

## Punchinello or 'on ambiguity' by Renzo Carli\*

### 1 – Introduction

The relationship with emotionally symbolized “objects” underlying our relation with reality has connotations of ambiguity<sup>1</sup>: a difficult daily mixture of emotions that lead us to experience the other as friend and *at the same time* as foe; as strong and *at the same time* weak; as belonging within us, and *at the same time* as extraneous, outside us. We could go on and on.

Ambiguity, or rather what emotionally corresponds to what we call ambiguity, is the original mode in which the mind's unconscious mode experiences the relationship. Friend and foe, outside and inside, powerful and weak, present and absent are, after all, descriptive categories that help us to talk, albeit in an approximate way, about emotional events that we are “forced” to communicate, even in this paper, through language. They are definitions, already organized and emotionally oriented, of what is experienced in the “logic of the emotions”<sup>2</sup>, far removed from the logic that organizes language and gives it intention. The original ambiguity can induce anxiety; it justifies the propensity to “dissolve”, in one way or another, the ambiguous and therefore emotionally non-defined relationship with objects. Emotional acting out serves the purpose: when emotions are acted out, the object to which the acting out is addressed univocally becomes “friend” or “foe”, if the original ambivalence concerns this primitive symbolization pattern. The dissolving of the ambiguity and the emotional acting out are temporally synchronic: there is no dissolution of ambiguity without emotional acting out; emotional acting out always entails a dissolution of ambiguity inherent to the symbolization of the object to which the acting out is addressed. If however the emotionally ambiguous symbolization is “thought”, then it is possible to elaborate an original ambiguity, and see its motivations, unravel its contradictions, construct a “dividing” idea which creates links between the various aspects of the originally ambiguous object.

Accordingly, it can be said that the mind's unconscious mode is manifested through emotional ambiguity, in the sense of an indefinite, contradictory emotional configuration of the objects one relates to. It is acting out, on the one hand, and on the other the thought that organizes and preludes to action, which lead to the emotional definition of objects and therefore to an organized relationship with them. It should also be remembered that original ambiguity is a resource for our knowledge of the object reality, for a non-stereotyped adaptation that can relate to the ambiguous, and thus extraneous, object. Dissolving the ambiguity means transforming the object into an emotionally defined interlocutor, but at the cost of losing the possibility of exchanging with the

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<sup>1</sup> I use this word instead of “ambivalence”, which is the term most often used to indicate such a form of emotional relationship with objects in the reality external to us; I feel, in fact, that in its true meaning ambivalence already indicates how to “solve” ambiguity. I am talking about the infinite set of emotions that Matte Blanco called “bags of symmetry” and that correspond to the polysemy which the object is originally filled with: an object that is still confused with our inner world and which, in order to acquire a “realistic” connotation, needs to see the ambiguity resolved by being emotionally connoted in more definite emotional patterns, such as the *friend-foe*, or the *inside-outside* schema, or others with a similar function.

<sup>2</sup> The mind's unconscious mode of being is, in the words of Matte Blanco (1975), homogeneous and indivisible; it differs from the mind's mode of being that we use for thinking, talking, perceiving and giving meaning to the objects of reality, which the Author calls heterogenic and dividing. The latter has the role of establishing relations between objects, while the mind's unconscious mode of being fuses objects, in broader and broader *classes of generalization*; at the same time it destructures the asymmetries of the relation, to form *classes of symmetry* where all differences disappear along with all relations between differences. While the heterogenic and dividing mode can separate and distinguish between different aspects of reality, the simultaneous active presence of the mode of being homogeneous and indivisible gives the same aspects of reality a confused emotional connotation, which for instance connotes a specific object as “friend” and at the same time as “foe”.

extraneous. Dissolving the ambiguity means transforming the extraneous into an object that can be possessed, so there is a shift from exchange to possession<sup>3</sup>.

Tolerating the original ambiguity, associated with the objects of the relationship, is difficult. It entails the non-resolution of the object's emotional indefiniteness, it therefore entails the capacity to establish relations with objects that have no definite configuration, from the emotional point of view, as "good" or "bad", as "friend" or "foe". The ritual components of cultures can be seen as ways of dissolving ambiguity in a reassuring style, channelled into common forms of relation, such as the 'friend' relationship. The difficulty of tolerating ambiguity is well-known in the psychoanalytically oriented psychotherapy relationship, where the analyst's silence may be hard to accept for the patient who right from the outset of the relationship *wants* to place the psychotherapist in the friend-foe pattern. The eroticization of the relationship, for example, can be a way of emotionally dissolving the ambiguity of the object in psychotherapy. In an interpretation using the categories under study, psychotherapy can be seen as the story of the different ways of dissolving ambiguity, acted out in the analytical relationship. But also the daily experience of each of us in relating socially can be read through the categorization of the various ways of dissolving ambiguity encountered in our usual relationships. The rules of the game in relationships, the social roles, the configurations of power in relationships, the categories of knowledge of the other, are all modes designed to dissolve emotional ambiguity in a reasonably stable way, *inevitable* in any experience of relating. If for instance, ambiguity is dissolved with a friend-foe type reading, then one can relate to the extraneous other, source of ambiguity, using modalities of attack-flight, of dependency or of coupling, to use the Bion's basic assumptions model. If on the other hand one tolerates the original ambiguity of the other, one can go through an experience of exchange where the dissolution of ambiguity will gradually become the outcome elaborated in the exchange itself. Think for instance of the ambiguous relationship with food in a country extraneous to us, like India. There are people who dissolve the ambiguity towards unknown food with a simple, repetitive category: spicy means foe. Hence the search for food that is "not spicy" in the homeland of spices. Hence also the impossibility of knowing a complex and variegated culinary universe, with the sole objective of avoiding an aspect of estrangement (the use of spices, the flavour of spices) symbolized as foe. These processes of drastic and pragmatically violent reduction of ambiguity, on the other hand, are present in the daily experience of social relations in all cultures; so much so, that it makes the acceptance of ambiguity, the tolerance of it in a relationship, seem *utopian*.

In this article I want to explore the figure of Punchinello drawn by Domenico Tiepolo, as the artistic expression of ambiguity which characterizes the mind's unconscious mode of being.

I think Domenico Tiepolo's Punchinello figures are in fact emotionally undefined "objects", capable of representing the ambiguity, the emotional indefiniteness typical of the unconscious. I also think that many works of art can be seen as attempts to give emotional ambiguity a clear and explicit emotional dissolution; many others, instead, can represent the expression of ambiguity which has the effect in the viewer of suspending the participation in the emotional dichotomies of friend-foe, in-out, above-below, front-back, i.e. in the emotional dichotomies behind the most primitive dissolutions of ambiguity. Examples of the first function attributed to art can be found in works of religious divulgation, such as the frescoes on the walls of the cathedral of San Geminiano conceived to spread the knowledge of the new and old testaments to the faithful. But also the "didactic" and predicatory works of a certain type of contemporary art: just to take one example, garbage put up as an object to contemplate and meditate on. Examples of the second function are found in artworks that do not provide an explicit or implicit emotional resolution, such as abstract art at its best, as in a Kandinskij and a Mondrian, in Malevich's suprematism, but also in Arman's *nouveau réalisme* with his *assemblages* of broken violins, paintbrushes, clocks or tubes of paint. This is the Arman dear to Umberto Eco, who says that he "transforms the monody of the identical into the symphony of the heterogeneous"<sup>4</sup>.

2 – *Divertimento per li ragazzi* by Domenico Tiepolo

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<sup>3</sup> On this see: Carli, R. & Panizza R.M. (2003), *Analisi della domanda: Teoria e tecnica dell'intervento in psicologia clinica*. Bologna, Il Mulino.

<sup>4</sup> Eco U. (2005), *Arman e l'elenco*, <http://espresso.repubblica.it/dettaglio-archivio/1166852>

Giovanni Domenico Tiepolo (1727 – 1804) was the gifted son of the more famous Gianbattista Tiepolo (1690 – 1770), who was a painter of canvases and frescoes and a refined engraver, the high point in the great Venetian painting of the 1700s. Famous all over Europe, Giambattista painted in Venice, Milan, Würzburg and Madrid, where he is buried. But let us get back to Domenico. He often accompanied his father, along with his brother Lorenzo, as an invaluable assistant in his painting. He can be said to have lived in his father's shadow. Few of his own paintings are known: an important one is the *via Crucis* which can still be seen at the *Oratorio del Crocefisso*, next to the church of San Polo in Venice. With great attention to the details of everyday life, he painted fine scenes of life in drawings and engravings of various subjects. At the age of seventy he began a work that can still be called "strange" both due to the subject it represents and to the dedication. This work took up the last seven years of his life, until his death. It consists of a hundred and four watercolours about the life of Punchinello. In 1921, at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, Domenico's work was broken up and the drawings were sold separately. Adelheid Gealt brought together the reproductions of seventy-seven of the one hundred and four sheets, with an interesting, detailed commentary in the book "Domenico Tiepolo – The Punchinello drawings"<sup>5</sup>.

The figure of Punchinello was much in evidence in 18th century Venice; Venice, the city of masks, where Carnival lasted six months, where many people went out in costume to preserve their privacy; where intrigue and disguise exerted a strange, ambiguous fascination over the Venetians and the numerous *foresti* (outsiders) who populated the city. Punchinello, on the other hand, was not a "mask" like the others. Hetty Paerl<sup>6</sup>, in her interesting book on the mask that under different names is found all over Europe, traces its origins by going back to a traditional Neapolitan story: Punchinello is dancing happily when he meets a hen, Cicerenella. Punchinello seduces her and mounts her, then roasts her and is about to eat her. Along comes Chirichichiò, the cock, who recognises his loved one and wants to avenge her miserable end. He calls his friend Farfariello (which in Neapolitan is the devil), who works a "diabolic trick" on the guilty Punchinello. When Punchinello eats the hen Cicerenella, his stomach swells beyond all belief. The doctor who comes running, frees from under Punchinello's shirt a great egg which Punchinello broods. The egg hatches and out comes a *Pulcinellino* (a small Punchinello), then another... until there are five, which, as soon as they are out of the egg, already dressed and identical in appearance to their father (who is at the same time their mother) hungrily attack a dish of macaroni. In Venice, the macaroni become gnocchi. The tall cut-off cone of the Venetian Punchinello's hat is simply the pot to cook the gnocchi in, turned upside-down and worn as a head-covering, always ready in case of need.

Punchinello generates Punchinello, and is both father and mother; he generates him by mounting a hen and then eating her. What Hetty Paerl calls "the upside-down world", in commenting on this legend of Punchinello's birth, seems to be the representation of the symmetry of the mind's unconscious mode of being.

Punchinello, as we said, is a character found in the popular traditions of many countries: he is the English Punch, the French Polichinelle, the Spanish Don Cristobal, the Russina Petruska, the Turkish Karaghoz, as Paerl reminds us.

The figure of this mask, its origins, the events of its life, allude to a world that we could call oneiric, where the laws of generalization and symmetry rule, where the elements that are described in language retain the emotional connotations of an ambiguity<sup>7</sup> that is disconcerting or, to use Freud's word, perturbing.

### 3 – The 'Mondo Novo'

Punchinello also appears, among other works by Domenico, in *Mondo Novo*.

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<sup>5</sup> Gealt, A. (1986). *Domenico Tiepolo. The Punchinello Drawings*, George Braziller Inc., N.Y.

<sup>6</sup> Paerl H. (2002). *Punchinello. Het mysterieuze masker van de Europese cultuur [Punchinello. The mysterious mask of the European culture]*. Theater Instituut Nederland, Amsterdam.

<sup>7</sup> The new world.



Fig. 1 – ‘Mondo Novo’. Image taken from the site: Web Gallery of Arts; <http://www.wga.hu>

This is a fresco that Domenico painted for himself on the walls of his villa at Zianigo. It shows a group of people seen from behind, intent on reaching an outbuilding where, through a gap, the model of something can be seen, a city, an optical illusion, perhaps one of the first examples of diorama. The characters are strange: a giant woman, who also appears in one of his Punchinello drawings, at the circus<sup>8</sup>; a gentleman in profile, with the haughty expression deriving from his rank, men and women lost in curiosity about the machine, a Punchinello on the left. They are characters that seem destined for nothing, for the vacuum of the unknown embodied in a distorting artefact. They turn their backs on the observer, on the painter creating them, on the real, on their own reality. It reminds one of Brueghel's blind, at Capodimonte; but here the sarcastic grotesque is transformed into irony, in the irony of seeking the “new world” in the machine and not seeing it all around one.

The fresco was painted and signed in 1791. Soon afterwards the *Serenissima* would fall, with no hope of return. On 12th May 1797 Napoleon's troops entered Venice. The Doge Ludovico Manin was forced to abdicate, the Great Council was dissolved and under the aegis of Napoleon Bonaparte, the Provisional Government of the Municipality of Venice was proclaimed.

The end of the *Serenissima* meant the end of a world, of a conception of the world. Another would be born: the ‘Mondo Novo’ (the new world)..

*Mondo Novo* symbolically represents the unawareness with which the Venetians moved towards the decline and fall of an institution, the *Repubblica Serenissima*, which had evolved over more than a thousand years. Here the theme is the repetitiveness that denies historical time, that ignores impending tragic events.

#### 4 – The resolution of ambiguity in art

In the Punchinellos, however, Domenico seems to use the mask that covers emotions, that “masks” all emotional response to the context, to illustrate a world without time and without a structural organization of events. We know the importance of the emotional connotation of the representation of figures.

Let us look at three examples that we can consider “extreme” modes of an emotional connotation of the representation of figures. These are three works by Quentin Metsys (or Massys, or Matsys) , a Flemish painter working between the 1400 and 1500s.

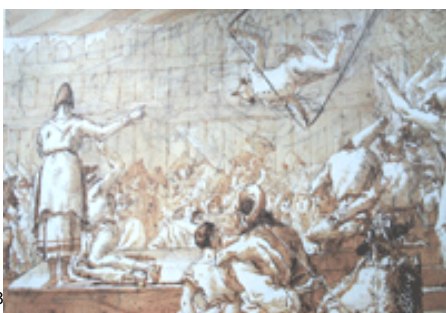


fig. 31 of *Divertimento*: Punchinello the trapeze artist

Here the figures are not masked and the emotions they intend to arouse, at least in an immediate, superficial response, are clear. The ambiguity has been resolved in the first two examples with the *ugliness* of the Duchess in the National Gallery or with the expression of *angry violence* of the *Ecce Homo* in the Palazzo Ducale.



Fig. 2 – The ugly Duchess, National Gallery, London (1525-30). The image is taken from the site: Web Gallery of Arts; <http://www.wga.hu>

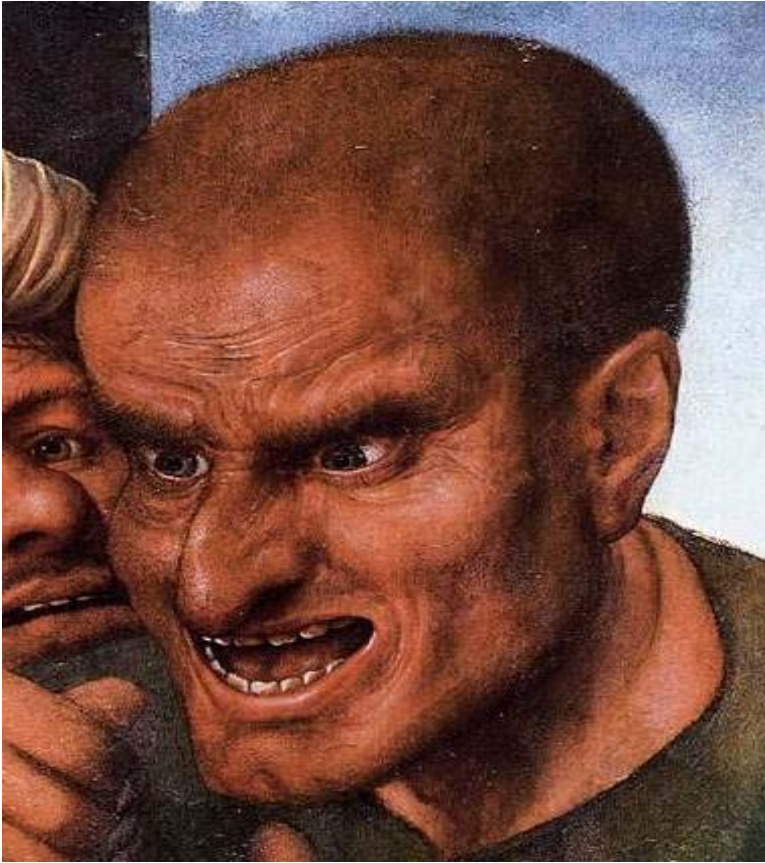


Fig. 3 - Ecce Homo, Palazzo Ducale, Venice (1526) detail. The image is taken from the site: Web Gallery of Arts; <http://www.wga.hu>

Let us see, in the third example, the portrait that Metsys made of Erasmus of Rotterdam in 1517; a portrait that was supposed to be sent to Thomas More, Erasmus's great friend and fellow constructor of utopia. On this point, I will give the interesting dedication that Erasmus addressed to More in "Praise of Folly":

*PRAISE OF FOLLY*<sup>9</sup>

*PREFACE: ERASMUS OF ROTTERDAM TO HIS FRIEND THOMAS MORE*

*During my recent journey back from Italy to England, not wishing to waste all the time I was obliged to be on horseback on 'idle gossip' and small talk, I preferred to spend some of it thinking over some topic connected with our common interests or else enjoying the recollection of the friends, as learned as they are delightful whom I had left there in England. <sup>1</sup> You were amongst the first of these to spring to mind, my dear More. I have always enjoyed my memories of you when we have been parted from each other as much as your company when we were together, and I swear that nothing has brought me more pleasure in life than companionship like yours. And so since I felt that there must be something I could do about this and the time was hardly suitable for serious meditation, I decided to amuse myself with praise of folly.*

*What sort of a goddess Athene put that notion into your head, you may well ask. In the first place, it was your own family name of More, which is as near to the Greek word for folly, moria, as you are far from it in fact, and everyone agrees that you couldn't be farther removed. Then I had an idea that no one would think so well of this jeu d'esprit of mine as you, because you always take such delight in jokes of this kind, that is, if I don't flatter myself, those which aren't lacking in learning and wit. In fact you like to play the part of a Democritus in the mortal life we all share. Your intelligence is too penetrating and original for you not to hold opinions very different from those of the ordinary man, but your manners are so friendly and pleasant that you have the rare gift of getting on well with all men at any time, and enjoying it.*

*I am sure then that you will gladly accept this little declamation of mine as a 'memento' of your friend and will also undertake to defend it. It is dedicated to you, so henceforth it is yours, not mine.<sup>4</sup> There may well be*

<sup>9</sup> This translation first published 1971 / Translation copyright © Betty Radice, 1971. Penguin Classics London 1971 (a cura di A.H.T. Levi).

plenty of critical folk rushing in to slander it, some saying that my bit of nonsense is too frivolous for a theologian and others that it has a sarcastic bite which ill becomes Christian decorum. They will clamour that I'm reviving Old Comedy or Lucian, carping and complaining about everything. Well, those who are offended by frivolity and fun in a thesis may kindly consider that mine is not the first example of this; the same thing has often been done by famous authors in the past. Homer amused himself ages ago with his 'Battle of Frogs and Mice', Virgil with his Gnat and Garlic Salad, Ovid with his Nut. Polycrates wrote a mock eulogy of the tyrant Busiris and so did his critic Isocrates; Glaucō spoke in favour of injustice and Favorinus of Thersites and the quartan fever; Synesius praised baldness and Lucian the Fly and the Parasite. Seneca was joking in his 'Apotheosis' of the Emperor Claudius, as Plutarch was in his dialogue between Gryllus and Ulysses. Lucian and Apuleius both wrote in fun about an ass, and someone whose name escapes me about the last will and testament of the piglet Grunnius Corocotta: this is mentioned by St. Jerome.

If they want they can imagine I've been amusing myself all this time with a game of draughts, or riding my stick if they like that better.<sup>6</sup> How unjust it is to allow every other walk of life its relaxations but none at all to learning), especially when trifling may lead to something more serious! Jokes can be handled in such a way that any reader who is not altogether lacking in discernment can scent something far more rewarding in them than in the crabbed and specious arguments of some people we know - when, for example, one of them endlessly sings the praises of rhetoric or philosophy in a botched-up oration, another eulogizes some prince, and a third sets out to stir up war against the Turks. Another man foretells the future, and yet another invents a new set of silly points for discussion about goat's wool.<sup>7</sup> Nothing is so trivial as treating serious subjects in a trivial manner; and similarly, nothing is more entertaining than treating trivialities in such a way as to make it clear you are doing anything but trifle with them. The world will pass its own judgement on me, but unless my 'self-love' entirely deceives me, my praise of folly has not been altogether foolish.

Now for the charge of biting sarcasm. My answer is that the intelligent have always enjoyed freedom to exercise their wit on the common life of man, and with impunity, provided that they kept their liberty within reasonable limits. This makes me marvel all the more at the sensitivity of present-day ears which can bear to hear practically nothing but honorific titles. Moreover, you can find a good many people whose religious sense is so distorted that they find the most serious blasphemies against Christ more bearable than the slightest joke on pope or prince, especially if it 'touches their daily bread'.<sup>9</sup> And to criticize men's lives without mentioning any names - I ask you, does this look like sarcasm, or rather warning and advice?

Again, on how many charges am I not my own self-critic? Furthermore, if every type of man is included, it is clear that all the vices are censured, not any individual. And so anyone who protests that he is injured betrays his own guilty conscience, or at any rate his apprehensions. St. Jerome amused himself in this way with far more freedom and sarcasm, sometimes even mentioning names, I have not only refrained from naming anyone but have also moderated my style so that the sensible reader will easily understand that my intention was to give pleasure, not pain. Nowhere have I stirred up the hidden cesspool of crime as Juvenal did; the ridiculous rather than the squalid was what I set out to survey. Finally, if anyone is still unappeased by all I have said, he should at least remember that there is merit in being attacked by Folly, for when I made her the narrator I had to maintain her character in appropriate style.<sup>10</sup>

But why do I say all this to you, an advocate without peer for giving your best service to causes even when they are not the best? Farewell, learned More; be a stout champion to your namesake Folly.

From the country, 9 June 1508

This is evidence of a relationship between cultured people full of humanistic interests, intelligent, capable people, good people, where goodness springs from ironic competence. The portrait of Erasmus, painted by Metsys, proves to be most effective in dealing with the task. Equilibrium and serenity, goodness of soul and shrewdness, depth of spirit and courage that come from competence and knowledge, seem to be fused in the gaze of Erasmus and in the context of which the humanist is part. The setting is one of frugality and of books, which reminds us of similar places found in painting: San Gerolamo in his study, by Antonello, at the National Gallery; Saint Augustine in the study, by Carpaccio, in the *Scuola di San Giorgio agli Schiavoni* in Venice; and again San Gerolamo in his study, by Colantonio, at Capodimonte. All these paintings leave no space for ambiguity, but arouse a specific emotion, intense and calm at the same time.



Fig. 4 – Erasmus of Rotterdam, Palazzo Barberini, Rome (1517). The image is taken from the site: Web Gallery of Arts; <http://www.wga.hu>

### 5 – PUNCHINELLO AND AMBIGUITY

Let us return to our Punchinello and to Domenico Tiepolo. Here ambiguity reigns supreme, and this effect is obtained with a precise, repeated technique, used by Domenico to give his drawings an atmosphere of suspended emotion that is at the same time perturbing.

All this is found in some statements and opinions reported by the greatest scholar of Domenico's Punchinello, Adelheid Gealt, in her introduction to "The Punchinello drawings". Let us look at them together:

*"he is simultaneously an ordinary and an extraordinary character"*

*"he seems to be fundamentally human, although he lets himself go in bizarre excesses"*

*"the character approaches reality, but he never reproduces it exactly"*

*"things happen that are similar and at the same time so different from here with us ..."*

Punchinello's world: *"so different from ours and at the same time so familiar"*

*"it's almost impossible to reconstruct the order things happen in the story"*<sup>10</sup>

*"Domenico managed to create one of his greatest paradoxes, since every drawing is so specific that it completely absorbs our attention, and at the same time it eludes us"*

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<sup>10</sup> All these quotations are on p.15 *op. cit.*

“... all the Punchinellos look the same, giving us little chance to identify one central character”

“Domenico worked in a period and in a tradition which said that an exact meaning was not always considered necessary and desirable”

“Isn't it possible that Domenico wanted to create more than one plot, letting the viewer consult these loose drawings, changing the order as he likes, so that they could take on a new meaning in every new context? In our zeal to discover a single plot in the narration, have we perhaps neglected the artist's far bolder and more original intention, to let the 'Divertimento' tell an infinite series of stories? We can only make hypotheses, but the series undoubtedly has such potential”<sup>11</sup>

Punchinello: “a mask that is at the same time larger and more humble than a man”<sup>12</sup>

These quotations seem to speak, explicitly and at length, of the characteristics typical of the unconscious system: the unconscious that reminds us of the *coincidentia oppositorum* of Nicola Cusano, the author of *De docta ignorantia*, who says:

“Truth has neither degrees, nor more nor less, and consists of something indivisible. [...] So the intellect, which is not the truth, can never understand it so precisely that it cannot be understood more precisely, *ad infinitum*.”

Gealt's reference to the “infinite” series of stories that can be endlessly re-organized, seems to explicitly recall what is said about the polysemic structure of dreaming, in psychoanalysis.

Perhaps a clearer idea is starting to emerge of what I want to say about Domenico's Punchinellos: they are, in my hypothesis, figures and stories that have not resolved the ambiguity in a particular dimension of the friend-foe pattern. They are representations of the mind's unconscious mode of being. As such they escape from a precise identification and an unequivocal, shared emotional reference.

Reading the quotations, taken from Adelheid Gealt, seems to confirm this assumption: the repetitiveness of the elements, which moreover are never “the same”, recalls the disoriented, confusing emotion aroused for instance by the angels in Duccio's 'Maestà', in the Opera Museum of Siena Cathedral; but also the movement of the spears in Paolo Uccello's 'Battaglia di San Romano at the Uffizi'. In the latter case, the movement of the spears is strangely similar to that of the saucepan-hats in the Punchinello pictures.

Why do the Punchinello drawings recall something that we feel so close to us, and at the same time so distant? Isn't it the same emotion we feel when we remember a dream, even vaguely? Or when we talk about vivid, confused emotions, near and far at the same time?

Let us look at some drawings of Domenico's *Divertimento* (shown with the original numbering):

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<sup>11</sup> All these quotations are on p.16 *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Quotations on p.21 *op. cit.*



Folio 16 of *Divertimento*: Punchinello learns to walk



Folio 76 of *Divertimento*: Punchinello's burial



Folio 30 of *Divertimento*: The leopard's cage

Now, one is struck by some characteristics of these and other drawings in the *Divertimento*: let us look at them together.

The first factor is the high number of Punchinellos present in the drawings, often spread out in a sort of repetitive series where it is the different angles of the saucepan-hat that organize the pattern of figures in the space of the drawing. This is particularly evident in "The leopard's cage", but it can be seen in the other two drawings shown.

The second factor comes from the absence of facial expression; the faces covered by the masks are repeated, the same, in all the Pulchinello figures.

The emotional expressivity relies on the hand and arm gestures of some of the figures. Others seem to be present without a clear emotion with their arms crossed.

In every drawing of the *Divertimento*, there are some Punchinellos that perform "useful" gestures for the meaning of the scene, but there are always other Punchinellos that watch the scene, acting as spectators of themselves, in a sort of taking apart of their own emotional role.

There is a great difference between the emotion expressed by the "human" figures in the drawings, such as the old man on the right of the "burial" (moreover taken from a painting by Domenico's father Giambattista) and the Punchinellos' non-emotion. The latter seem to configure a sort of "*commedia dell'arte*" where the person looking at the scenes is responsible for the emotional resolution of the repetitive gestures that univocally express wonder, before the most varied and emotionally involving situations in the most "humanly" varied ways. It could be said that the Punchinellos' emotional response, their wonder, is essentially the same, whether what is seen is the movements of a large crab, the execution of Punchinello, his hanging, his birth, a courting or the cutting down of a tree, of work in the fields.

To use our language, we could say that Domenico's great "discovery" is that of *not giving a specific, acted out emotional resolution to the ambiguity that permeates all his scenes*. These scenes are at times ironically borrowed from famous paintings by his father ("Punchinello portraitist", which imitates Giambattista's painting 'Alessandro e Campaspe nello studio di Apelle'; 'Il banchetto nuziale' which recalls 'Il banchetto di Antonio e Cleopatra', again by Giambattista). But there are also scenes referring to works by Goya, echoing some figures or anticipating dramatic situations, such as in the drawing "The firing squad".

In his repetitive seriality, Punchinello seems to embody the characteristics of generalization and symmetry that Matte Blanco connects with the mind's unconscious mode. He seems above all to suspend the separation between friend and foe, between good and bad, that organizes the emotional acting out designed to resolve ambiguity. Think for instance of "The firing squad".



Folio 71 of *Divertimento*<sup>13</sup>: The firing squad

We have said that this scene, created by Domenico at the end of the 1700s or the beginning of the 1800s, anticipates Goya's 'Il tre maggio 1808 o Los fusilamientos'.

Domenico seems to have done his drawing as a comment on how Italian patriots were treated by the French during the occupation that began in 1797.

Goya's work, commissioned by the Spanish government, aimed to celebrate the heroic resistance of the population of Madrid against the Napoleonic troops.

The subject seems similar, as were the circumstances that motivated the two artists.

In Domenico's drawing, on the other hand, it is the Punchinellos themselves that shoot Punchinello, and it is a Punchinello who commands the firing squad, in a mirroring of roles. The Punchinellos on the ground, already shot, recall the position of Punchinello full of gnocchi, lying on the ground in a resting position, because the surfeit of food and his swollen stomach prevent him from standing upright. In this respect, see 'The departure of Punchinello', the fresco removed from the Villa at Zianigo, today in the Museum of the Venetian 1700s in Ca' Rezzonico.

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<sup>13</sup> The four drawings were photographed by the Author, from A. Gealt's book in the Italian edition.



Fig. 5 – The departure of Punchinello. Image taken from the site: Web Gallery of Art; <http://www.wga.hu>



Fig. 6 – Goya, Il 3 maggio 1808 o Los fusilamientos. Image taken from the site Web gallery of Art; <http://www.wga.hu>

The scene represented by Goya is quite different, the persecutors and the persecuted being figuratively different, and the emotionality differentiates between those who kill and those who are killed.

We could also talk about the feeling of estrangement aroused in the viewer by Domenico's drawings. Why the title *Divertimento per li regazzi*<sup>14</sup>? Why is there a dedication to the young? Looking closely, in Domenico's scenes there does not seem to be anything very diverting, especially for children or pre-adolescents. What seems "diverting", can be understood if we look at the etymology of the term: *de* indicates 'away from' and *vertere* 'turning'. '*Divertimento*', therefore literally means going somewhere else. Somewhere different from what is represented by "reality", we might say. Enjoying oneself (being diverted) and transgressing have similar etymological origins: going beyond, not taking the straight, obvious road. It is therefore understandable why Domenico talks about *Divertimento*. His Punchinellos are not in the reality where friend and foe are separate, well defined and recognizable, and arouse very different emotions from the original ambiguity. The *Divertimento* contains a seriality, with no order or sense, of "daydreams", of events that are mid-way between knowable dimensions and emotional complexity.

It is certainly not possible to establish an "order" in the episodes shown in the drawings, and the commentators notice this, although they often put it all down to the artist's "strangeness". Strangeness links back to estrangement, to the estrangement that seems to be evoked in the viewer when looking through the drawings.

It comes to mind that Domenico, then nearing the end of his life, and of that of the Serenissima, achieved the *coincidentia oppositorum*, feeling like a young man, detached from divisive heterogenic emotions, from the anxiety of the foe, confusing life and death, joy and sadness, old age and youth. So the '*regazzi*' to whom he dedicates the *Divertimento* are none other than himself, multiplied in as many boys as Puchinello is multiplied in the drawings. The artist feels like an old man who is also a boy, just like Punchinello.

#### 6 – Farewell

I am a clinical psychologist. I am not, and this is obvious, an "art historian".

Being keen on things to look at, I have been greatly struck by Domenico's drawings since I first saw some of them many years ago in an exhibition at the Giorgio Cini Foundation in Venice.

In this paper, I myself decided to present a "divertimento".

I put forward a "psychological" category of interpretation of some artworks. This is done in the hope that the dichotomy of "resolution of emotional ambiguity - suspension of emotional ambiguity" might guide the understanding of the emotional response that some works evoke in the viewer.

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<sup>14</sup> Amusement for the kids.