

Dense figures in Vittore Carpaccio

by **Renzo Carli***

How the unconscious is manifested

The mind's unconscious mode of being is the mental function that organizes our emotional experience; it is the "real psychic reality", as Freud used to say; it can be considered the constructor of our relations with the objects of reality, insofar as it is the modulator of our emotional symbolizations. Relating with objects, starting from the significant figures of our earliest experiences of life through to the complex articulation of social and organizational relations, is mediated by the function of affective symbolization which is the most important element in the mind's unconscious mode of being. The unconscious has its own logic, summed up by Freud in the idea of *primary process* and to which, almost a century later, Matte Blanco returned, putting forward the principles of *generalization* and *symmetry*. The mind's unconscious mode, in a theoretical proposal made by my research group, underlies social relations thanks to the process of *collusion*; collusion organizes unconscious social dynamics, through the emotional sharing of affective symbolizations of objects present in the shared context. In our experience of relating, both the mind's conscious mode and the unconscious mode are constantly active, albeit with different interaction modalities. Broadly speaking, it can be said that dividing thought, which can make "logical" connections between events and objects of reality, corresponds to the mind's conscious mode of being; while emotional thinking, which can synthesize and simplify¹ the real into broad affective categories such as friend/foe, inside/outside, tall/short, in front/behind, corresponds to the mind's unconscious mode of being. More specifically, the unconscious mode tends to expand into broader processes of generalization and symmetrization; it is the conscious mode that can "domesticate" the unconscious dynamic and confine it to more restricted areas, integrating it into one's functioning. Our mind is a "compromise" deriving from the integration of the two modes of being.

What we are interested in studying in this article is the double presence, in language, of dividing thought and unconscious thought. Usually we think of language as the overcoming of the mind's unconscious mode, in that the linguistic construction is based on "dividing" and "heterogenic" axioms *par excellence*, in a construction that would seem to be essentially designed to establish relations. It should be pointed out, on the other hand, that language was used by Freud as the basic element for the analysis of dreams, the analysis of Freudian slips, of the psychopathology of daily life and more generally, for carrying out psychoanalysis. The practice of psychoanalytical treatment, defined by Franco Fornari as "a word thing", is therefore closely connected to language. This seems to be an interesting tangle of concepts. On the one hand language is presented as the tool *par excellence* for establishing relations: it therefore belongs to the mind's heterogenic-dividing mode of being, to use Matte Blanco's terms. On the other, it is through language that one can approach the unconscious: we do not directly know dreams for instance, not even "our" dreams, but we can know them and analyse them only with the mediation of language.

An example, taken from an event recounted in psychotherapy, may make this issue clearer: a woman with serious bulimia problems, obese from the clinical medical point of view, tells about an unpleasant episode that happened to her. A flashback will enable us to understand the event: thanks to their great sacrifices, the woman and her husband had managed to buy back from a government body the house where they had been living for many years in the old centre of a town in Lazio. She is happy to have contributed to this "feat", which is important for herself and her husband considering their precarious economic situation, due to very low wages and the constantly

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¹ We stress the imprecision of these terms: simplification or synthesis are part of dividing thought, therefore of the "scientific" consciousness. For the unconscious mode of being, reality is simple "in itself", tending to be dichotomous, based on emotional dichotomies of the friend-foe kind. Manicheism can be seen as a way of construing the real, tending to be organized by unconscious thought.

rising cost of living. The woman invites relatives and friends for a drink to celebrate the event. A nephew comes up to her and says, smiling, "Aunty, now you're rich you'll have to make a will and leave something to all us relatives". The woman is seized by a sudden anger towards her nephew, a very strong, uncontrollable anger which triggers one of her usual attacks of gorging. Talking about the episode during a psychotherapy session, she appears to be indignant, offended and angry about her nephew's unpleasant, rude remark. She gets even angrier when she is told that her nephew probably wanted, in a good-humoured way, to underline the "wealth" she had achieved by buying the house; a wealth that "deserved" a will, a new idea for her seeing that up to then she had never had any material possessions to "hand down". The ironic sense of the "guilty" comment was clear to the onlookers, even at the time of the episode, says the woman bitterly; and her own violent reaction seemed incongruous to her, at least to a "part" of her.

Let us look at the possible reasons for the rage. One factor could be the nephew's unfortunate expression, talking about the will and therefore about death. However, this would not justify such a degree of rage, but rather a rebuke such as "What are you talking about?!". No, rage in the "infinite" sense can only be understood if we look at the emotional elaboration of specific "stimulations". The comment, in its narrative sense, does not justify the anger. But if we look at the two words loaded with emotional meaning "will" and "leave", perhaps we can get closer to the meaning of the emotionally intense reaction. 'Will' (or 'testament') refers to a document drawn up before witnesses who attest (from the Latin verb *testari*), and therefore to a document that will be valid after death. 'Leave' [in Italian 'lasciare' from the Latin *laxus* (relaxed, loosened)], refers to losing, not being able to hold onto, as for instance when the sphincters are loosened. In buying the house, the woman has just made a purchase, and she finds herself having to face the fear of loss, and of *dying in the loss*; this losing is seen as having to leave it to others; hence the anger and the compulsive need to "put in" food, as an apotropaic act designed to ward off loss by acquiring. But fear of loss is also "fear of losing weight" or of losing parts of her body, seeing that the house can be symbolized as the enveloping body. The two emotionally dense words² evoke an emotional response that has nothing to do with the meaning of the comment uttered by the nephew, but instead is connected to the fantasies the woman associates with the two emotionally significant words. This reconstruction is possible if the nephew's remark is treated like a dream, listening to the woman's reaction as she talks about her anger and the feelings evoked by the comment, as if they were connected to a dream episode. This dream episode is organized as phantasmic emotionality evoked by the emotionally dense words in the nephew's comment. The woman's associations have in fact been polarized on the two words remembered. These words have been transformed into a forced, duty-bound relationship where the nephew plays the role of all those who disapprove of the woman's obesity and want to force her to lose weight, to lose a part of herself, to let go of what she possesses to become attractive again and to let herself be possessed by others, particularly her husband. The woman's obesity began when the man with whom for many years she had had a clandestine relationship, made her his wife. During the illicit relationship, the woman experienced her own beauty as a seductive power, therefore as the power to keep the man she was having the affair with. When they got married, the woman experienced a profound change in symbolizing her affective sexual relationship with her husband: from an active seductiveness that was always new, the woman felt she had been plunged into conjugal duty, a sort of obligation to satisfy her husband's desire. Hence the fantasy of a relationship in which seductive activity (from the Latin *secum ducere*, leading with oneself) was transformed into the passivity of letting herself be possessed. Hence the defensive response of gorging as if "holding" within her, as the opposite response to feeling that she was "losing" parts of herself, in letting herself be possessed. The calls to lose weight, real or metaphorical like the one made by the nephew with the joking request for a Will, are seen by our woman as invitations to promptly accept the passivity to which marriage "condemns" the woman. Hence the anger and the defensive response of gorging. Without an analysis of the relationship with her partner and with family members and friends, and without an analysis of the emotional symbolizations that these

² The term "dense words" has been proposed within a theory of the technique aimed at Emotional Text Analysis (AET). See in this respect: Carli R. & Paniccia R.M. (2002). *L'analisi emozionale del testo. Uno strumento psicologico per leggere testi e discorsi* [Emotional text analysis: an instrument for reading texts and speaking]. Milano: FrancoAngeli.

relationships entail, it is difficult to grasp the sense of the problem presented by the woman in psychotherapy when she tells her story of the event.

More generally, one can think of language as of a compromise between unconscious emotional dynamics and construction of a linguistic whole that can convey a sense of one's emotions, that is comprehensible to others too. Words, as an expression of emotions, for instance, are typical of connotative language, while words organised in meaningful constructions are typical of denotative language, and therefore of a process of narrative communication. With words one can communicate idiosyncratic personal emotions, deriving from an experience that is incommunicable to others and not clear even to oneself; this can happen with language, like any other behavior, such as anger or joy. With words one can convey narrations, again connected to one's emotions; but here the emotions are associated with a construct of events, with a report, with a meaningful story that can evoke agreement on the link between the events recounted and the emotions connected to them. Language has these two functions, in its relation with the emotions. On the one hand, in narration, it assumes the status of a story that can be socially shared, in order to evoke consensual emotions, consistent with the structure of the narration; on the other, with single dense words, it has the power to spread emotions, to evoke associations and symbolic polysemous universes in a transmission of emotions that show their efficacy separately from the structure of the story being narrated.

An example of what has been said can be found in many texts, not only of a literary nature, but also simple communicative texts. One of the many possible examples was found by chance on the internet in a blog about insects.

"A few days ago as I was strolling in a field looking for unusual insects to photograph, I came across a mantis that I had seen very occasionally in photos but that I had never thought was found in Italy, and in particular in my area. This is what happened: I called this piece of land a field out of kindness, as it was actually a dry wasteland with wild vegetation, totally uncultivated, dominated at this time of the year by the dry sticks of the plants from the previous year. In years of searching, I have learnt to notice movements in the vegetation not caused by the wind. A jerk, an over-long or over-regular vibration in an area that is otherwise immobile, inevitably draw my attention. While I was "rooting around" in a big tussock of grass from which shot out a woody, almost dry stick from a previous flowering, I felt a strange sense of *disquiet*³, I felt that something was wrong. Raising my eyes I saw in front of me a pile of twigs "looking" at me in a *threatening* way, swinging to and fro. I did not understand at first, I am allergic to pollens so every time I am in a field my eyes water, making my vision hazy. I rubbed my eyes with a handkerchief and looked again and realised that the "thing" was still there. On looking closer I understood that it was a mantis and although it rang a bell in a far corner of my memory, it did not make me think of the appropriate scientific name. After getting the *alien* into a small container, I raced home, as happy as a child on Christmas Eve⁴."

This is the tale of an unusual, interesting meeting with a mantis among the blades of grass in a field. It is a story which highlights the interest in the insect, the unusualness of the encounter, which the narrator considers "rare" and lucky, the mix-up of the sticks and the mantis, due to the mantis's skill at camouflage, through to the realization of the truth and the catching of the mantis, an almost predatory taking possession like that practised by the mantis. But also the happiness, the not believing his eyes, the euphoria aroused by the encounter. It is a set of emotions that altogether denote ambiguity⁵. If on the other hand we look at the dense words, we see the sequence: *disquiet* – *threatening* – the "thing" was still there – mantis – alien. This series of dense words can associate the mantis with a danger, a threat, a presence that is looming and disturbing because it is unknown. This emotional dynamic evoked by the mantis is only partly present in the story that is shared in the blog, but it is clearly evident in the sequence of dense words running through the narration.

The stereotyped beliefs about the insect spring to mind, such as the bad end its partner meets in the sexual act, the female's cruelty, designed to guarantee the reproduction of the species, the sense of "strangeness" due to the fact that the mantis so closely resembles man, the aggressive, cruel side of the human species. The resemblance is also in the mantis's shape: unlike other

³ The italics are mine, and serve to point out the dense words in the text.

⁴ http://www.amiciinsoliti.it/artropodi/mantidi/e_pennata.html

⁵ For more details on emotional ambiguity, see Carli R. (2007), PUNCHINELLO or 'on ambiguity'. *Rivista di Psicologia Clinica. Teoria e metodi dell'intervento*, 3, 376-389.

insects, is able to turn its head, to look by moving its gaze, and at the same time to “stand erect”. And it is, in terms of the insects present in nature that we can see in everyday life, a singular encounter, and a source of often intense emotions for the writer of this article as well.

Here are two photographs: the first is the praying mantis (*mantis religiosa*); the second belongs to a second family, part of the Mantoid order of the *empusidae*: it is in fact a young specimen of the *empusa pennata* species (the one identified by the author of the blog): they were taken in July 2008 in a field in the Comino Valley.



These pictures may evoke the most varied emotions in the reader, in some cases similar to those of the author of the blog, emotions that the story does not explicitly envisage, but that can be traced in the emotionally dense words organising the unconscious component of the text.

The picture, on the other hand, differs profoundly from the text: it is the photograph of an unusual insect, just like the insects that are present in our fields and that we are not used to “seeing” because we are usually not very interested in these strange inhabitants of a world that is familiar to us, like the field we walk across in an excursion in the countryside or the edges of an unpaved road that we go along on our way to a nearby restaurant or to pick blackberries at the beginning of the autumn. We usually tend to use pictures more than words to evoke emotions of the mind’s unconscious mode of being, while we use a narration in language to tell stories. This was not so in the past, when painting was given the task of handing down narrations, usually religious. These narrations were easy to understand for those unused to reading written texts, had little chance to read the Old Testament stories, the Gospels or the lives of the saints. One thinks of the San Geminiano Cathedral, with its frescoed walls telling the stories of the Old and New Testament, a real illustrated catechism for the illiterate. One wonders whether “illustrated” narrations also contain a symbolic communication that can be related to the mind’s unconscious mode of being.

Why Carpaccio

I believe that in Carpaccio’s paintings one can find a con-fusion between narration and the presence of unconscious elements.

Let us look at some factors confirming this statement. In an important work⁶, Svetlana Alpers contrasts, in the figurative art of the 15th, 16th and 17th centuries, the aim of describing, typical of northern Europe, with that of narrating developed in the south, particularly in Italian art. The author, referring to Leon Battista Alberti’s definition, recalls that a painting in the Italian Renaissance, was

⁶ Alpers S. (1983), *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

a surface or a framed canvas, placed at a certain distance from the observer who wanted, through it, to look at another, substitute world. In the Renaissance, this world was a stage on which human figures played out significant emotions, based on writers' texts. This is a narrative art. The author's argument is that Dutch painting, or more generally the painting tradition in northern Europe at that time, is a descriptive art, where the images do not spring from or conceal meanings that can then be deciphered by iconologists. Northern painting offers a description of an existing world, as the sure way to gain knowledge of the world itself. It is interesting to notice that in his review⁷ of Alpers' work, the great iconologist Ernst H. Gombrich makes a harsh attack on the case put forward by the Harvard academic, despite her having been his student: on the other hand, for Alpers what matters in Dutch art is precisely what the eye sees. To support his critique of the "descriptive" attitude, Gombrich uses aesthetics, and therefore the poetic transformation involved in a painting, not only in paintings showing human figures, but even in cartographic works. It is an interesting diatribe, which however sows some doubts. These doubts are evoked by the contrast between describing and narrating. The hypothesis of this article is that a contrast exists, but that it concerns other elements of pictorial representation. My analysis revolves around some works by Vittore Carpaccio: what I want to show is that in these works there is a narrative dimension alongside a disturbing dimension that creates strangeness; the latter is conveyed by the absence of the reciprocity that is required in a narration, to confirm the narrative intention.

In his work on Carpaccio⁸, Muraro reminds us that in Venice the spread of Florentine renaissance art met strong opposition. "While the idea of Rome, more than the teachings of Florence, contributed to the renewal of Venetian architecture, it must be said that the renewal of painting had totally different origins, and was inspired in particular by the Flemish painters. There was no noble house that did not have, among its most precious objects, a painting by *Ruggero* or "*Memlino*", by *Alberto* or *Giovanni da Brugia*. Very few, on the other hand, were the paintings by Florentine masters⁹" (p. 14, op. cit.). It is also interesting that Flemish painting is considered by Svetlana Alpers as well, as the precursor of Dutch art of the "golden century". Carpaccio, therefore, matured and worked in a Venice that was interested in the taste of the Flemish painters, therefore in "descriptive" art, more than in the narration of the Italian renaissance.

The estrangement of Vittore Carpaccio

If we look at the paintings of Vittore Carpaccio (1460?-1525) and in particular at the nine canvases of the History of St. Ursula, painted for the Venetian "school"¹⁰ of the same name between 1490 and 1495, and now collected as a full set in one of the rooms of the Gallerie dell'Accademia (Galleries of Academy) in Venice, we may notice their main characteristic: the characters represented in the historical scenes of the story of the Saint and martyrdom, *never exchange glances*. It is not, I must add, a matter of a specificity peculiar to these canvases; here moreover, the absence of reciprocity in the glances is marked, unlike some of the contemporary paintings by

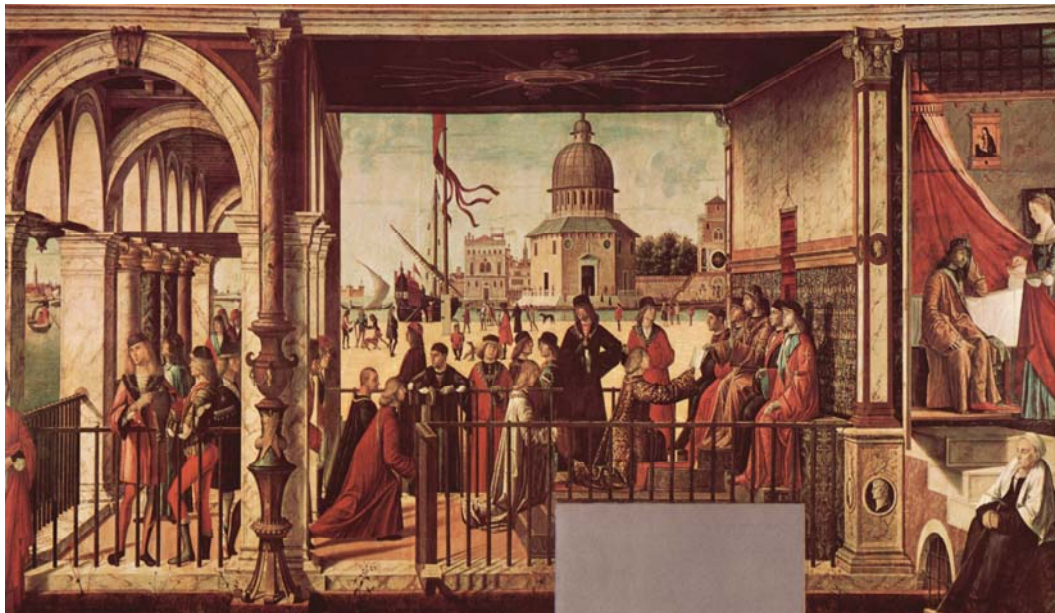
⁷ Gombrich E.H. (1987). *Reflections on the History of Art: Views and Reviews*, Phaidon, Oxford.

⁸ Muraro M. (1966). *Carpaccio*, Il Fiorino, Firenze

⁹ The writer, referring to Marcantonio Michiel, mentions the paintings of Roger van der Weiden, Jean Memling, Alberto Outwater, Jean van Eyck.

¹⁰ The "Schools" were typically Venetian institutions: charity associations of workers of the same trade (*tiraoro e battiloro*, *calegheri*, meaning shoemakers), living in a specific area of the city, in which a saint was venerated (San Rocco, St. John the Baptist), or foreigners of a certain "nation" (Albanians, Dalmatians). The Schools were buildings used as meeting places, where activities were organized for the benefit of the members or neighbours. They were confraternities that also provided a place where the members "can get down to their devotions". Pietro Zampetti (the curator and organizer of the exhibition on Carpaccio in 1963) reminds us that in the most powerful phase of the Republic, the Schools achieved considerable importance, due also to the magnificence of their headquarters. Carpaccio was the painter of the "Schools". No fewer than four of them (St. Ursula, of Albanesi, St. Stephan, San Giorgio of Schiavoni) were completely decorated with his canvases. For the School of St. John the Baptist he painted the "Healing of the obsession", which according to Giovanna Nepi Scirè, is one of the most extraordinary 'city portraits' of all Renaissance painting, a detailed sequence of official and everyday Venetian life, in which Carpaccio also remembered the two white capped maids beating carpets and hanging out runners in the sun on a rooftop loggia.

Giovanni Bellini or Andrea Mantegna, where the reciprocity of the glance organizes the texture of the relations represented and the visual path suggested to the viewer of the painting. Here is an example of what we are arguing about Carpaccio. The scene shows the arrival of the English ambassadors in the court of the King of Borgogna. The purpose of the visit is to ask for the hand of Ursula¹¹, the Breton King's daughter, as wife to Ereus, son of the king of England.



Let us examine the scene in its *narrative structure*, as it is visible in the positioning of the characters and in their gestures. Now, the global view shows the King of Bretagna sitting at the highest seat, amidst four court figures, while the ambassador holds out to him a written sheet, presumably a message from the king of England. Behind them there are other figures from the embassy; some people are watching the scene from behind a railing that lines the procession of ambassadors before the king and his court. In the background there are other figures talking amongst themselves richly dressed in marvellous, showy clothes; marking the furthest part of the scene, there is a hexagonal temple and evocative glimpses of the city of Venice. The narrative texture of the scene is admirably constructed and besides the meaning that the scene sets out to convey, the narration is clear: a group “endowed with power”, with the most important person at the centre, receives a group of people kneeling in deference; the first personage of the kneeling group proffers a written document to the central person in the seated group. Knowledge of the *context* in which the narration is made, namely Carpaccio's paintings, the story of St. Ursula, and the fact that the canvases were destined to the Venetian school of St. Ursula, complete the narrative meaning of the painting. Below we show a detail of the scene, that of the royal group and the ambassador proffering the written document, with some of the bystanders behind him. Let us look at the details of the scene. We can see a strange element of the painting, which was not noticeable when looking at the whole scene: none of the figures shown is reciprocating a gaze, no-one is exchanging a glance with anyone else, they all seem to be looking in different directions. This seems to give the painting a feeling of “estrangement”: one is confronted with a scene where what is missing, with the exchange of looks, is relations between people, the relations that the narrative structure of the painting on the other hand seems to show so well.

¹¹ The legend of St. Ursula and the eleven thousand virgins is taken from the *Legenda aurea o Legenda sanctorum* by Jacopo da Varagine, written between 1255 and 1266.



There is an interesting contradiction here, from the point of view of both painting and clinical psychology. Pictorially, the scene seems to construct different emotions if seen, on the one hand, from the narrative point of view, and on the other, in the perspective of the emotions aroused in looking at the painting in detail. One might say that the narration is the pretext that gives the painter his direction and organises the structural path. In the narrative dimension, one expects a series of relations to organise the scene: for instance, one expects the king to look at the ambassador or at the document being held out to him, just as one might expect the court dignitaries to be interested in and focused on the ambassador in front of them, or to be exchanging looks amongst themselves, perhaps fleetingly; one might expect a glance of understanding, of satisfaction, of disapproval, or of puzzlement. The scene on the right that closes Carpaccio's canvas conveys the reasons for this possible perplexity in the court circle: an indoor scene shows the conversation between the King of Bretagna and his daughter Ursula; the King appears bewildered and depressed, because his daughter is showing some opposition to the marriage that is about to be arranged for her. None of this is revealed in the scene in question. The facial expressions are all emotionally involving: perplexity, amazement, curiosity, boredom, indifference. But these are emotions expressed within each character, in the absence of a relationship, which seems to separate them from each other, each sinking into a solitude from which there is no return. I dealt with this issue back in 1990¹², referring to a work by Ludovico Zorzi¹³ in which the historian of performance arts came to an interesting new conclusion: in his canvases, Carpaccio did not mean to show the story of St. Ursula and her martyrdom, but to reproduce on canvas some specific "sacred scenes" or performances, that were played out on particular occasions in the Venetian life of the time. Through Carpaccio's paintings, argues Zorzi, we are dealing with scenes of Venetian performances, put on in designated places in the city or using purpose-made objects. In particular, Zorzi divides the paintings into three phases:

¹² Carli R. (1990). Il processo di collusione nelle rappresentazioni sociali [The collusion process in social representations]. *Rivista di Psicologia Clinica*, 3, 282-296.

¹³ Zorzi L. (1988). *Carpaccio e la rappresentazione di St. Ursula* [Carpaccio and the representation of St. Ursula] Einaudi, Torino.

a – the last canvases of story (the first done by the painter) “faithfully follow” sacred representations

b – the intermediate canvases (the departure of the spouses to be, arrival in Rome, St. Ursula’s dream) allude to various “parades” and ceremonies in Venetian life. Here there is the first reference to the “Fratelli Zardinieri”, one of the most powerful *Compagnie della Calza*¹⁴

c – the initial or “diplomatic” canvases (the last to be painted) reproduce real civil *momarie* despite being placed in a religious context. The *momarie* are social representations proper.

Like Zorzi let me say that although the *momarie* are presented as entertainment performances, they cannot be linked to the modern idea of theatre, in the sense of a performance based on the interaction between “parts” representing specific characters. *Momarie* differ from theatre proper in the purpose of the performance: they were pantomime performances of profane content, often mythological stories accompanied by music and dance. They were a kind of masked procession using extremely rich costumes, and taking place along the canals where moralistic questions were represented, such as the struggle between Vices and Virtues.

Momarie can be considered a staged interaction based on the implicit agreement of its participants; this interaction did not require the theatrical action of a story through the exchange and reciprocity of glances. One can think of the *mumming* very common in England from the middle ages until the end of the 15th century (though some mumming performances are still put on today), where parading, farcical costuming and the struggle between Good and Evil show specific affinities with the performance shown by Carpaccio. The demonstrative purpose of the *momaria* (but also of English mummers) is shown by the fact that the scenic action depends mainly on the choreography and the stage set, rather than on the text. Similar forms are those of the French *momme* and the Spanish *momo*¹⁵.

A special mention must go to the role of the public, depicted by Carpaccio in various scenes of the St. Ursula story. If we consider the *momaria* as the “duplicate” of the Saint’s story, then the representation of the representation of the story, through the pictorial construction, is in fact a “duplicate of the duplicate”. We who see the performance through Carpaccio’s painting therefore see the saint’s story through a two-fold “duplicate”. In the paintings, too, there are spectators, positioned in a mirror image of the person looking at the canvas, lined up along the whole front of the performance. These are obviously *spectatores in scaena*. There are, on the other hand, moments of pause in this sort of narrative complexity: it is a particular kind of audience, characters who “force themselves” to meet our gaze, to intercept it to make a sort of invitation to participate in the scene reproduced in the canvas. There are other characters looking intensely towards “those looking at the picture” and indicating with hand gestures some of the central figures shown in the painting. According to historians of performance arts, these characters play the role of merrymaker, those in charge of the event; or of *maneur de jeu*, close to the present stage director, or in other situations, to Public Relations expert.

¹⁴ The *Compagnie della Calza* were a sort of “circle” of young Venetian noblemen devoted to organizing the city’s performances: from the Carnival to the feast of the *Sensa* (Ascension), from the festivities for visits to Venice by the sovereigns of various European countries, to the *momarie* which we will deal with later.

¹⁵ All these terms clearly have the same etymology, deriving from the Greek term *mimos* meaning mime, comic actor or more generally, actor; the verb *miméomai*, with the same root, means imitate, represent, reproduce by imitating.



The merry-makers therefore invite us to come into a painting that is characterised by an absence of reciprocity; we cannot refuse, also because our gaze as we “look at the painting”, is captured by these invitations to enter this place of split relations, of characters closed within themselves, of stories organised by the narration but at the same time destructured by the absence of reciprocity.

Conclusions

A global view of the canvas with the arrival of the ambassadors by Vittore Carpaccio clearly tells us about the episode and its meaning, in a narration deriving from the whole scene shown. It is a figurative narrative text, where the structure of the visual representation is the same as that of written narration, taken as a whole. The single figures, thanks to the absence of reciprocity deriving from the absence of exchanged glances, make up a sort of “dense figure”, comparable to that of “dense words” in a narrative text. They are images that, taken alone, seem to be extraneous to the time and space of the narration, being presented in an emotionally involving way only outside the emotional involvement of the narration. At times one hears that with these images, the painter has shown “portraits” or people who really existed, almost as if they had been responsible for commissioning a portrait gallery of all the numerous figures shown in the canvases. But the portrait is connected to the single individual and his infinite emotional connotations, far more involving than the character that is represented in the *momaria*. It is an individual that escapes from the character of the representation and his narrative limitations, to evoke an individual and individualised image with its own history and personal emotional experiences, which cannot be reduced merely to the character represented.

In my 1990 work, I hypothesised that the absence of reciprocity in glances was an example of collusion, in other words of emotional reciprocity independent of the conscious relationship between the figures in sacred scenes. This collusion was due to the theatrical dimension of the scene, identified thanks to the work of Ludovico Zorzi. Today I am able to examine in greater depth that proposed interpretation of the canvas and its characteristic based on the absence of the

exchange of glances. The canvas can be approached as one considers a narrative text and the dense words characterising it. Carpaccio seems to work on two levels in involving the spectator in the scene from the life of St. Ursula (in particular in the initial, "diplomatic" canvases which, as we know, were the last to be painted). The painter offers the narrative plan, consistent with those commissioning the work and with the place where the paintings were to be shown; in connection with the narrative plan, he also provides the strategy to get the spectator "into" the canvas, to evoke emotions that are not linked to the narration but to the duplicate represented by the painting, through the representation of a representation of the *momaria*: the person looking at the painting is affected by the single emotions of the figures shown, real "black holes" where it is possible to plunge into an identification with the individual "dense figures", while identifying with split emotional expressions that are an end in themselves, and lack a narrative link. The merry-makers that invite us into the canvas then invite us to mix with the single figures, with their confused emotionality, separate from the context, rather than to capture the whole narrative dimension. This is what we have proposed to do with literary texts, using Emotional Textual Analysis to analyse the texture organising the unconscious emotional message running through the texts' narrative structure. Vittore Carpaccio seems to have been able to capture the potential for emotional evocation permitted by unconscious dynamics, freed from the conscious thought that is designed to establish relations and construct stories. He proposes, intertwined with this narrative idea, the emotional dynamics of indivisible homogeneous thinking, contained in the individual "dense figures". This emotional involvement in the dense figures, on the other hand, may be related to the function of description, as opposed to that of narration, that we talked about in connection with Svetlana Alpers.

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