

Beloved by the Gods

Luigi Russo

Many years ago, it so happened that I held a novice in my arms during his christening: very young, scarcely more than an adolescent... I had never done it before, I have never done it again. I did it of course because I liked the boy, who was both so fragile in expecting to unveil the world through the most profound and despairing of means given to mankind, through images, but at the same time, so authentically determined, completely absorbed by this huge mission, which inside of him spoke in an imperious manner.

The most surprising thing about this aspiring sorcerer was that, although he was still wet behind the ears, he knew how to do the essential thing with shameful spontaneity, and he knew how to do it with the confidence of certain child prodigies, who have remained in art history: the Giotto's, the Picassos... This young man knew how to create images: and what images! A talent at the pure state which astonished you. It was right to introduce him, it was right to point him out to the world. It was right also to step away from him, and to avoid that he'd become too full of himself.

This was the reason why I revealed the important significance of that representationalism born of a mysterious source ("lively sense of form [...] an almost magical image, archaic and timeless, a negation of history, unheard of in the flagrancy of its ciphered breaking in"), but at the same time I strongly disapproved of "his lasciviousness" ("an amorphous space, neutralized by its existential frequency: a place of the absurd; because of this, the image stands out as if part of a scene made out of papier-mâché, primed and signed by stratifications of color without an author [...] the image is mocked, unwanted at the same moment in which it offers itself to us"), and I advised him to enter a monastery – to age a bit and to clear up his ideas at the same time.

Almost thirty years have gone by, and here I am today again – amused – introducing the former young man, now Beppe Madaudo, an artist at the prime of his charming maturity. No way did the beginner enter a monastery! Good advice, as everybody knows, is what nobody ever follows.

Accordingly Beppe Madaudo did go to the Arts Academy first in Palermo and later in Rome, but without paying the price of discipline, without bowing down to the frustrations of apprenticeship.

Instead he hurled himself into the field of Painting, surrendering completely to worldly temptations. His image, his extreme joy of creating images, became an omnivorous means of representing things, a transparent signature in high demand on the market, which completely absorbed him: graphic art, cartoons, illustrations. This is how "Corto Maltese" and the cartoons on the "Espresso" came up, and also books with Garzanti and Rizzoli, all the way to "Casanova" by Ricci. In other words, he became successful: awards, fame, international acclaim...

I had lost track of him. I met up with him again recently and I discovered that he had converted back to Painting, which had matured during the last ten years. And this is the best part: because now I notice a way of painting that has splendidly grown up around itself, entering completely into adulthood, it has risen to become a unique imaginative phenomenon which casts a spell with its magnetic force. And I would like to understand what happened, how it happened.

The fact is that, instead of paying his dues as a novice at a monastery and learning how to praise the Lord, Beppe Madaudo preferred to walk the path of Perdition all the way through, but instead at the end of it – beloved by the Gods – he was allowed to see the light of Redemption.

Speaking out of metaphor, the problem with a remarkably talented beginner is that that same exceptional inborn talent of creating images, i.e., of having been gifted with and not having had to obtain through difficult acquisition the unique attitude of representing the world, paradoxically did not allow him to appreciate the fact that image is a challenging, high-risk universe. Trying to understand image's language is already a difficult task, especially because the alphabet used by the visible is deformed compared to our own language. But it is extremely difficult to express this language in its other, not less important, essential structural dimensions: grammar, syntax, lexicon... Without acquiring (and this means becoming mature), and without developing (and this has to do with practicing, which is at the base of learning how to paint) the complete universe of image, you cannot produce an image, and if you do, it remains an empty image, a simulacrum.

In other words, a pure image is not – please pardon the repetition – a pure image. The image of art is pure in the sense that it is not the image of something that exists beyond itself, but at the same time it is still the image of itself, an entity that becomes alive solely thanks to that image.

When this rigorous procedure is not followed, or is not followed correctly, the image remains nothing else but an inexpressive number, or rather a sign that only communicates its genetic flagrancy, illustrative lasciviousness.

The debut of Madaudo moves along the edges of this abyss. But instead of falling into it or submitting to it, he has had the good fortune of surviving within this hellish world of painting, obviously having had to pay first hand the price of having turned it into worldliness, but also having discovered in the end image's truth within this melting pot, the magic through which image becomes painting and qualifies as an authentic illustrated reality. After having reached the freezing point of painting, Madaudo completely reinvented expressiveness according to his own needs. In this way, having dismissed his impulsive translation of image, he has acquired the humility of an artisan and the slowness of an officiant, and with the sacrifice of a self-taught artist he has reached the point of elaborating incredibly refined strategies of pictorial work. Today his images come from within himself through painful intrinsic devising, and they become a painting through a mysterious bradyseism of matter.

It's astonishing to watch Madaudo while he's working in his art studio. Twenty-five years ago (I remember him in Rome), he would finish an illustration in just a few minutes with impeccable strokes, but now he works on it for a long time, and spends long days of religious silence before each canvas, which is no longer simply a canvas waiting to be prepared before being painted upon, a simple support work for the image, but it is already the hope of an image, the promise of an outright event.

Through Madaudo's eyes and hands, the canvas changes its essence, it becomes immaterial and starts to live. The extremely detailed preparation is not really preparation, but instead its pre-configuration, a first suckling of the image. He spreads obsolete pastes on the canvas, such as Bolognese gesso and rabbit skin glue, which he learned about by studying the works of early art masters, with the dedication and the preciseness that one would have while feeding a baby. These progressive treatments sketch out chaotic traces that the act of painting patiently disciplines and structures. The act of painting is the harmonic use of both line and color.

Thus, lovingly and knowingly nurtured, the image slowly starts to come out, it ends its concealment, it emerges from the canvas and becomes painting. How much fine work of molding, of surface intarsia, of interfoliating stratifications; how much trepidation accompanies the alchemic transmutation of matter into form, which unveils itself chromatically in all its illustrative value! A form that astonishes you especially because of its surprising consistency: ethereal but also as clean cut as crystal, sinuous but also tightly strung like steel wire. And another thing that strikes you is the luminous irradiation that it gives out, remarkably controlled by the incredible gold leaf he uses. And obviously Madaudo's use of gold has nothing to do with Byzantine painting or with Beato Angelico, because his use of gold gives color and a chromatic guideline, actually it is the yeast of the entire artwork. If anything, we should point to other types of illustrations, in particular the influence of Japanese decorations that Madaudo came across during the time he spent in Japan where he learned about a lot of things. But this is just one of the many things that enrich his image culture; not any less than his favorite topics during his childhood: imaginary animals, flora, the great myths of civilization, the female figure... But that which imposes itself and remains in the end is the enchantment of paintings that stand before us like the sap of life, a very pure witness of imagination.

I am proud to have introduced Beppe Madaudo many years ago. And I'm happy to see today that he no longer needs any introducing. And, like everyone else, I enjoy his paintings, which have been purified into icons, gems of light that light up the world's opacity.