

## Lello Esposito, the Parthenope Syndrome

Stendhal wrote: “There are two capitals in Europe: Paris and Naples”.

Lello Esposito responds, in his own way, to the assertion of the “Milanese” Beyle by portraying what has become not so much a metropolis – like New York, Cairo or Bombay – as a category of the spirit in the collective imagination. Or at least he does all he can to convince us to see it this way.

Proceeding by hypothesis, the Neapolitan artist would end up working on an abstraction, an idea generated by an excess of myth, when reality surrenders to the semantic abuse to which it has been subjected in time, and becomes “something else”: something that belongs to our senses and our memory, something we can recognize without direct knowledge, though in the end we can never possess it.

Here lies the paradox. All that is left for Esposito is to begin from a realization of loss. He has no other choice. Naples, his city, the womb from which he comes, denies herself to him, though at the same time she represents a substantial portion of his genetic code. The capital christened by Stendhal is too closely linked to him for it to be transformed into intelligible narrative, anecdote, celebration or rhetoric, perhaps: precisely what we might have expected from the figurative exuberance of this artist so naturally versed, according to the whim of the moment, in wild-style metropolitan graffiti or the nativity scene figurine that, “leavened”, rises and swells to become a monumental sculpture.

Anyway, one thing is certain: Naples backlashes against Esposito almost as a matter of unhappy destiny. This, I repeat, is due to emotional exaggeration. As the anonymous author of the *Palatine Anthology* wrote: “Never speak of love, lest you lose it in the words”.

But the paradoxes don’t stop here. The *genius loci* that overbearingly demands satisfaction and drives the artist toward that impossible identikit becomes a messenger of mortal melancholy and restlessness. The promised celebration, that of the recognition of roots made of Mediterranean colors, sounds, cries and odors, is twisted into a painful, at times tragic script.

This psychic and emotional synchronism is the field in which the artist conducts his research. Having failed in his objective, he has to return to the path that was his in any case, a “journey” that has become indispensable, toward a destination that no longer exists.

Thus the unattained love object – the “continent” of Naples – emerges almost by spontaneous pollution, through a signage of lucky charms and apotropaic fetishes, humble memorabilia, relics, bric-à-brac, devotional images, votive offerings. A chaotic, kitsch inventory the artist uses to celebrate a propitiatory ritual, which will allow him to recover all the pagan content in his religious fervor. For Esposito, the path to knowledge moves in this obligatory direction.

A central, demiurgic figure, “present” even when not represented, Pulcinella appears, at this point, to indicate the ancestral archetype. *Protògonos* of Neapolitan consciousness, the symbol that more than any other has been affected by the subversion of meanings in tradition and folklore, Pulcinella is deprived of his standard, stereotypical attributes. “I have stripped away the mask a thousand times”, the artist admits, “I have laid bare the man behind this mask”. Which means defiling it in its untouchable sacredness and then “using” it as a pretext for expression, as a pure sign, to the point of making it become the earmark of an inscription in continuous evolution, outrageously metaphorical, capable of being simultaneously barbaric and baroque, popular in the most reckless sense of the term.

“The challenge was to use a mask-character about whom everything has already been said and done”, says the artist, “but to always use it in different ways”. Thus the similarity to the constituent verbal and alphabetical modes of every communicable language is announced and guaranteed by Esposito himself. He is one who speaks “Pulcinelle”, one who instinctively knows that making art is above all an impulse to communicate, an offering from mine to yours, perhaps to the point of abnegation: nothing more. To echo Barthes, art is simultaneously *langue* and *parole*, the sharing of what belongs to us, for better or worse, enchantment and repulsion included.

Artists of Esposito’s breed are not required to foresee the reaction of the audience, nor must they concern themselves with entertaining, delighting, reassuring it. What is important is to pull forth – as in the dramatic *Moto rigenerativo* (Regenerating motion), where a Pulcinella obscenely sprawled on a chair vomits himself – the moods that infest us, the population of little demons that possess us and decide our fate. Obsessions, rantings, plunges of the psyche – perhaps an involuntary recouping of the Goya of the *Caprichos* – whatever suffices, in any case, to convince us that someone is paying attention to us, even against our will; that, in short, no one can ask us to justify our shortcomings.

**Thus, between superstition and animism, Esposito invents his own brimstony inner ethnography. He repeats, as a creature in perfect tune with the cosmic elements, the palindromic path of Heraclitus, for whom “upward, downward, the way is one and the same”. Everything returns, everything is reabsorbed by its origin. There are no one-way trajectories, beginning and end converge, Eros and Thànatos born of the same egg, just as Pulcinella’s father came from a turkey egg.**

Naples becomes the *aleph* of reference, the fantastic melting pot where the imagination is granted free rein, where thoughts take on a magma-like, eruptive consistency, where “everything mixes”, as he artist confesses, describing his studio at Palazzo Sansevero. So why be amazed if a poor fellow in a mask gets nailed to the cross, the latest sacrificial victim immolated in the hope of a salvation humanity (and indubitably the microcosm of Naples represents the entire human race) is no longer capable of awaiting? The blasphemous links back up with the innocent in the sign of a rebirth that will certainly come, when the world will be able to return to its cycle of damnation and redemption in pursuit of a survival that seems to have become its only chance.

And there is little doubt that the victim will know how to be reborn in a new guise, filling our everyday world with himself and his gestures. Pulcinella, or what is left of him after the liturgy of the sacrifice, disintegrates in a prodigious tumult of his projections, a sort of atomization of the symbols with which he is identified. In other words, Esposito continues to speak his language through the numberless transfers of that figure-guide. Between primitivism and expressionism, it is an uncontrollable contagion the sign exalts with daring gestures, to the point of the equivalence of painting and sculpture, which become disciplines open to any excess of fantasy.

The “improper” use of the legacy of stereotype is proof of an existential laceration that makes everything ambiguous and double, when Dionysiac exulting is transformed into a grimace, jests into lamentations, eggs into skulls; when the blood of San Gennaro, the blood of Naples, coagulates and liquefies more due to alchemical intervention than to divine grace. Behind the by-now-virtual mask of Pulcinella is concealed a world of multiple adjectives: esoteric, hybrid, chthonic, orgiastic, eschatological, macabre, surreal and more. Here obscenity, too, becomes liberating against the sense of sin. And yet, or perhaps precisely because of all this, everything reassembles on a human scale, as in the theater of Edoardo (De Filippo, ed.), where the Neapolitan and the universal coincide perfectly.

Definitively speaking, Esposito “escapes” in order to go deeper. Beyond the gibbousness, the sores and stigmata of the likes of Pulcinella, beyond the puppet-totem that today has assumed the form of a canopic jar inside which any miracle or magic is possible, we find the unmistakable signs of life. “One must imagine Sisyphus happy”, Camus wrote, and Esposito cannot help but agree.

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