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****Between Realistic Enchantment and Surreal Allegory****

I am not fortunate enough to know Vincenzo Guerrazzi as well as many illustrious figures who have written fascinating and, I imagine, highly accurate things about him. The little I know comes from his book published by Rizzoli, **La Festa dell'Unità,** and from the overlapping images of his countless paintings, about which others, from Luigi Compagnone to Corrado Costa, from Maurizio Fagiolo to Paolo Volponi, have written, drawing from more direct experiences. These few have dared to tackle the complex tangle of literature, painting, life, and politics that this former worker at Ansaldo Grandi Motori, sufficiently disillusioned and angry, has managed to construct over the years.

Thus, I feel entitled to take a leap of faith, to write impulsively, offering impressions rather than carefully considered analyses, which are incredibly difficult to conduct with the critical tools available in our field. After all, Costa had foreseen that when faced with Guerrazzi's work, art critics would be forced to step outside their usual language—a sort of invitation.

I accept this invitation by starting with that fierce and exceedingly polite book I recently finished reading, with the same amazement with which the repentant factory worker wanders through social life, entangled as much in the stubborn memory of the factory as in the bindings of a cultural, aesthetic, and political conscience that is nearly unspeakable. The same conscience, I mean, that emerges from the highly intricate ritual mechanisms of paintings, which, for the sake of metaphor, range between realistic enchantment and surreal allegory, with a subtlety of invention that cannot be masked by satire, grotesque humor, or moralism.

In these paintings, I mean, artistic pretenses nest, sufficient to give the work an air of naivety. This probably explains the misunderstanding of those who see Guerrazzi as a "naive" artist and his "workerism" as a mask of lingering populist rhetoric. I wrote similar things about Guttuso's **Funerali di Togliatti,** pointing out its deliberate clarity and sophisticated structural mechanisms—a tribute from cultivated culture to emotion,

perhaps born of immense modesty, certainly of a humility that the great painter from Bagheria periodically seeks to rediscover and, indeed, succeeds in finding.

It is no coincidence that Guttuso's name, along with his ambition, both ancient and ongoing, to speak through metaphors and legible liturgies, is frequently mentioned by those interpreting Guerrazzi's work. Nor is it a coincidence that Guerrazzi himself is among the few artists in Italy to openly express admiration for Guttuso and forgive his success, in the name of fundamental values that he himself shares, whether he paints workers or cardinals, writes about veterinarians, or crafts depictions of madonnas with an amplified allure. One of these shared values is undoubtedly melancholy; another is trust in the word—whether painted or written, explicit enough to avoid dryness, yet allusive and hyperbolic enough to animate allegorical machines. These machines are filled with Guerrazzi's timeless characters: Christopher Columbus and Gilberto Govi, the Anonymous Warrior and the Doge, Cardinal Siri and Pertini, the Cultural Affairs Assessor, and even himself. All are embarked on a sort of secular Jubilee devoid of love, just as the secular funerals of a while ago lacked **pietas**. In this vessel, the new rich float along, but the old and utterly destitute are completely absent.

Italy sets sail, having thrown overboard—where, no one knows—the ideological ballast, which, one hopes, some wandering, laid-off worker will eventually recover and bring to some “space for the youth,” ephemeral as it may be. Painting? It has many qualifications to enter the realm of postmodern theorists' citations and museum recoveries, foremost among them irony, craftsmanship, ritualistic and celebratory taste, all of which discharge the unprecedented libertarian dizziness triggered by the sudden crisis of the avant-garde. Processional mysticism, inseparable from “popular” art, is repeated in Christopher's bewildered journey.

The figures cluster as if at a funeral or a political rally—mass hermits gathered out of neither conviction nor necessity, much like at a party gathering or an assembly line. Yet, here, the worker is absent; having become unrecognizable, he cannot be imagined or given an image. The ship is a paradigm of society, with its floating passengers above and its submerged or clandestine travelers below. Today, there is nothing more subdued and clandestine than the old worker, whom Guerrazzi continues to believe in as something, indeed, imaginable.

After this work, I cannot see how our painter-worker-writer will manage to paint tuna fishing or olive pickers except, like Chagall or Zavattini, by sending his cherished

memories to soar in the highest skies, adding allegory to allegory and soothing the anxiety and rage of incomprehensible days in fables.

A writer by vocation and a painter by necessity, Vincenzo Guerrazzi will always find someone ready to suggest shortening a painting or cutting a book. But if it were possible to let him wander through the myths and rites of low-level miracle-making without pinning down his imagination, I believe the result would be an image quite different from the overly affectionate one created by his admirers. Indeed, there is enough cruelty and sufficient plundering in his works to suggest Guerrazzi is something like a metropolitan Ligabue—cultured and refined, wandering with stubborn despair through urban forests, from which he extracts the clamors of rallies and the seductive currents of Celtic poetry.

He, too, paints tigers and peacocks, turkeys and acrobats. And if his demeanor is that of a wild soul who has read Kafka and studied Velázquez, this does not mean Guerrazzi cannot look at the reality and unreality of our days with infinite wonder.

A wonder, too, for his own ultimate, helpless cynicism.