

Luncheon Seminar
at The Italian Academy
March 7, 2007

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«*Chi sono?*» (1930)
Self-portrait by Aldo Palazzeschi

Chi sono?

Son forse un poeta?
No certo.
Non scrive che una parola, ben strana,
la penna dell'anima mia:
«follia».
Son dunque un pittore?
Neanche.
Non ha che un colore
la tavolozza dell'anima mia:
«malinconia».
Un musico allora?
Nemmeno.
Non c'è che una nota
nella tastiera dell'anima mia:
«nostalgia».
Son dunque... che cosa?
Io metto una lente
davanti al mio cuore
per farlo vedere alla gente.
Chi sono?
Il saltimbanco dell'anima mia.

The famous self-portrait *Chi sono?*, brief manifesto of Palazzeschi's early poetry, appears in the valuable edition of *Poesie*, published in Milan in 1930 by the publisher Giulio Preda, but it is not its

first printing. It can be found, with minor textual variations in three different volumes that precede this “raccolta definitiva e definitivamente curata” (*Notizia*, in *Poesie*, 1930, p. 5) of lyric poetry by Palazzeschi.

This programmatic self-introduction appears for the first time as a preface in the opening of *Poemi* (1909), and is later included by the author in the first two ‘self-anthological’ editions (*L’Incendiario 1905-1909*, 1913 and *Poesie 1904-1909*, 1925), where it occupies a strategic position: it is a link between the first writings in verse and the brief but intense futuristic experience (thus accentuating its value as a prophetic *exemplum ante litteram*). So there are various versions of *Chi sono?*, and each of them takes on a distinctive flavor according to the collection it is found in and the position it occupies therein. At the same time, it remains clear that this work occupies the initial position only in *Poesie* (1930). Set in the homonymous section, this placement makes it the recurring and recapitulating emblem of the whole first season of Palazzeschi’s poetry (1905-1915), a standing which it maintained even in the numerous editions and reprints that followed.

This preamble is not to undermine the methodological importance of following the evolution of an author’s work through the texts of the first editions, but at the same time, the study of the particular version that the poet has chosen as the ultimate testimony (*ne varietur*) of his artistic experience must certainly not be neglected. In Palazzeschi’s case, this selection is almost impossible even to recognize amongst the masses of variations-*ne varietur* published between 1913 and 1958. Opting for the text from the 1930 publication of *Poesie* contrasts with Adele Dei’s choice for the Meridiano publication of *Tutte le poesie*, where the version reprinted was taken from *Opere giovanili* (1958). The reason behind the choice of the 1930 edition lies in its originality. The book of poems takes on its final structure in this version and the composition *Chi sono?* is positioned as the *incipit* of the entire collection.

The opening poem in *Poesie* (1930) functions as an introduction to an unpublished poem narrating a dramatic poetic adventure; it is the story of a “giovinezza turbata e quasi disperata” (the

traumatic discovery of his homosexuality), which resolves in “allegria” in a moment of time (that coincides with the artistic time of his novel *:riflessi*, 1908), “come per miracolo, come per virtù di un incantesimo del quale non saprei io stesso spiegare il mistero (approfondita conoscenza della vita, degli altri e di me stesso?)” (*Premessa*, in *Opere giovanili*, pp. 2-3).

What exactly is new about this edition of *Poesie* (1930)? Curiously enough, the author himself gives us the answer in a brief and ambiguous *Notizia* on the text of his poems:

Le poesie vennero qui disposte secondo l'ordine cronologico in cui vennero concepite, più che pubblicate o scritte, e cioè fra il 1904 e il 1914, per modo che l'a. può considerare questo libro nel suo naturale svolgimento, come la vicenda spirituale della propria fanciullezza.

At first glance, this confession seems odd to say the least, and rather than shedding light on the collection, it seems to cause further confusion: especially on the part of whoever sets out to reconstruct its genesis and order of composition according to strict philological procedures. Published on various occasions in earlier years in books and reviews, the poems have suddenly been revolutionized in their sequence and take on a new chronological order according to the author's internal sense of time. Palazzeschi himself defines it with a metaphor taken from the ‘father/mother-child’ relationship: ‘conception’. Only by following this hypothesis to its conclusion can we accept the reshuffling of the cards and discern the “naturale svolgimento” of the “vicenda spirituale della propria fanciullezza”. The new and unusual combinations of heterogeneous material, developed over a long diachronic period, compel us to examine the material in a synchronic study. In this way, the historical perspective is annulled, introducing us into a universal present tense and revealing the constant theme of a bitter, dramatic web, which is twisted further by the irony of “saltimbanco” and the clown's desecrating: the same elements which contribute finally to unraveling the entanglement (at least in part).

The opening lyric in Palazzeschi's books of poetry often fulfills the task of condensing the thematic-ideological innovations of the entire collection and presenting them in a single composition. *Chi sono?* from *Poesie* (1930) is a prime example of this. It functions as an emblem, establishing and encompassing the young Aldo's poetics as well as revealing the torment of his own self-discovery. The author's point of view, which was at first external and separate from the subject of study, is suddenly internalized, giving birth to an authentic character: the "poeta", whose own self-consciousness casually coincides with that of the author. *Chi sono?* is the self-portrait program (or identikit) of this ultimate figure of Palazzeschi's transformistic repertory, the "radice quadrata" (Pieri, p. 15) of his artistic production.

There is a strong resemblance between the opening verses of this poem and those of three crepuscular poets:

Perché tu mi dici poeta?

Io non sono un poeta.

Io non sono che un piccolo fanciullo che piange.

(Sergio Corazzini, *Desolazione del povero poeta sentimentale*, in *Dal «piccolo libro inutile»*, 1906, I, vv. 1-3);

Chi sono?

È tanto strano

fra tante cose strambe

un coso con due gambe

detto guidogozzano.

(Guido Gozzano, *Nemesi*, in *La via del rifugio*, 1907, vv. 65-68);

Da qualche tempo una voce

perfida che non s'oblia

rivolge all'anima mia

una domanda feroce.

Oh come, come vorrei

rispondere! Son due sole
parole, son due parole
piccolissime: *chi sei?*

Rispondere! Vorrei bene
far tacere questa voce
additando la mia croce,
numerando le mie pene;

ma quando ascolto il suono
tristissimo al cuore mio
solo e tremante anch'io,
dico e ridico: chi sono?

(Marino Moretti, *Chi sei, chi sono*, in *Poesie scritte col lapis*, 1910).

Chi sono? seems to have the strongest affinity with Corazzini (although Palazzeschi defuses it by removing “ogni forzatura emozionale”: Pieri, p. 20). This hypothesis is strengthened in comparing it with several verses by Francis Jammes, which the Roman poet surely read and which Corazzini transcribed in a 1906 letter to Palazzeschi:

Penser cela est-ce être poète?
Je ne suis pas. Qu'est-ce que je suis?
Est-ce que je vis?
Est-ce que je rêve?

(*Les Dimanches*, in *De L'Angelus de l'aube à l'Angelus du soir 1888-1897*, 1906, vv. 14-16).

Less well-known is its similarity to Rodolfo's celebrated “aria” in the first act of *La Bohème* (“Chi son? Sono un poeta / Che cosa faccio? Scrivo / E come vivo? Vivo”), which is however in the affirmative. An unpublished, but even more probable and important resemblance comes from a comic source: *Goldoni* in *Teatro comico*. This influence is undoubtedly linked to Palazzeschi's brief but intense theatrical apprenticeship between 1902 and 1906 at the R. Scuola di Recitazione in

Florence, directed by Luigi Rasi. In Act I scene viii of *Teatro comico*, in an attempt to have the part of Arlecchino from Orazio, Gianni recites several significant verses in which his ‘mad’ being (acrobat) shows itself in triplicate as ‘poet’, ‘musician’ and ‘painter’ (the thematic-lexical order changes slightly but the rhetorical structure remains the same):

Orazio: Tra poco devo sentire un poeta, e poi voglio, che proviamo qualche scena.

Gianni: Se voli un poeta, son qua mi.

Orazio: Siete anche poeta?

Gianni: Eccome!

Anch’io de’ pazzi ho il triplicato onore.

Son poeta, son musico, e pittore.

(*Il teatro comico*, Act 1, sc. 8)

These numerous references show that wondering about one’s identity and duty as a “poeta” was a historically motivated literary *topos* at the beginning of the century.

The response to the three interrogatives of the lyric (“Son forse un poeta? / Son dunque un pittore? / Un musico allora?”) is negative on all counts (“No certo / Neanche / Nemmeno”). This speaks of the very reference models of crepuscular poetry (Moretti, Gozzano, Corazzini) becoming passé: they can be detected through the presence of keywords in sequence (“poeta-parola-penna-follia”, “pittore-colore-tavolozza-melanconia”, “musico-nota-tastiera-nostalgia”: cfr. Pieri, pp. 25-39). In the midst of this progressive tension, rooted in the text through use of a rhetorical viewpoint upon the figure of an ascending climax, which comes to a standstill on the last question and affirmation (“Chi sono? / Il saltimbanco dell’anima mia”), some interpretations see “sostanziale ambiguità” (Curi, pp. 52-53) as the dialectics of this work. In other words, these interpreters have noticed the clash between “malinconia” and “nostalgia”, which are indisputable elements of the crepuscular faith, and the “follia” of the “saltimbanco” as a prefiguration of the subsequent futuristic turning-point. This interpretation, however, in assimilating the “saltimbanco” with the “incendiario”, does not take into due consideration that Palazzeschi delights in ‘variety’ and

reversibility (cfr. Sanguineti, pp. 80-105): a fact that can be observed in his simultaneity of styles “metà sublime, e metà bestiale” (*La visita di Mr. Chaff*, in *L'incendiario*, 1910, v. 122) from *Poemi* (1909) onward. In fact, the theme of “follia” is not new to Palazzeschi's poetry; it is present in several works from *Cavalli bianchi* (*La lancia* and *Il pastello del sonno*), and the “saltimbanco” probably derives from Corazzini (cfr. Sergio Corazzini, *Dialogo di marionette* and *Scena comica finale*, in *Libro per la sera della domenica*). A particular phrase reminiscent of the Roman poet is the “penna dell'anima mia” as is the heart-poetry identification:

Il mio cuore è una rossa
macchia di sangue dove
io bagno senza possa
la penna...

(Sergio Corazzini, *Il mio cuore*, in *Dolcezza*, vv. 1-4).

The metaphor of the pen dipped in the poet's own blood, filtered through the sieve of irony and defused of any possible sentimental bent, reappears among Palazzeschi's later memoirs:

Ricordo a tale proposito di averne scritta una [poesia] direttamente col sangue: sì, servendomi di un temperino per aprire una boccettina d'inchiostro, a quel tempo i tappi erano di sughero, mi ferii una mano e tuffando la penna nella piccola ferita scrissi una poesia di otto versi, ce l'ho sempre ma è talmente sbiadita che non si arriva a leggerla in nessun modo, anche perché da ragazzino fui marcatamente anemico ragione per cui non m'è venuto ancora un coccolone dopo quasi un secolo, di quelli che vengono a chi ha il sangue troppo gagliardo, se lo avessi avuto gagliardo anch'io, la poesia sarebbe leggibile ma il suo unico lettore si troverebbe in quell'altro mondo (interview with Aldo Palazzeschi, in Spagnoletti, pp. 68-69).

Even though the verses of *Chi sono?* are the emblem of a distinctive moment in Palazzeschi's poetical evolution, suspended between motives remaining from the old (symbolic-pathetic) and new representative tendencies (ironical-grotesque), it still remains to be said that their attribution *sic et*

simpliciter to the figure of the “saltimbanco-incendiario” seems rather questionable, and has been justified only in part by the strategy of several representatives of the Florentine and Milanese avant-garde (Marinetti and Soffici).

The “articolo-ritratto” that Soffici dedicates to Aldo Palazzeschi, “genio poetico della nostra razza”, in “Voce” of July 17, 1913, is perhaps the essay that has contributed most to this interpretation taking root. According to Soffici, *Chi sono?* serves as a watershed between crepuscular “pastelli” / “acqueforti”, and the futuristic “magnifica efflorescenza” in the creation of an Italian (or rather Tuscan) artistic avant-garde:

il saltimbanco della propria anima artistica, vuol dire in Palazzeschi un’apertura sterminata oltre ogni convenzione, ogni preoccupazione estralirica, ogni ridicolo preconetto didattico, civico, umanistico, tendente a fare del poeta qualcosa di simile ad un apostolo, illuminatore, consolatore e guidatore di popoli. Vecchia misura per la creazione d’infinite gerarchie contrarie a ogni spontanea valutazione di questo fenomeno fatale, disinteressato e solo miracoloso che è la creazione artistica pura.

Face to face with this fact, Soffici wonders “Che cosa è successo”, to justify the “conoscenza di sé e l’ironia” that appear for the first time and in such a direct way in Palazzeschi’s poetry. The poetics of the “saltimbanco della propria anima artistica”, which he considers to be an example of artistic modernism, seems to explain the innovation of this unexpected turning-point toward the comic:

Vuol dire anche affermare implicitamente la vanità di tutti gli ideali, di tutte le serietà, di tutta la vita, di ogni cosa, tranne la gioia dolorosa di sentirlo e di affermare sé stesso almeno cantandolo, o di dimenticarlo mentre si canta. Ironia, ironia, urto convulso di riso per un confronto fra il nostro entusiasmo giovanile e la vanità finale del suo oggetto, tragedia e consolazione del nostro spirito moderno!

But in order to complete his “ritratto”, Soffici must still explain the passage between the melancholic irony of the poet-acrobat (“tragedia e consolazione del nostro spirito moderno”) and the pure divertimento of the poet-arsonist (“una poesia intesa come semplice capriccio, come mera effusione di uno stato lirico, di qualunque specie sia, senza nessuno scopo, senza nessuna ragione, né rapporto coi valori sociali”). To do so, he appeals to the invention of the formula “estetica da clown”, in which “il clown, se e in quanto dilettante, rappresenta meglio di ogni altro la figura dell’artista disinteressato, l’idea del divertimento per il divertimento”. Pointing out an esthetic genre, this label also establishes a hierarchy between the “migliori poeti modernissimi”. In spite of himself, Palazzeschi appears at the top of this pedestal (“è quello fra noi cui si può applicare con ragione l’attributo di futurista”), in virtue of being the only Italian poet (“Fuori di qui s’è tentato qualcosa di simile”) with the “coraggio aristocratico di non offrir più nulla al lettore all’infuori d’immagini chiaramente colorite, di ritmi liberi e di fantasie”, or rather to “tradurre la teoria in fatto artistico”. This portrait-review (which is not shared *in toto* by the poet) has long conditioned the reading of Palazzeschi’s early poetry, fitting it neatly under the banner of poetry as playfulness, pure divertimento.

However, the structure of the works in the *Poesie* (1930) edition as well as the poem-program *Chi sono?*, reprinted as the opening of the collection, appear to shake this interpretation at its foundation, offering us a new key to understanding the poet’s “piccole corbellerie”. His heart and his art have become subjects of study, and we find ourselves face-to-face with a cadaver in a virtual dissection laboratory. Our poet has long withdrawn from the “gente” in an attempt to conserve his purity and autonomy (“stanco della vita mondana, / non sognò che una mèta: / la vita tranquilla. / E si ritirò / in una sua bellissima villa / in Toscana”: *Postille*, vv. 2-7), but finally, our poet wearies of his continual fleeing and makes his body and heart available to all in his castle-tomb. Even though he has espoused voluntary exile, to be buried alive in an inaccessible place is certainly a bizarre “mèta” (the metamorphosis has been caused by a magnifying glass), and it induces a resentful

reaction on the part of the “gente”, who immediately attribute the poet’s behavior to folly: “*Quale insperata mèta! / Un manicomio sì grande / per sì piccolo poeta!*” (vv. 75-77). It is clear, then, that his choice is not painless: retreating to a villa means putting the spotlight on himself and opening his heart for examination: “prima della parola: *sepolto*, / là fuori, c’è scritto: *qui vive*, non giace” (vv. 136-137).

The “lente” that the poet places “davanti al suo cuore / per farlo vedere alla gente” acts as a powerful magnifying glass, making manifest everything that before was hidden and inaccessible, like the “microscopico paese” *Rio Bo*, “paese da nulla, ma però...” (v. 7). However, focusing too directly on an object can also cause it to catch fire and burn. Magnifying an object “per farlo vedere alla gente” also implies distorting it, making it unrecognizable. Various types of ‘lenses’ are at work in *Poesie*, and they can all be traced back to the “lente” of *Chi sono?*. A powerful lens like the one that allows us to discover the “microscopico paese” in *Rio Bo* can also be found in the “canocchiale” spoken of in *Città del Sole mio*: “La città voi non la potete vedere, / ci vuole il mio canocchiale” (vv. 21-22). This city’s “strano sole” is none other than a variation of the poet’s “cuore/core” and guards a secret which is within *his* reach alone. Still, just as any other lens, even a telescope warps the view of an object in its attempt to bridge the gap between them. Revelatory tension is thus mortified by the imperfection of the study device and the passage that was opened, the “finestra”, swings shut once again (“E ora potete andare, / io chiudo la finestra / e vado a riposare”, vv. 164-166). However, it has in the meantime given us a glimpse of the complex and versatile nature of the poet’s intimate self.

An instrument similar to the telescope, although less powerful, is “la lente / dell’occhialino” in the hands of the lady at the theatre who observes the protagonist of *Assolto*, an *alter ego* of the poet-arsonist that has been released from his house-prison because of a “mancanza assoluta di prove”. Under the keen regard of the ‘telescopic lens’, the poet, who has tired of ‘fleeing’, begins to show off and “Esibirsi; senza misura / generosamente” (vv. 31-32). Like the lady at the theater, the poet is

simply “un umile spettatore” when the play begins, but “negli antratti” (pauses between one act and another) he returns to his previous “professione” where he is “un poco attore” (not only professionally, but in the etymological sense). Almost as if he wishes to point out the supremacy of life over literature, of life lived over life imagined, the poet makes this observation: “(Postille al frontespizio / del libro che non scrissi / dell’ultimo poema / che solamente vissi)” (vv. 78-81). He knows well that these are only simple marginal notes, written on the edge of real life, and therefore ultimately incapable of expressing and communicating his identity (“tradurre in arte la vita, di trasferirla in parole”, cfr. Tellini, p. 26).

This anxiousness to tell of (and to know) himself reaches its acme in the poem *Monastero di Maria Riparatrice*, in which the poet compares his artistic vocation with the ‘profession’ of nuns in a holy order. A parallel study of the two different characters brings out Palazzeschi’s desire to ‘unravel the mystery’ and reveal himself and his different sexual orientation (or “senso inverso”): “due gomitoli siamo noi, / sorelle velate, / soltanto che tiriamo in senso inverso, / io mi sdipano, voi v’adipanate” (vv. 192-195).

Besides the obvious biographical link to Palazzeschi’s real theatrical experience, the figure of poet-acrobat is also connected to the image of a modern *homo viator* pursuing happiness, or a new Diogenes on a quest to find himself: “Un poeta quando è stanco / cambia castello: / piglia sulle spalle il suo fardello / come un qualunque saltimbanco” (*Quando cambiai castello*, vv.1-4). The acrobat’s numerous *performances* and continuous wandering about clearly manifest this strain to know and express himself. He is even willing, if need be, to give up his crepuscular poet’s toolbox – the objects and tools of his workshop (“Non sogno più castelli rovinati”, *Una casina di cristallo*, v. 1) – in the attempt to reveal (make “tutta trasparente: / di cristallo”, vv. 35-46) his identity and the secret of his art.

Under the magnifying ‘glass’, focused on the poet’s “cuore” “per farlo vedere alla gente”, lies hidden the bitter secret of Palazzeschi’s divertimento. His “piccola arte” revolves around the

disclosure (diversion, “di-vertimento”) of his “cuore”: an apparently cynical and sadistic operation that he effects through the *Poesie* in the secret, unconfessed urgency to ultimately encounter someone or something that understands.

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