drawing of the *Serenade* where we see three minstrels singing and playing beneath the walls of a castle (the Este Castle in Ferrara) while high above, in the middle of a long moonlit balcony, a tiny female figure appears, like a minuscule ghost. Only the air from Verdi's *Troubadour, Desert on Earth...*, might be compared to this drawing, for its purely Italian sentimentalism and for lyrical power.

His drawings inspired by the works of Edgar Allan Poe and his illustrations for *The Betrothed* are also full of sentimentalism and exceptional imagination. The latter are the finest illustrations and the only ones that truly express the great nostalgia that stirs in Manzoni's novel.

I have looked at and judged Previati's work as a whole, focussing however only on the spirit and sentiment it holds within. It is not my task to evaluate its material aspects, to see where he was a greater or lesser painter or where perhaps he wasn't one at all. Moreover, I always set out from the principle that when a work of art strikes us for its spiritual power, its surface will be neither ephemeral nor weak.

The nostalgic aspects of his figures and forms brought praise from foolish, sentimental aesthetes, while a number of pseudo-intellec[t]s, affected by spirit-phobia, looked upon him with suspicion. No matter.

Being ensnared by misunderstanding is the fate of all men of value, and Previati's value will not be diminished by the praise of dunces or by the silence of the half-intelligent. He was not an empty and vulgar man, like most of his colleagues and contemporaries, but a noble man tormented by the demon of art.

Translated by David Smith