

THE ETERNAL QUESTION¹⁶

I.

When intellectuals discuss contemporary art, speaking of Cézanne has become a rule of law. If you take one of them aside, look them straight in the eye and suddenly ask: “Please, tell me, do you really like Cézanne?... And what is it you like about him?”.

A worried expression appears on their face; put on the spot, they do not know how or what to answer and search their memory anxiously for one of those typical banalities current nowadays and speak confusedly of construction, atmosphere, anguish, unrest and other nonsense of this sort. They break off by declaring: “Cézanne was a necessary reaction” to the destruction of painting perpetrated by the impressionists. Adding that whereas the impressionists searched for light and colour, the Master of Aix aimed at volume and form (into what company have volume and form fallen!), in a word, they come up with a few worn out phrases and yet, with all this, one still cannot understand whether they really do admire the Master of Aix and, if they do, why they do. In solemn truth they do not like him, but do not know how to confess it and are frightened to death of being taken for someone who does not understand. The great admiration for Cézanne is due to the fact that it is easier to imitate him than any painter that came before him.

The pretext for imitating Cézanne is a pretext for avoiding difficulty. The rich and blooming Italian landscapes have become as arid and sad as a third-class funeral. After the lyrical and highly suggestive landscapes of 17th and 18th century artists, and the less lyrical and suggestive but still bearable ones of the 19th century, one finds meagrely and carelessly painted crooked huts that are gloomy and windowless that sometimes have a skinny haystack on the side.

Manet joins Cézanne at the head of the school of modern decadence in painting. The latter gave the signal “go” to a world of painterly impotency, donning the mask of construction, spirituality, anguish, unrest etc. The former did the same for the pseudo-skilfulness, pseudo-elegance of amateur bourgeois painting.

But the funniest thing of all is that they drag “Italian tradition” into it with names such as Giotto, Masaccio and Piero della Francesca. This is as good a way as any to cheat the enemy and try to hide innumerable painterly deficiencies and a lack of will to work. There would be no reason not to cite Watteau, Fragonard and Boucher, for example, when speaking of French painting or, when speaking of Italian painting, Tintoretto or, more boldly still, Tiepolo, Salvator Rosa or Giacinto Gigante. In a word, it is rather like what happens in literature when one looks to “NRF”, whilst trying to create an alibi by evoking Leopardi’s *Zibaldone* or even Alessandro Manzoni who has even less to do with it.

Jean’s *anges-vitriers* have flown over the alps and flutter ineffably among us dressed in plain clothes to work as mechanics, plasterers, boot shiners, chimney sweeps and delivery boys...; really, enough is enough.

“Disregard others in order to be held in high regard; ignore others if you want them to look at you”. These are elementary truths upon which many producers of art and literature of ours should meditate.

One thing is certain: never as today have men been so concerned about painting, yet never has painting been less discussed. The modern critic has a horror of talking about painting; it is a theme they run away from as if it were the bubonic plague, a hurdle that one does their best to avoid. Today’s critics are more

16 G. de Chirico, *Leterna questione*, in “L’Ambrosiano”, Milan March 1938, in three parts, 16 March, p. 6; 23 March, p. 5; 30 March, p. 5, with the title *Vox clamans in deserto*; republished in *Commedia...*, cit., pp. 98-103. Published in English here for the first time.

concerned with anecdotes, or “intelligent” sounding gossip that is actually quite manipulative, through which they aim at appearing as a superior, acute person, as a lyric and complex spirit, someone up-to-date with the most recent artistic trends. In fact, when one reads the essays in the numerous monographs dedicated to the various Cézannes, Gauguins, Van Goghs etc., one finds nothing but anecdotes, gossip and romanticised life; whilst on the subject of painting, not one word. Thus for pages on end you will be told about the relations between the “Master of Aix” and Emile Zola, illustrated with photographs and facsimile reproductions of their correspondence; and again about that miserable, chloroformic and feeble-minded Van Gogh and how he cut off his ear one day and sent it to a woman in a brothel. I remember that during my stay in New York, a critic that was most in vogue at the time and a fervid lover of all things French, spoke to me about the episode of Van Gogh’s ear and concluding in French, though he was an American of German extraction, with rather forced enthusiasm: “*Ça c’est un peintre!*” I became thoughtful, asking myself if the fact of cutting off one’s ear and sending it to a woman in a brothel can possibly constitute an irrefutable proof of excellence in the art of painting. With regard to Gauguin, critics beat around the bush with anecdotes and insignificant details regarding his travels to Tahiti and his love stories with native women in order to avoid the dangerous stumbling block of painting. There are three important and fundamental reasons for all this. Firstly, many of those who write about art do not know the first thing about it. Secondly, they avoid speaking about the profound and inexhaustible subject of painting as it is a difficult, arid subject to handle. Indeed, it has no room for those attitudes considered today as proof of intelligence and spiritual awareness, though actually reveal nothing but a total lack of any true intelligence, real culture, clairvoyance and courage. Lastly, the painting they do speak of “is not painting” and even if they were amply equipped with the four above-mentioned virtues, they would be at a loss as to what to say.

The art critic who tries today to make a show of lyricism, brilliance and complicated knowledge is a mammal thriving in all climates and latitudes. We can unfortunately enumerate many of this kind in full activity here in Italy. They have ingeniously and provincially let themselves be caught by the bait of Parisian modernist rhetoric and now give themselves free rein with terms such as “atmosphere”, “emotion”, “unrest”, “mystery”, “drama”, “dream” and especially “surrealism” and “metaphysics”. Poor metaphysics! The consoling song of old Schopenhauer! Who could have told me this more than 25 years ago when I called some of my painted representations “metaphysical”; who could have told me that today in Italy this world “metaphysical” would have caused confusion and put into a state of upheaval so many good youngsters and so many adults who for the health of their spiritual life and Italy’s artistic and intellectual reputation should really behave with more wisdom and dignity?

Modern critics and modern intellectuals are terrorised by painting. Like a donkey who feels the approach of a thunder storm they know that if painting should become understandable, develop and take ground in a definite manner without the usual nonsense of neo-classicism and return to tradition, their ruse would be unmasked. Farwell to all pretence of lyric digressions, to hermetic criticisms, to incomprehensible judgements, to unreadable prefaces; there would be no more opportunity for being catchpenny intellectuals, for effortless culture and soapbox proclamations without risk. No more shortcuts, no way of pretending to be a brilliant writer when one cannot even write a short story for the Sunday paper “Domenica del Corriere”; no more magnificent occasions for posing in Italy as an Apollinaire or a Cocteau.

Only through painting can the art of today be saved.

In America's grand modern French art market, to which all worldwide artistic speculation shareholders and stockbrokers aspired, Renoir is the only French painter to hold his own without camphor oil injections or oxygen tents, but this is because his painting pleases and because he was a real painter.

II.

Italian painting today seems more than ever to be stuck in the same place without advancing a footstep. In fact, to say the sad truth, one must admit that it is indeed going backwards. Let us look the facts in the face: in what way is the painting done in Italy today superior to what was being done thirty or forty years ago?

I have often asked myself this question and I ask it of you, dear reader, and defy you to give me a logical, serene and convincing answer. I remember the years before the other war when I used to go with my mother to the Venice Biennial. Those were the times of painters like Tito, De Marie and Bistolfi. Ugo Ojetti presented and praised them in anecdotic style on the third page of "Corriere della Sera"; thus we were informed that Marius De Maria liked Rembrandt and the moon and that when he was in Rome he used to go with D'Annunzio in the evenings to taverns outside the city limits and that Leonardo Bistolfi once burst into tears before a Greek statue in the Naples museum. On the subject of painting, naturally, not a word, but of course we know that painting critics never speak about painting. Nevertheless such articles were a pleasure to read and stimulated one's curiosity. They were well-written tales and infinitely superior to some of the incomprehensible, pretentious and tiresome thrash written today, which holds interest for no one and has a provincial stench of Paris that one can smell ten miles away. Painting of that time, even if mediocre, had at least the merit of not being done on false Parisian pretexts, of not being a mask for feebleness and, for better or worse, at least still looked like a painting. I remember once, at a solo-exhibition of Ettore Tito, that more than half the works in the show were bought by foreigners. Tell me, what foreigner would come to Venice today to buy a modern Italian painting?

The Italian painters of present, the war notwithstanding, are all on the Paris bandwagon and hauled along as they are, do not know which way to turn. Instead of trying to surmount their deficiencies, leaving all false pride and laziness aside and asking the advice of someone who knows more than they do and has proved it in his work and not only through words, they start making grimaces in front of paintings of exceptional quality and, instead of learning something, they change the subject, pretending to praise things they actually do not like. This is done with the malignant intent of distracting people's attention from any manifestation of real painting which is for them a sort of Yellow Peril. Months and years pass thus and we are always at the same point. And yet natural talent is not lacking. All that is needed is one push towards liberation and another one for making an important decision.

Besides, as a mere glance at any art history manual tells us, the painters who have remained and will remain are those who rose above their contemporaries through the "quality" of their work, rather than those who painted one subject in preference to another. The "subject" in painting is of no importance, it is "quality" alone that counts; without this element, spirit and lyricism cannot exist. There have never been great painters who "painted badly".

The uniform gloom of painting today, the discontent and weariness that torments painters even if they have attained to honours (although feel unworthy of them), even when they achieve well-being by selling their works or becoming rich, is due to the fact that they *have lost the joy of painting*. They have lost this joy because

they do not know how to paint well. Without daring to confess it even to themselves, they have a nostalgic yearning for the Gardens of the Hesperides, the Lost Paradise of good and beautiful painting.

Some throw themselves in desperation headlong into a puddle of so-called “spiritual” art. For them, spirit, or rather what they consider to be spirit in art, is not a discovery and even less a conquest, but rather a great surrendering. All their theories, all their discourses have a bitter tang that reminds one of the fable of the fox and the grapes.

And yet there would be a remedy. Something that might completely change painting in Italy in the space of a few years. Something which would cause Italy to be the one country in the world to produce a new art; at first with the gentle melancholy of convalescence and later with the exuberant joy of health regained... It would be a unique phenomenon in our epoch that would attract universal attention to our living painters, more than any expensive propaganda or fits of rage, which do not allow one inner peace and in the end have no influence at all.