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“By force or by fraud”. Mannerism and freedom

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“Ciao, Harry.” “Ciao, Achille...” “I just wanted to tell you a few things I was mulling over... We live in rather tense times full of conflicts and confrontations but also of differences that manage to coexist, joyful differences.” In this filmed phone conversation with Harry Styles, Achille Bonito Oliva, who is standing in a post-office queue, goes on to say that these “joyful differences” can be seen in various fields of the cultural sphere, and that art, music, fashion, and theater, albeit with differences, are fields in which the creative act takes center stage. “I think when it comes to making art [...] you draw on things you’ve kind of experienced in the past because it’s your only reference point,” says Harry in English. “Fashion dresses humanity. Art lays it bare,” replies Achille.¹ “Ours is an era of intermingling, an age marked by a certain lack of faith in the future but one where awareness of the present is vivid. And this is important. When you consider that there have been other times in which the same thing happened, distant times, after the Renaissance [...]. The awareness of diversity, the madness that constantly accompanies the Mannerist intellectual, is thus captured in the order of discourse made up of the formulas and ceremonies of the court.”² The camera then moves away from the dialog to a model in line at the post office counter, who asks for “a stamp with flowers [...] a stamp printed with something cute.”

This video was produced by the most mannered court of today, namely the Gucci fashion house, where there is no longer an example of style but where the styles of history (and not only of fashion) are all placed on a par in the form of citation, the only tool required by a linguistic artifice that indicates the possibility of coexistence. In this video, Achille returns to concepts already expressed in another era of crisis. As early as 1976, he had already pointed out how in every period of crisis (today as in the years of terrorism or the Mannerist sixteenth century), “life is neutralized by the assumption of its stereotype, fashion. It becomes the place that celebrates the surface and the mask [...] attributes that enable the Mannerist man to recognize others and find reassurance.”³ And this may be why in *At The Post Office*, the third in a series of seven short films made by the director Gus Van Sant for Gucci, before and after the conversation between Achille and Harry, the models make stylized, archetypal movements and express themselves in the incongruous, affected phrases required by a simulated ceremony—a ceremony that simultaneously celebrates and seeks to elude the rules of the court, the financial court, in which existence takes place, or is supposed to take place, today. In any case, the Mannerist artist, like a present-day human being overwhelmed by dehumanizing globalization, clearly realized that “the only possible condition of life is *style* and the stereotyped place of stylistic devices; manias are the only resource to resolve an accentuated individuality; and Mannerism is the only way to work and speak in a reality that changes and is governed elsewhere.”⁴ “Beautiful form is a parody of form”⁵ and therefore fashion too is a parody of fashion.

Referring to Parmigianino and the enamel and ivory elegance of Bronzino in the chapter on loss, imitation, and groundlessness (“Perdita, imitazione, infondatezza”), Achille identified the way in which the “awareness of loss becomes *style of loss*” in Mannerism because “style is the only movement and the only behavior capable of ensuring a minimum (or maximum) of survival.”⁶ The

artist, Mannerist or contemporary, is always asked, however, never to believe fully even in the possibility of style but rather to prefer betrayal as the sole path of subversion: “The traitor responds to the elusiveness of existence with a lateral perspective and the ambivalent assumption of *fashion* understood as acceptance of all the codification of the web of worldly relations” through a cynical “utilization of convention.”⁷ For Achille, however, the oblique battle of critics and artists living in eras of crisis is not fought solely on the plane of more or less citationist style or styles of expression. Starting from the titles of many of the chapters in *L’ideologia del traditore*, language is in fact called upon to express subjective manias, manias that become the manner and instrument of language called upon to express an aesthetic subjectivity freed from the political and ideological framework that by 1976 had become, like the modernist utopia, suddenly obsolete and incapable of expressing the existence of the contemporary individual. Achille was to reiterate these concepts a few years later in the writings where he defined the postmodern position of “operative solitude,” “minority feeling,” and “laterality of those who look at the world and do not accept it.” It was here that his theorization of the Transavantgarde was also born.

While the literary and philosophical roots avowed in the notes to *L’ideologia del traditore*—Arnold Hauser, Ludwig Binswanger, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault—are perfectly elucidated by Andrea Cortellessa in his afterword to the edition of 2012,⁸ it still remains to indicate a number of sources, this time all Italian and art-historical but also visual, references to which are scattered through the lines and pages of the forty chapters, each with a threeword title, that constitute the work’s rhetorical backbone. Scattered images and words, sometimes turned upside-down, are the roots of the text even though they are not always taken up entirely by Achille but often betrayed or used in an oblique way. These roots stretch back to the Italian debate on Mannerism that had, by 1976, already informed over twenty years of art history; a debate that had since 1950 glorified the individual behavior and slated passions of the Mannerist artist, now seen as a mirror capable of reflecting the yearning for freedom from bourgeois conventions of young people after the war and for a language capable of expressing through a jagged, scalene style the individual existences that had survived an era of crisis. In his review of Paola Barocchi’s study of Rosso Fiorentino in 1950 for *Paragone*, Roberto Longhi recalled how Leonardo Buonafede had been taken aback by the harshness of the altarpiece painted for Santa Maria Nuova and identified the patron’s rejection of the work as marking the birth of a critical opposition to a “manneristic” attitude involving both conduct and form.⁹ Practically calling Barocchi’s scholarly study to order, Longhi indicated a precise interpretative line for her to follow. His point of reference was the critical debate initiated by Giuliano Briganti’s 1945 book on Pellegrino Tibaldi and Mannerism, where the author observed that “indivisibly linked moral and intellectual elements are interwoven at the root of the pictorial expression of Mannerism” and suggested that many works of that period of crisis had been inspired by the desire to express the “agonizing ambiguity of a moral world” previously confined to a private sphere. In order to understand the art of Pontormo and Rosso Fiorentino, interest would therefore attach to “the sexual ambiguity of many of these artists and to facts of another but not different nature,” such as Rosso’s involvement in digging up corpses and the hypochondria revealed in Pontormo’s diary. Reference was made to the torment and passion of “ambiguous adolescents with girl-like bodies” and a “promiscuity of attitudes that in no way mask their explicit eroticism.”¹⁰

As early as 1945, an artist like Pontormo already embodied the anxieties of an Italy that had just shaken off Fascism through rebellion and was in the throes of transformation. It was an Italy that was heading toward the social clashes of the 1950s and ’60s, and that looked for elements of a revolutionary and anti-bourgeois nature in the art of that distant time, part of which was to be called the autumn of the Renaissance.¹¹ In the same way, the early Mannerists had been revolutionaries with respect to the classicism of Raphael, regarded as the voice of papal power, expressing themselves

through works in which the mannered style alluded to private manias.

In any case, Longhi himself had already authorized a parallel between the “devilish and bewitched” Rosso and the avant-garde artists of the early twentieth century, the “tortured ‘*incroyables*’ of that century of ours, at least as tortured as the modern ‘Cubists’ were.”¹² Born out of his *Il Manierismo e Pellegrino Tibaldi* (1945), Giuliano Briganti’s *La Maniera italiana* (1961) is quoted by Achille precisely with respect to the eccentric behavior of artists like Ferrucci, who “wore a jerkin made of the skin of a hanged man,” Rosso, who “unearthed corpses by night,” and Pontormo, who “built himself a house that looked rather like the dwelling of an odd and solitary man.”¹³ These were all Mannerist artists who, according to Achille, expressed themselves through “the word of the misfit destined to convey an intentional diversity.”¹⁴

As is known, the 1961 edition of *La Maniera italiana* appears in one of the photographs taken of Pier Paolo Pasolini while preparing the *tableau vivant* of Pontormo’s *Deposition* for *La ricotta*, his episode in the collective film *Ro. Go. Pa. G.* (1963),¹⁵ which we regard as the visual root of the Mannerist artist as described also by Achille, no less significant than coeval art-historical writings. As readers will recall, the depictions of the *Deposition* by Rosso and Pontormo appear as two *tableaux vivants* in color against the black and white of Pasolini’s episode. Moreover, the tragic nature of the subject is undermined by the constant laughter of the actors when coarse songs are played by mistake as a soundtrack and when Christ falls in the Pontormo representation, bringing the action to a halt, while the camera focuses on the individual physiognomic variety of the extras overcome by the liberating relief of infectious hilarity. More laughter is caused by an actor in the Rosso *Deposition* and guffaws even accompany the moment when the extra Stracci, on the lowest rung of the social system portrayed in the film, gorges on the ricotta cheese that will bring about his death on the cross.

To the best of my knowledge, such a close interweaving of Mannerist figuration with irony and humor forms no part of the Italian or international historical and artistic debate. And it is precisely this entwining of Mannerist style, language, the breaking of rules, and “hilarity” that combines in *L’ideologia del traditore* with the subversive metaphor of the servant/master relationship¹⁶ and becomes the most direct derivation of Bonito Oliva’s interpretation of Mannerism from Pasolini’s. Pasolini had already betrayed Longhi, who was known for his dislike of the Mannerists, in the images of *La ricotta* by juxtaposing the depositions of Pontormo and Rosso with lateral scenes in which black youths hold baskets laden with fruit, a citation of Caravaggio’s adolescents, thus effecting a fusion of two moments in art regarded as antithetical in style but still today identified as key episodes of artistic rebellion against the establishment. Pasolini’s heresy and stylistic betrayal of his master in juxtaposing the two anti-naturalistic Mannerist artists with Caravaggio, Longhi’s epitome of naturalism, therefore took place precisely on the plane of the artist’s existential imbalance, the primary driving force of avant-garde expression. It should also be recalled that *La ricotta* put forward a Marxist view of the overwhelming power of financial capitalism. As the character played by Orson Welles states in the interview, “Capital only recognizes the existence of labor when it is needed for production, and the producer of my film is also the owner of your newspaper.” And it is precisely on the altar of this power that the extra Stracci dies in the film on the cross with no possibility of redemption. Pasolini looked back once again to Pontormo in a poem of 1964 as the metaphor of an age of illusions, bewilderment, and indeed death for the country as a whole: “With the help of a meticulous / operator, Pontormo arranged corners / of yellowish houses to cut / the soft, crumbling light, / that becomes brown against the yellow sky / dusted with gold on the urban world [...] and I / lagging behind death, ahead / of true life, I drink the nightmare / of light like glowing wine. / Nation with no hope! The Apocalypse / exploded beyond consciousness / in the melancholy of Mannerist Italy, / has killed everyone: look at them—shadows / oozing with gold in the gold of agony.”¹⁷

In *L’ideologia del traditore*, the link between laughter, smiling, and lamentation (the three terms of

the central chapter “Riso, sorriso, lamento”), as well as stylistic passages through irony and hilarity are instead used by Achille as one of the ways to disrupt and reverse the servant/master relationship within a world—the world of the sixteenth century and the 1970s alike—where ideologies are plunged into crisis and the might of international finance increasingly dominates the lives of individuals. This shift in perspective takes place once again through a betrayal, in this case of the sources, and Vasari in particular, reread by Achille in terms of a Duchampian logic of displacement and irony. With respect to the concise foreword of 1976, in that of the 1998 and 2012 editions, almost as though to reflect on what was the figurative and pre-Transavantgarde version of *L'ideologia del traditore*, the references to sixteenth-century sources are explicitly stated and different elements from the preface to the third part of the 1568 edition of Vasari's *Lives* are yoked together in the phrase, “most perfect grace as license ordered by rule though not itself being the rule” (“*la graziosissima grazia come licenza che non essendo di regola, fusse ordinata nella regola*”). In defining Mannerist production as replete with the “grace of fraught inspiration,” Achille then cites some further Vasari concepts developed as though belonging to the same preface, such as “license ordered by rule,” “order with more adornment,” “facility,” and “humor” (*allegria*). He also returns to “this ‘*allegria*’ theorized by Vasari” in describing the drawings of Luca Cambiaso.¹⁸

In actual fact, however, Vasari's preface never theorizes the need for *allegria* in sixteenth-century artistic expression, and precisely this playful betrayal—ironic mockery of Vasari on the part of Achille, who cites Duchamp's addition of a mocking moustache to the *Mona Lisa*?—is perhaps already indicative of Achille's intent to leave the seriousness of the previous Arte Povera generation behind. The immanent is now to be preferred and hence the need to express lived experience and the private sphere, just as the private sphere had already been revealed in all its shocking detail in Pontormo's diary.

If the mechanism of international finance only became aware of the existence of the extra Stracci on his death in *La ricotta*, humor not being regarded as sufficient to combat the might of capitalism in 1963, in 1976 individuality—oblique, ironic, and tragic but in any case joyful in the assertion of the Mannerists' individual and aestheticizing existence—became for Achille the mirror of the following decade. A decade in which the expressive action of the Mannerist and contemporary artist was to be necessarily turned upside-down into a kind of stage play constantly described through the entire text in the words of Cervantes and Shakespeare: “They are coming to the play. I must be idle” or “the play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.”¹⁹

Like the “involuntarily comic” Pontormo of the diary, Cervantes is instead continually referred to by Achille to define the subversive example of the master/servant relationship, where the courtier-servant, unlike Stracci, will no longer succumb to the “internationalization of finance” and political realism but will be able, through action that is no longer frontal but lateral and also “capricious and individualistic,”²⁰ to subvert and take over the master's life with political and expressive implications that appear to be reflected in Joseph Losey's film *The Servant* (screenplay by Harold Pinter) of 1963, the same year as *Ro.Go.Pa.G.*

Through betrayal, understood as expressive action, the sixteenth-century artist operates not only in the political sphere but also and above all in the sentimental realm. Individual and individualistic action therefore remains the only practicable path for the contemporary critic. For Achille too, the loftiest model of this exhibition of one's own body as a mirror of painting remains the diary of Pontormo, published in 1956 by Emilio Cecchi, who had already spoken in a lecture one year earlier of the Mannerist artist's “aesthetic heresy,” which was therefore seen as only stylistic. For Achille too, Pontormo epitomizes behavior capable of “duplicity of direction” in a conscious “splitting of the biological and the artistic, where one world merges with the other” in the expression of a “solitary mania in one own's narcissism.” As a result, “the confusion of introjection and expulsion (eating and

defecating) demonstrates that the two moments are placed on a par and cancel one another out.”²¹ Achille interprets Pontormo through Binswanger (the 1964 edition of *Drei Formen missglückten Daseins: Verstiegtheit, Verschrobenheit, Manieriertheit*, first ed. 1956) and draws his quotations from Luciano Berti’s monograph of 1973. However, Pontormo’s diary may actually have influenced Italian art as from the Cecchi edition of 1956, since an ironic representation of the artist’s body and his excretions appeared in 1961 with Piero Manzoni’s cans of *Artist’s Shit*: “On Tuesday 16, I began that figure and dined in the evening on a bit of meat that did me little good [...] on Wednesday I ate two fried eggs, on Thursday I shat two firm little turds.”²²

But by 1976, the physical body of the artist and the critic had already become a screen of free expression for the manifestation of manias and sentimental subjectivity. It should be remarked in this connection that Pasolini’s body had become a screen for Fabio Mauri just one year earlier in the action *Intellettuale* performed at the inauguration of the new Galleria Comunale d’Arte Moderna in Bologna in 1975, the artist’s intimate reflection on the effect that his work had on himself as its author. Pasolini’s appearance in *Intellettuale* could almost be seen as sentimental backtracking with respect to the political ideas expressed in his film *Il Vangelo secondo Matteo* (1964), projected on his bare chest, since those ideas were now subjected to aesthetic translation and self-reflective transposition. Looking at Pontormo one year later, Achille already spoke of the need for a further expressive praxis capable of fully representing through painting the desires and aspirations of a new generation of artists for whom the style of the work was to become a mask concealing any sentimental heresy. Heretical artists like Pontormo (the critical tradition of regarding him as a modern and consequently heretical artist stretches up to the present day²³), heretical with respect to the different political forces, as Pasolini was himself by 1975, are models for a practice of heresy immediately expressed by Achille in various ways, such as displaying his body in the nude in photos published in the magazine *Frigidaire* in 1981—certainly an act of narcissism rather than a political gesture. The necessity of the narcissistic act is clearly stated as from the introduction to the 1976 edition of *L’ideologia del traditore*.²⁴ Furthermore, the same “act” is replicated as self-citation years later, in a perfect Mannerist reiteration. Such narcissism becomes the mask of a brazen anti-bourgeois heresy inspired by that of Pontormo, who described in the diary the bare limbs (legs, torsos, and arms) he frescoed in San Lorenzo alongside the exhibition of his own body. A mask that, like the reversal of content on the plane of style, declares the determination of the artists, both Mannerist and contemporary, to express their hypochondria and eccentricity as well as feeling solely through their painting. In a substantial and early (1976) change of direction from the political to the private, Achille stated that as “solitary voyeurs imprisoned within the microcosm of their narcissism, Mannerist intellectuals are able to live only through interposed objects.”²⁵

When the mask, as a metaphor also of style, becomes an obligation for the artist faced with the bewilderment of an age of crisis, as the 1970s evidently were for Achille, then in his view, the other response to the rift in the times, both ancient and contemporary, is that of nomadism: an existential necessity whose roots in Deleuze have already been identified by Cortellessa.²⁶ But a different and wholly Italian root of nomadism, which Achille saw as necessary for the intellectual, had already been indicated by Delio Cantimori in *Eretici italiani del Cinquecento*, published in 1939 and describing the wanderings of religious heretics of the Mannerist era all over Europe. This work had become a metaphor of the intellectuals persecuted and exiled by Fascism during World War II and then, in the 1950s and ’60s, a mirror of the heresies of nomadic intellectuals (exemplified for Achille by the artists of the Fluxus movement, another field of his critical and exhibitional writing) in their increasingly individualistic reaction to post-war political realism. This nomadism lingered on until the last examples of members of the Red Brigades in exile in France and South America, where dreams, utopia, and betrayal are combined in an indistinct whole. Achille described this

unquestionably heretical path of the Mannerist artist as one of “permanent subversion” with respect to a life organized “in accordance with possibilities functional to the production system.”²⁷ Required in order to reassert the “freedom” of the artist with respect to the “necessity” of social life and of the art system, this subversion took place in 1976, ahead of its time, in the sphere of privacy and style, discarding the political militancy that had instead been essential to the previous generation. All that remains in *L’ideologia del traditore* of the conventions cherished by that generation of militants is the relentless, programmatic tone of the asseverative pages, almost as though written aloud, which resounds in the text and affirms the right to express subjectivity, flaws, and imbalance even in a violent era that already sensed, indicating the sixteenth-century birth of international finance, the (imminent) victory of Margaret Thatcher (1979) and Ronald Reagan (1981). This was to bring not only hedonism but also a state of existential precariousness that has continued until the present, determining a new and more drastic crisis caused by post-capitalist digital globalization and without the structure of a strong ideology to serve as a shield.

This precariousness was expressed by the Mannerist artist and the contemporary critic in 1976 through Nietzsche²⁸ in the awareness that Machiavelli’s words “*per forza o con frode*”²⁹ meant “all the desperate urgency of that epoch, which found itself faced for the first time in the history of culture with the primary contradiction between language and reality,” thus expressing “all the violence, desire, eros, and death that language—especially the language of order—still seeks to divert and conceal today.”³⁰

¹ Adopting the conventions of this staged dialog, I shall abandon the customary practice in scholarly studies of referring to the subject by surname and continue to use his first name Achille.

² A. Bonito Oliva, *L’ideologia del traditore* (Milan: Electa, 2012), p. 72 (first ed. Milan: Feltrinelli, 1976).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 41, Bonito Oliva’s italics.

⁸ A. Cortellessa, “Dialettica del Manierismo,” in Bonito Oliva, *L’ideologia del traditore*, pp. 225–43.

⁹ R. Longhi, “Paola Barocchi, ‘Il Rosso Fiorentino,’ Roma Gismondi, 1950,” in *Paragone*, II, 13, 1951, pp. 58–62.

¹⁰ G. Briganti, *Il Manierismo e Pellegrino Tibaldi* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1945), pp. 23–24.

¹¹ C. Ossola, *Autunno del Rinascimento* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1971). See also, not least as a precedent to Bonito Oliva’s reflections on this subject, E. Battisti, *L’Antirinascimento, con una appendice di manoscritti inediti* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1962).

¹² Longhi, “Paola Barocchi,” pp. 60–61.

¹³ The quotations are from G. Briganti, *La Maniera italiana* (Rome, 1961), p. 12; see also Bonito Oliva, *L’ideologia del traditore*, p. 59.

¹⁴ Bonito Oliva, *L’ideologia del traditore*, p. 45.

¹⁵ The title *Ro.Go.Pa.G.* is made up of the initial letters of the surnames of the directors responsible for each of the four episodes: Roberto Rossellini, Jean-Luc Godard, Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Ugo Gregoretti.

¹⁶ See, inter alia, the chapter entitled “Riso, sorriso, lamento,” in Bonito Oliva, *L’ideologia del traditore*, pp. 122–27.

¹⁷ P. P. Pasolini, “Poesie mondane,” in *Poesia in forma di rosa* [1964] (Milan: Garzanti, 1976), pp. 23–24.

¹⁸ Bonito Oliva, *L’ideologia del traditore*, p. 11.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 45 and 46.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 54 and 55.

²² Pontormo, “Diario,” in L. Berti, *L’opera completa del Pontormo* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1973), p. 8.

²³ The spearhead of this interpretation of Pontormo remains M. Firpo, *Gli affreschi di Pontormo a San Lorenzo. Eresia, politica e cultura nella Firenze di Cosimo I* (Turin: Einaudi, 1997).

²⁴ Published by Feltrinelli in Milan, 1976. See p. 10.

²⁵ Bonito Oliva, *L’ideologia del traditore*, p. 59.

²⁶ Cortellessa, “Dialettica del Manierismo,” p. 233.

²⁷ Bonito Oliva, *L’ideologia del traditore*, p. 47.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

²⁹ This quotation from Machiavelli appears as an epigraph in the 2012 edition of *L’ideologia del traditore*.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 218.