

VINCENZO GEMITO¹

Giorgio de Chirico

There exist historical, mythical and legendary figures, and others in which history mixes with legend, who, when portrayed in sculpture or painting, form a category we have become used to since our earliest memory of being. We are no longer amazed by these as they form part of a whole repertoire that accompanies us through life like the sound of bells and birdsong that, when stripped of the realism that classical representation requires in the portrayal of profundity in all its forms, do not strike us more than any other aspect of man, animal, plant or object. Except for when, on very rare occasions, an artist takes one of these images and shows it from a different angle, allowing it to appear as what it is and, at the same time, what perhaps it has been.

These artists thus reveal the enigmatic side of apparition, the hidden side of a spectacle, similarly to that of an actor, whom having been seen on stage under the footlights, is seen in a setting that “normalises” him, “humanises” him, theatrically speaking, and whom, once the curtain has fallen, we surprise in the same clothes and makeup in his dressing room where he appears with an infinitely more solitary and metaphysical aspect, so that you come to think: this is his real appearance, the one that nobody has thought of so far! As an example of what I have said I cite a painting by Arnold Böcklin entitled *Centaur at the Village Blacksmith's Shop* and which makes one think of the “reality of the centaur”.

Some time ago, on a Sunday morning, finding myself before a magnificent series of sculptures and drawings by Vincenzo Gemito, I felt a similar emotion aroused by the ingenious Neapolitan's terracotta of Alexander the Great. I had the strange feeling that Alexander the Great had been exactly like that, as if Gemito, through a mysterious process, beyond what we know of life and time, had actually seen the Macedonian's true face, stripped of every feature impressed on him over the centuries by artists, poets, historians, thinkers and writers.

There are few artists who, even in the past, have achieved such profundity. This method of accomplishment is one that an exceptional creator follows almost unconsciously, like a sleepwalker. He rises from his bed and opens doors to life he would have never otherwise thought of opening; he passes through long, dark corridors without knowing who is leading him; he visits rooms that none before him have visited, where there are people sitting who are at once known and unknown who

¹ G. de Chirico, *Vincenzo Gemito*, in “Il Corriere Padano”, 9 December 1941; now in G. de Chirico, *Scritti/1*, edited by A. Cortellesa, Bompiani, Milan 2008, pp. 405-408. English translation in *Reading de Chirico*, exhibition catalogue edited by K. Robinson, Tornabuoni Arte, Forma, London 2017, pp. 201-203.

resemble the ones in the other rooms, rooms where the noises of our everyday life reach, the noise of tramcars pitching on their rails and automobile horns, people to whom there is a resemblance, I say, but as two brothers mysteriously resemble one another.

Such creators have mysterious means and powers at their disposal, and just as they undertake the making of a realistic portrait of a person who has been buried for thousands of years, so do they cast into the solemn twilight of the centuries the young person in flesh and blood who is actually posing for them. To clarify what I am saying, take a look at the disquieting drawing entitled *Ragazze di Porto d'Ischia* [Young Women at the Harbour in Ischia]: a girl viewed in profile but who, with an extraordinarily luminous eye, similar to the eye of the Athena Parthenos, glances somewhat from one side. The entire image is enveloped in an incredible atmosphere of antiquity: an air created without the use of easily available references and means, but through simple, powerful and patient observation of those forms the artist had in front of his eyes. By dint of copying them well, copying them very well, copying them magnificently, he managed to give them the expression of all pensive goddesses, all sleeping shepherds and resting gladiators, tired athletes and wounded warriors, the expression of that long procession of images that winds slowly and solemnly to the ardent and romantic frontier of Christianity.

Each one finer than the other, Vincenzo Gemito's drawings, pastels and gouaches create a setting (I won't say "climate", even if they thrash me) of great plastic and poetic joy.

This extraordinary sculptor, some of whose drawings rival the best of Dürer (one need only look at the pen and ink drawing in the Treccani collection, dated 1919 and bearing the title *Testa di fanciullo* [Head of a Boy], had more than one string to his cithara: a sculptor as few have been, even in the golden ages of sculpture: a poet, storyteller, philosopher, moralist, drawing artist, painter and craftsman in the highest sense of the term. I did not know Gemito the painter, but a fine tempera amazed me, perhaps even more than the sculptures and drawings. This tempera depicts Christ dead with, at the side, a Magdalene weeping; on Mary Magdalene's face we see tears, created with a few touches of white lead applied by "impasto", running down her cheeks. A magnificent painting, this tempera executed in a warm and impassioned painterly quality, with the paint laid on with a bravura worthy of the best Venetian masters, with certain fronds and leafy branches in the background that could have been the work of Paolo Veronese; and then there is also an extraordinary *Head of Christ* which, like the terracotta of Alexander, makes us think that this was indeed the true face of the Redeemer.

Notwithstanding the great joy I felt before those drawings, a great sadness weighed on my soul.

How is it possible, I thought, that an artist of such exceptional value can be so neglected in Italy? How is it possible that there is not a monograph on the work of such a creator, or if one does exist is nowhere to be seen?

Walking down a street in Milan I was struck dumb in front of a menswear shop window: among the ties, scarves and shirts, there was a magnificent self-portrait of Gemito, horrendously

framed. Portrayed with that burning glance of his, like an old mendicant whose heart is afire with beautiful passion, a card sat next to the painting informing passers-by that the work was for sale...

There ought to be a special museum for artists of this kind. An alternative to finding their masterpieces on sale in shirt maker's windows or hidden away in the cellars of museums, as happened at the gallery in Valle Giulia in Rome due to the delinquency and imbecility of certain people. But for Gemito, and for a few others, *veniet felicior aetas*.

Translated by David Smith