

Saltimbanco di fumo:
Evanescent Art in Palazzeschi's Early Novels,
Il codice di Perelà and *Interrogatorio della contessa Maria*

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Before his death in 1974, Aldo Palazzeschi willed the creation of the Fondo Palazzeschi in the interest that his personal effects, letters, and documents remain in capable hands. Fourteen years later, Fabrizio Bagatti, curator of the Fondo Palazzeschi and leading authority on his works at the Università di Firenze, unearthed two curious manuscripts amidst the disordered vestiges of the writer's prolific literary career. These turned out to be drafts of Palazzeschi's unpublished novel, *Interrogatorio della contessa Maria*, neatly composed in the author's own hand. The title's imminent publication had been announced by the editor upon the distribution of *La Piramide* in 1926, but it failed to appear and remained an enigma until Bagatti's fortuitous discovery in 1988.¹

The resuscitation of the mysterious opus set the Italian publishing world abuzz with excitement and speculation. Had the author made a conscious decision not to release the novel, and if so, what had precipitated this choice? Bagatti advanced three conceivable theories to account for Palazzeschi's motivations, the first being that the author believed the work flawed; however, if that were the case he likely would have returned to edit it at some point in the subsequent 50 years. Secondly, he might have

¹ Laura Lepri, *Il funambolo incosciente: Aldo Palazzeschi 1905-1914*

withheld the novel for fear of reproach given its erotic subject matter, but Bagatti discounts this notion as well, observing that Palazzeschi had already broached issues of sexuality in his earlier novels and in addition, Fascist censors were not yet in full force in 1926. The final hypothesis, the one to which Bagatti lends credence, suggests that the author purposely shelved the novel during his lifetime in order to stage a posthumous joke, the last message of a lifelong clown and "*gran teorico di quella letteratura sospesa fra scherzo e capriccio, sovversione e fantasia.*"² This literary prankster reveals his nature from Palazzeschi's earliest poetry, through which his name historically became synonymous with "*incendiario*" and "*saltimbanco.*"

Characteristic of Palazzeschi's stylistic innovation, the unique structure of *Interrogatorio* places it outside of conventional literary categories. The novel furnishes a link between Palazzeschi's early experimentalism in his prose works, typified by *riflessi* (1908) and *Il codice di Perelà* (1911), and the somewhat more grounded nature of his middle period, which saw the publication of the acclaimed and successful *Sorelle Materassi* (1935). Although

(Firenze: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1991), p. 15.

² Nico Orengo, "*Il segreto di Palazzeschi: nel cassetto un romanzo erotico,*" *La Stampa: Tuttolibri.*

Palazzeschi composed *Interrogatorio* during the time when the influence of futurism and the avant-garde had already begun to dwindle, stylistic remnants of the movement surface in the syntactical fluidity of the narrative, the contrived lack of systematic punctuation, and the uninterrupted flow of dialogue.

Palazzeschi produced highly imaginative works in a period of significant literary evolution in Europe. He only adhered officially to the Futurist movement from 1909 until 1914, preferring to dwell outside of any sort of artistic categories, even the seemingly least restrictive. Postulation of the reasons behind his decision to withhold *Interrogatorio* during his lifetime has the potential to shed light on his relationships with his own poetics and with contemporaneous literary movements. Luciano de Maria posits the idea that Palazzeschi "non l'avesse voluto stampare perché avvertiva che il clima culturale stava cambiando, non era più tempo di sperimentalismi e avanguardie."³ This adds another dimension to the hypotheses put forward by Bagatti.

The notion that Palazzeschi might have feared that his novel would be placed in the realm of the by then *passé* avant-garde seems ironic enough to bear truth. He was a

reluctant futurist to begin with, but in this regard he seems to exact a characteristically *futurist* intolerance of all things *passatiste* on a composition that itself shows strong futurist tendencies. *Il codice di Perelà*, by contrast, exists to some extent as a proto-specimen of futurism. Its subversion of existing cultural institutions and conspicuous anti-bourgeoisie attitude reflect an unmistakable *avant-garde* character, just as the corresponding stylistic devices make evident the author's desire to gain the attention and approval of his futurist compatriots.

Thematic resonances linking *Interrogatorio* with *Perelà*, Palazzeschi's "*anti-romanzo futurista*," galvanize a comparative consideration of the two works. Palazzeschi's representation of unusual modes of existence on the part of his *personaggi* effects a thorough *rovesciamento delle norme*. In the case of the Contessa, her unorthodox sexual practices, which have afforded her the pleasure of 4,000 lovers in her lifetime, with 200 new initiates per year, constitutes her manner of rebellion. She makes no apologies for her chosen lifestyle; instead she "*giustifica il suo agire come la celebrazione vitale al più forte*

³ Luciano de Maria quoted by Orengo.

istinto che ci sia in natura: il divino Eros."⁴ For Perelà, the man of smoke, his unique form and philosophy of *leggerezza* throw the society he enters into crisis. As a secondary but highly portentous character in *Perelà*, the *pazzo volontario* Zarlino upsets social expectations as well with staged lunacy and sensational antics.

Through their respective methods of defiance, each of these characters exerts a force against the claustrophobia imposed by the system under which they must operate. Palazzeschi uses aberrant behavior as a device to relay a broader social message and communicate the pernicious effects of human alienation and dissatisfaction in the modern era. Actions shunned by society as abnormal or unallowable in the cases of the Contessa, Perelà, and Zarlino simply reflect a mode of reasoning outside the accepted paradigm.

In each instance, the characters' nonconformist attitudes capsize social conventions with the consequent emergence of a positive moral message: that life should be lived without restrictions. As the Contessa valiantly proclaims, "*Io amo la vita*," carrying on in the fervent, burlesque tradition of Palazzeschi's *buffi*, as noted by Lepri: "*La contessa Maria infatti sembra la discendente*

⁴ Orengo, p. 1.

ultima, l'elaborazione iperbolica e provocatoria di personaggi che avevano già abitato la poetica palazzeschiana fin dagli esordi."⁵ Palazzeschi's portraits of personages who inhabit realms outside the norm present a protest against the systematized, capitalistic bourgeois society which inhibits individual freedom, represses natural urges, and stifles the delight and spontaneity of life.

The idea that a higher moral plane can exist inside socially disreputable human behavior persists as one of the author's preferred themes. At the beginning of *Interrogatorio*, the narrator, observing the exploits of the Contessa Maria, "'donna di tutti': instancabile divoratrice degli uomini,"⁶ from across the *caffè delle Giubbe Rosse* in Firenze, struggles with the emotions she provokes in him, ultimately concluding: "Poco alla volta mi si insinuò nel cervello la convinzione che sotto quel cumulo di sozzure, di equivoci, di incongruenze, dovesse esistere una vera grande profonda moralità" (3).

The first half of *Interrogatorio* takes the form of a free-flowing discussion between the Contessa and the

⁵ Laura Lepri, "Un'ipotesi sull'*Interrogatorio* della contessa Maria di Palazzeschi," *Lettere Italiane*, 41 (4): 596.

⁶ Fabrizio Bagatti, Introduction to *Interrogatorio della contessa Maria* (Milano: Mondadori, 1988), p. IX. All quotations from the novel come from this edition.

narrator, the author in the guise of a young poet, in the Florentine *caffè*. In the second part, the focus shifts as the Contessa takes control of the narrative, telling the story of her familial background and earliest erotic experiences. She appears as a *donna del fumo*, compulsively inhaling cigarettes during her colloquy with the narrator, who deems this trait essential to her character: "*soprattutto fumava*" (4).

Palazzeschi's other hero of smoke, Perelà, brings his uncomplicated message of *leggerezza* to a fairly ahistoric group of people, everyday citizens who might have been extracted from any time period or geographical location. They become smitten with his unique form and implore him to rewrite their city's code, treating him with reverence until they grow disenchanted and indict him under criminal charges, ultimately attempting to imprison him for lack of a means to kill a man made of smoke. The people, nearly always represented in a crowd, appear in stark opposition to Perelà's singular individualism.

As a prototype of the bourgeoisie, the crowd denotes an indifferent, apathetic society that thinks *en masse* and shows no idealistic conscience. Many landmark works of twentieth-century literature, including those of realism and existentialism, have endeavored to reveal how apathy

results in the meaninglessness, melancholy, and alienation of humankind. Sloth has represented a dominant negative characteristic in most every age of history; it goes back at least as far as the times of the medieval church, which looked on "*acedia*" as a deadly sin. "*A-pathos*," the absence of passion and *joie de vivre*, embodies the precise sort of societal lack for which Palazzeschi's rebellious *buffi* seek to compensate.

Against the lackluster background of a passion-drained world, Perelà stands out in stark contrast, as a champion of individual freedom, courage, and humanity. The crowd pressing in on him, uncomprehending of his simple message, symbolizes conformity and the oppressive system. The inhumanity of the society is underscored at the very beginning of the story, through Perelà's speech about how he envisioned war when he learned of it through his mothers Pena, Rete, and Lama while still nesting in the chimney uterus:

...io mi figuravo che gli uomini corressero nudi alla guerra, che si liberassero anche dei calzari perche' i loro passi fossero agili e silenziosi come quelli d'un leopardo Acciaio... ferro... piombo... E non cadono schiacciati sotto tanto peso? Come possono velocemente aggredire il nemico, e aggrediti sottrarsi con velocita'? ... Ora vedo la guerra un'enorme minestra grigia, scodellata con lento, sordo frastuono, e rimasta li'... immangiabile.⁷

This monologue communicates Perelà's philosophy of *leggerezza* and in addition gives the impression of his disappointment with the impersonal, mechanized reality of war as contrasted with the battles of his imagination, which, in his description, sound more individualized, gritty, and heroic.

The same basic metaphorical structure can be applied to the Contessa and the disapproving society under which she frankly conducts her uninhibited and unsentimental lifestyle. Her lack of concern for socially imposed restrictions enables her to live by Perelà's philosophy with humor and honesty. As the poet observes at the beginning of his acquaintance with her, "*mai con nessun amico provai tal senso di leggerezza*" (5). The description of the café society in the opening scenes of the novel establishes the identity of the Contessa's oppressors: "*rappresentanze di ogni calore di quel gran blocco sociale che chiamasi la borghesia*" (14). The dialogue unfolds in a profoundly bourgeois atmosphere, among people who, despite their apparent intellectual occupation and perhaps even implied leftist leanings, remain forever scandalized by the Contessa, "*nella loro cieca ed innocente cattiveria*" (7). This same faceless crowd will never reach any profound

⁷ Aldo Palazzeschi, *Il codice di Perelà* (A. Mondadori editore, 1974), p.

understanding of Perelà's great secret. As Marco Marchi astutely observes:

Sta di fatto che il "segreto" più profondo e implicante che Perelà portava con sè ("il segreto, semplicissimo invero, ... quello che la faceva apparire così eccezionalmente diversa da tutte le altre," come si dirà di una donna nell'Interrogatorio della contessa Maria) risulterà alla fine, al pari della libera e liberatoria scrittura cui si era affidato, reso quasi del tutto irriconoscibile: disperso, occultato, o già trasmigrato in altre pagine altrettanto sensazionali e soffocate, lasciate nel cassetto. In esse-quasi una profezia per il dopo di Perelà e per la leggerezza tradita del suo messaggio-un Palazzeschi mezzo poeta e mezzo en travesti era tornato a chiedersi: "Perché rimanere a quel modo in catene, in una casa tetra, in una città infame, che pareva la cappa di un camino, fra la gente tonta, inciprignita nel tedio, che non mi poteva capire, che non mi avrebbe capito mai?"⁸

This link between the two novels illustrates the crux of Palazzeschi's overarching literary endeavor to overturn the tenets of artistic, religious, and moral convention and expose the fallacies perpetuated by the *gente tonta*. In their social contexts, Perelà and the Contessa stand out as pariahs, the Contessa even a "*pagana*" (24), in the accusation of the poet-narrator. By her own admission, she is "*pagana ... e felice.*"

The colloquy with Maria was not Palazzeschi's only literary encounter with a contessa. His poem, "*Visita alla contessa Eva Pizzardini Ba,*" another dialogue between a *nobildonna* and a *poeta*, reveals a woman deathly bored with

her routine. Palazzeschi attributes the "noia" that afflicts this contessa to the suffocating effects of the "gentilezza borghese." The emergent theme exposes the futility of the repetition inherent to quotidian life. By contrast, the Contessa Maria, through her mode of rebellion, successfully thwarts the ennui that threatens to smother her counterpart. The outlook of the novel seems more optimistic than that of the poem, although the fundamental social problem remains the same.

Palazzeschi draws attention to the monotony of *gentilezza* in *Il codice di Perelà*, with his description of the inside of the *manicomio* Villa Rosa. Here, the author embarks on one of the most subversive and vitriolic examinations of the *borghesia* in the novel. One episode in the Villa Rosa involves an inmate with suicidal mania who has devised his own philosophical system whereby everything must end in suicide, and he allows no getting around the system. This subtly chastises the capitalist bourgeois scheme for its totalizing tendencies and lack of possible alternatives.

The inmates of the asylum appear as burlesque characters, and here Palazzeschi's philosophy of

⁸ Marco Marchi, *Palazzeschi e altri sondaggi* (Firenze: Le lettere, 1996), p. 117. Internal quotations from *Interrogatorio*, pp. 16 and 102.

controdolore makes a conspicuous emergence, particularly in the figure of Zarlino, the wealthy prince and *pazzo volontario* who stays in the asylum for the love of the game. Having given up the opportunity to assume the kingship of the mythical realm, he practices a conscious, controlled lunacy, having with the aid of his vast wealth assembled a stage and company of players among the inmates in order to complete the image.

The aspect of Zarlino's wealth resonates strongly with the situation of the *nobildonna* Contessa Maria, confirming that a degree of luxury plays an important role in the success of living outside the bourgeois system. Zarlino's staging of such comprehensive theatrical productions obviously requires a great deal of capital, as does the prospect of an unmarried woman without employment living in the manner suitable to her class. The Contessa enjoys her chosen lifestyle largely by virtue of her economic means, the result of an inheritance from a relative that did not have to be channeled through her father. She has the money and comfort level to avoid having to live as a prostitute, the inevitable lot of most female sexual deviants. The implied financial requisite places the capacity for rejection of the status quo beyond the capability of the average member of the bourgeoisie.

Beyond the economic comfort intrinsic to noble standing, an effective *rovesciamento delle norme* seems also to demand a certain amount of intellectual opulence particular to members of the aristocracy. Historically, economy and thrift in both a financial and a sexual or moral respect have belonged to the set of typically middle-class virtues, in opposition to the expenditure and liberality shown by the aristocracy. The Contessa, through the eyes of the narrator, "*possedeva ... una disinvoltura ed una spontaneità veramente aristocratiche*" (8-9). Late in the story, during the divulgence of the Contessa's life history, her father expresses wonder and incredulity at the sixteen-year-old Maria's precocious deviance: "*una giovinetta tu sei ... cresciuta lontana dagli esempi perniciosi, da cattivi insegnamenti, in un giardino di gentilezza, di virtù, di correttezza...*" (87). The implication surfaces that precisely these elements of conventional gentility have spurred the Contessa towards her chosen lifestyle. The "shelter" of luxury proves to have the opposite effect than her parents intended, in fact enabling a smoother and more vivacious rebellion, symptomatic of a distinct "*anticonformismo aristocratico*."⁹

⁹ Lepri, "Un'ipotesi...", p. 596.

Secure in the shelter of his own creation, Zarlino looks with disdain on the public outside of his asylum. He tells Perelà (in the same profane vernacular later used by the Contessa) that the masses on the outside are "coglioni," spiritually decrepit in comparison with the madmen on the inside, who in his view possess a more profound spirituality. He believes that the asylum "è il solo [luogo] dove si possa vivere." Zarlino has paradoxically turned life into a game in order to attain personal liberty, using theatre as a means to escape the reality of the world. In this sense he lives by the *controdolore* philosophy, although Palazzeschi did not publish his manifesto "*Controdolore*" until three years after Perelà, in 1914, as Tamburri points out.¹⁰ Laughing in the face of the outside world, Zarlino effectively embodies the successful *controdolore* individual whom Palazzeschi would imagine in the manifesto:

L'uomo che attraverserà coraggiosamente il dolore umano godrà dello spettacolo divino del suo Dio. Egli si farà simile a lui attraversando questo purgatorio di spine ch'egli gli ha imposto per godere primo lui e comunicare poi la stessa gioia agli eletti, egli corpo umano ma perfettissimo che non ha sulle sue membra di gioia una sola cicatrice di dolore.¹¹

¹⁰ Anthony J. Tamburri, *Of Saltimbanchi and Incendiari: Aldo Palazzeschi and Avant-Gardism in Italy* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1990), pp. 139-147.

¹¹ Aldo Palazzeschi, "*Controdolore: Manifesto futurista*," p. 211.

Zarlino's contrived lunacy, with its prescribed number of deafening shrieks and other scripted theatrics, renders the socially-imposed ideas of mental illness and the *manicomio* absurd, succeeding in the #1 *controdolore* aim to "**distruggere il fantasma romantico, ossessionante e doloroso delle cose dette gravi, ridicolizzandole.**"

In this view, Zarlino and the Contessa both achieve success in the arena of *controdolore*. Neither of them has any qualms about obeying his or her innermost desires. The Contessa's habits scandalize the members of her society, including the narrator, but she views her behavior as symptomatic of metaphoric health. She suggests that only healthy people can appreciate her mode of existence: "*Se un uomo è sano e forte ... quello non mi disprezza*" (23-24). The sort of health she alludes to here seems more mental than physical, flying in the face of conventional views of "sane" behavior. To complete the reversal, she places moral convention in the realm of mental illness. "*Chi non mi volle,*" she continues, "*lo fece quasi sempre per ragioni ... morali, malattie della mente perciò*" (30).

The Contessa exercises her own "*giuoco,*" and she expects that no one, not even her poet-confessor, will understand her endeavor. "*Tu nonosci il giuoco, ragazzo mio,*" she informs him with characteristic

condescension. The nature of her *giuoco* evolves as the opposite of the apathy and indifference that Palazzeschi seems to despise particularly. Such phenomena pose a threat to the game: "...cioè prostituzione o abitudine, adattamento, pigrizia, entrano nel giuoco mille elementi impuri a corromperlo" (25).

Il codice di Perelà and *Interrogatorio* possess aspects alternately tragic and comic. In the comic vein, each seeks to dissolve the prevailing negativity in modern thought with pointed satire and an often carnival-like atmosphere of buffoonery. The element of game plays a fundamental thematic role in both the raucous theatrics of Zarlino and the Contessa's brazen sexual exploits. As she says to the poet, ever-condescending, "*Tu nonosci il giuoco ragazzo mio.*" Her "*giuoco*" involves an often grotesque tendency to act on the slightest sexual impulse, as when she abandons the narrator at the opera for an impromptu tryst with the snack hawker.

The Contessa's exaggerated behavior creates a carnivalesque atmosphere that mirrors Zarlino's stage. The element of carnival has undergone rigorous critical analysis as a literary device by Eco and other theorists.¹²

¹²Umberto Eco, "Frames of Comic Freedom," *Carnival!*, Thomas A. Sebeok, ed. (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1984), pp. 1-9. All further Eco citations come from this article.

Bakhtin observes that the carnival celebrates "temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it mark[s] the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions."¹³ Palazzeschi's further exaggeration of the already abnormal behaviors of lunacy and promiscuity enhances the aesthetics of his *controdolore* philosophy.

By removing his characters so far from the paradigm of not only acceptable but credible conduct, the author turns them into burlesque monsters, in what Eco might label the "animalization of the comic hero." The reader engages in vicarious enjoyment of the transgressions of a character like the Contessa, the illicit thrill of this pleasure becoming possible because such characters seem "less human" than we believe ourselves to be. In addition, the audience appreciates and perhaps even grudgingly admires the bravura of her transgressions because we recognize the gravity of the norms she is operating against; we have experienced their sway ourselves, but at the same time we would never have the courage to flail out against them with such a guttural and animalistic reaction. However, as Eco suggest, the ultimate purpose of carnivalization as a literary device serves to "remind us of the existence of

¹³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 10.

the rule," to refresh our awareness of social restrictions. For Palazzeschi, the comic *mise-en-scene* functions as a vehicle for criticism of those restrictions.

At the opposite extreme, the tragic element in both works appears just as essential to the forceful conveyance of the common message, even as it serves to mitigate the carnival effect. Palazzeschi triggers natural human compassion for Perelà and the Contessa by incorporating themes of alienation and persecution into their stories. According to Eco, midway between comedy and tragedy, we find ourselves in the realm of humor as defined by Pirandello. The thematics and tone of humor defined thusly, suspended between the two emotional extremes of tragedy and comedy, provide the backdrop for Palazzeschi's novels. Eco observes, "In humor we smile because of the contradiction between the character and the frame the character cannot comply with. But we are no longer sure that it is the character who is at fault. Maybe the frame is wrong." Each of Palazzeschi's pariahs fits ably into this definition of humor, the frame cast into question by their rebellion being the bourgeois society.

Inherent to the success of rebellion comes the tragedy of alienation and exclusion from society-at-large, as well as from family, as in the case of the Contessa. Her own

account of her history in the latter portion of the *Interrogatorio* reads like a gothic tale, the story of a desultory *pellegrinaggio*, a continual flight "*verso la vita, verso la libertà verso la giustizia!*" (133). After her family's discovery of her first affair as a teenager, she overhears their plans to send her to the nunnery. Wary of becoming a reconfiguration of Manzoni's unfortunate Gertrude, the Contessa reacts with horror, anticipating how the cloistered lifestyle would contradict the fiber of her being. As she tells her story, the narrator observes, "*Avremmo avuto due monache di Monza,*" to which the Contessa acerbically replies, "*No, caro, ne avresti avute tre, perché io avrei contato per due*" (93).

Before her family can act on these intentions, she flees to Rome, where her brother finds and retrieves her. After a long period of confinement and oppressive treatment under the supervision of a vicious matron Maria nicknames "*il tacchino,*" she escapes again, with the aid of an accomplice who becomes her next lover. She finds refuge at first in Paris, which Palazzeschi depicts as an idealized geographical locus where the concerns that plague the Contessa in Italy are temporarily dispelled. She eventually repatriates, only after being disowned by her family, and proceeds to lead a life of relative solitude.

She scorns the company of fellow women, and aside from her numerous sexual affairs has little interaction with other people, with the necessary exception of the narrator. Without him, there would be no excuse for the dialogue that reveals her story. An omniscient narrator would surely not succeed in capturing the snappy, irreverent character of the Contessa's repartee, making the poet's narrative presence essential, at least from a stylistic perspective. It provides the means for the highly-charged communicative exchange between Palazzeschi's characters, a technique that Piero Pieri terms the "*teatralizzazione del romanzo*."¹⁴

For the Contessa, the conventional conception of "*amore*" encapsulates its own sort of imprisonment: "*amore per voi ... sboccia generalmente nel suicidio o nel manicomio*" (21). She refuses to endure confinement, whether in the cloister, a domestic construct, or in an emotional sense. She will not even remain within the perimeters of the novel—in the final scene, she disappears, leaving the narrator to wonder, "*Che è? Che è? Che è stato? Che mi passò vicino? Che?*" (147). Perelà exhibits the same resistance; at the end of his story, the man of smoke vanishes as miraculously as he first appeared.

¹⁴ Piero Pieri, *Ritratto del saltimbanco da giovane: Palazzeschi 1905-1914* (Bologna: Patron Editore, 1980), pp. 151-179.

The evanescence of the *uomo* and *donna di fumo*, their coincidental disappearance at the ends of their stories, underscores Palazzeschi's perception of the corresponding evanescent quality of artistic endeavor, the impossibility that literature will have an enduring impact on external reality. As an *incendiario*, the artist ultimately dances in the smoke of his own creation, because, in the final analysis, no one, not even the *poeta stesso*, can actually live by a *codice* that obliterates rules and convention. Restrictions and boundaries remain too deeply ingrained in the social structure to permit this possibility outside the fantastical realm of art. Echoes of the fundamental precept of "*Chi sono?*" abound in this context: the inevitable product of poetry, the only defined result of *approfondimento* in the external world endures as "*follia*."

Additional reverberations of the "*Chi sono?*" ideology run through the Contessa's commentary. She envisions the world from a rather futurist perspective herself, viewing "*nostalgia*," for example, as a "*malattia incurabile*." She also mounts a compelling invective against the traditional *letterati*, those who "*dissero e discussero quello che non fecero mai*" (10-11). These could be the "*gente tonta*" from whom she seeks constant escape, the closed-minded *moralisti* who cannot hope to appreciate the worth of her

unconventional outlook. The Contessa's experimental attitude towards sex becomes an analogue of the author's artistic experimentalism.

Palazzeschi's revolutionary approach to literature mirrors the events that were taking place concurrently in the field of science and technology. During the first few decades of the twentieth century, the emergent realm of quantum mechanics was overturning the tenets of classical theory that scientists had previously accepted without question, redefining the notions of energy, space, and time. Through *avant-garde* movements like Italian futurism, poets and writers were achieving similar ends through artistic endeavor. Quantum theory is informed by concepts of dynamism, uncertainty, the indeterminate quality of the atomic world and its infinite possibilities and potential; in short, the unpredictability of nature. The futurist movement as a whole relies heavily on the influence of technological progress, incorporating these dynamic new concepts into the thematics of literature and art. F.T. Marinetti's *manifesti* glorify movement and speed, the frenetic vibrations of the city, a world full of energy, full of potential.

Written in the wake of some of the most startling and revolutionary conclusions in scientific history,

Palazzeschi's early works show signs of the effects of modern science on the author's literary consciousness. Echoing one of the fundamental postulates of quantum theory, the Contessa champions her doctrine: "*Ma la vita non è l'organismo di una combinazione, poveri noi allora, ma è l'organismo di miriadi di combinazioni*" (26). Here Palazzeschi seems to integrate at least a philosophical understanding of the new science into his systematic view, in particular with the image of "*miriadi di combinazioni*."

Manifestations of Palazzeschi's leftover futurist tendencies also appear in the ideological attitude towards art expressed by the Contessa. She undertakes an extensive discourse on the subject, labeling most products of artistic and literary tradition with Palazzeschi's favored slur, "*coglionerie*." Like his futurist contemporaries, Palazzeschi questioned the dominant culture, but in a sense he transcended their rebellion by never aligning himself with any one movement for too long.¹⁵ His novels remain highly emblematic of the dramatic changes in individual thought at the turn of the century.

Palazzeschi's "*follia poetica*" reveals itself in both a thematic and stylistic sense. The former aspect becomes

¹⁵ Anthony Julian Tamburri, "Aldo Palazzeschi and Giorgio de Chirico: Decentralized Antitraditional Aesthetics," *Languages of Visuality*:

manifest through his reliance on characters' lunacy as a device for social criticism and upheaval. In the latter case, Palazzeschi's style comes across as irrational and unusual in comparison with the traditional poetics of Pascoli, Carducci, and d'Annunzio.¹⁶ All of these writers are mentioned in the harsh invective against literary tradition unfurled by the Contessa in *Interrogatorio*. She exhibits distaste for nearly every conventional writer, composer, and artist. Palazzeschi grants extraordinary subjectivity to the Contessa, using her as a vehicle through which to transmit his scathing criticism and often didactic ideology of art and literature.

Palazzeschi's artistic and ideological ambivalence has long provided fodder for the conjecture of literary critics. The poem "*Chi sono?*" shows his early fundamental reluctance to bear the label of poet. He prefers to act as a *saltimbanco*, in perennial reaction against literary tradition. (And yet he configures himself deliberately as the poet/narrator in *Interrogatorio*.) In this regard, he grants a special status to clamor and discord, exploding the conventional conception of "artist" as "creator."

Crossings between Science, Art, Politics, and Literature, Beate Albert, ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996), p. 155.

¹⁶ Orengo, p. 1.

Palazzeschi's new class of artistic practice does not facilitate criticism under existent criteria and parameters. As Lyotard states, "Those rules and categories are what the work of art is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*."¹⁷ The reader must then approach the text without rules as well. Certain critics regard such "rejection of universality or absoluteness" as "(proto)postmodern."¹⁸

In the interest of promoting individuality and rejecting universality, Palazzeschi makes a careful effort to emphasize the voluntary quality of his characters' deviant behavior. The Contessa continually makes reference to her degree of choice in the selection of her lovers. Zarlino, as a *pazzo volontario*, willfully removes himself from society and thereby attains a degree of freedom of thought that would not be feasible under the restrictions of the outside world. The revelation of voluntary deviance in the novels presents a challenge to society and its categories and definitions, provoking reconsideration of the existing institutions and therefore of the entire human situation. As a result, the *controdolore* goals to destroy

¹⁷ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 81.

social myths and upset the status quo become realized in two varying forms.

Other parallelisms between Palazzeschi's texts demand attention, in particular his reliance on religious themes through which his characters acquire an almost prophetic quality. Both the Contessa and Perelà undergo a quasi-sanctification. Unmistakable Christ symbolism abounds in *Perelà*, as the author plainly configures the man of smoke as a messianic figure. Perelà attempts to impart his philosophy to the masses in the interest, conscious or not, of saving humanity. He emerges into the world apparently as a result of an immaculate conception, and he is already 33 years old, the age of Jesus Christ during his career as a prophet. Resounding strongly with the role of Mary Magdalene in the Bible, the Marchesa di Bellonda is the woman most intently devoted to Perelà. It is she who discovers that his "crypt" is empty, just as Mary Magdalene is the first to see that Christ has disappeared from his tomb in Christian scripture. In an earlier scene in the *manicomio* Villa Rosa, the suicidal maniac, who is prone to moments of lucidity, tells Perelà: *"Voi potreste essere un Dio per gli uomini. Hanno bisogno di dare un corpo al nulla, che il nulla si possa vedere e anche toccare..."*

¹⁸ Tamburri, "Aldo Palazzeschi...", p. 155.

The Contessa's *virtù*, as defined by Palazzeschi, endows her with the potential to serve as a possible prophetic figure in the unspecified future, although she makes a grand show of denying this charge. With regard to others less enlightened than herself, she claims that helping them towards her breed of redemption poses insurmountable difficulties, in one case saying: "*Se io avessi il potere di tirarlo su ... io sarei diventata il padre eterno*" (27). As if to controvert this apparent lack of confidence in the redemptive power of her sexual crusade, the Contessa recounts the story of her experience in the bedroom with one particularly severe "*ricco borghese*:"

Nel punto buono però si abbandonava tutto, ebbro. Allora non esisteva più nulla, le preoccupazioni, la sua frolla morale, la vanità, gli amici, il mondo non c'era più, non c'era più che quello che mi dava e che prendeva da me (31).

Shortly thereafter, the Contessa broaches the idea of her own hypothetical sanctification herself: "*Poni ad esempio, chi sa mai perché, per una stranissima ragione, abbiano un giorno un interesse di far passare me per un esempio di virtù*" (41). Despite her clearly sarcastic undertones, the notion of her as representative of a new kind of *virtù* remains an undercurrent through the remainder of the story. She redefines *virtù* as just the opposite of the suffocating

self-denial and sacrifice that characterize the conventional conception. The Contessa views living like this as nothing more than self-deception. The only means to attain *virtù* is to "*non ingannare mai nessuno, e soprattutto, non ingannar se stessi mai*" (46).

Both Perelà and the Contessa disappear once they have served their narrative purpose, but they leave redemptive hope in their wakes in the form of undesignated apostles. In *Interrogatorio*, the poet himself becomes the effective apostle with the message to bear to society from the dubious messianic figure of the Contessa. Alloro, in his attempt to imitate Perelà, could be viewed as a failed apostle, one who committed a folly in not realizing that Perelà wanted people to emulate him, not imitate him. The Marchesa di Bellonda does not achieve true understanding of Perelà's message at the end either: as stated by Anthony Tamburri, "Not having transcended her emotion, she remains within the realm of *dolore*."¹⁹ The definitive disciple of Perelà, the only remaining character capable of living out his philosophy in the world, appears in Zarlino.

One of the most striking ideas aroused by Palazzeschi's *Il codice di Perelà* is that of *l'approfondimento*, which can be interpreted as true

understanding of Perelà's message of *leggerezza* and, more broadly, of the author's "gospel" of *controdolore*. Tamburri suggests that Zarlino functions as the only character in the story who demonstrates a sense of *approfondimento*. At the end of the novel, as a result of his self-imposed lunacy, Zarlino remains the sole symbol of the complete rejection of the existing social system and freedom from its norms, the sole possessor of true *approfondimento*. In this sense, he is left as the bearer of the message once the prophet has gone.

The poet has an analogous function in *Interrogatorio* after the heroine vanishes. Art, therefore, becomes the medium of communication for ideological prophecy in both novels. The Contessa proclaims, "*Io sono un capolavoro della vita, non dell'arte,*" and commands the poet, "*Scrivi pure te che è il tuo mestiere e lascia me vivere in pace*" (11-12), effectively bequeathing him an apostolic mission. Palazzeschi's role as an artist sinks into contradiction: does he function simply as a court jester, as his poetry proclaims, or is his artistic mission more ideologically important than the word "*saltimbanco*" suggests?

The Contessa's words ("*lascia me vivere...*") paradoxically hearken back to one of Palazzeschi's most

¹⁹ Tamburri, *Of Saltimbanchi...*, p. 155.

famous works of poetry, the *canzonetta* "*Lasciatemi divertire*," in which the poet, among nonsensical onomatopoeic utterances, beatifies poetic license and begs for space to exercise his "*divertimento*." For the Contessa "*vivere*" is synonymous with "*divertire*," but the poet cannot live as fully as his heroine, as she points out to him: "*io tocco il fondo meglio di te*" (58). The artist must serve as an intermediary between the ordinary reader and the impossibly resplendent protagonists. The poet cannot himself "*toccare il fondo*" but only seek to convey an understanding of those who do. Palazzeschi's role as poet ultimately remains ambivalent, suspended between the poles of the *saltimbanco* and the dutiful ideological apostle. Antonio Saccone remarks on Palazzeschi's ambivalence and continually shifting poetic perspective with regard to *Perelà*:

La "favola aerea" di Perelà (così è definito dal suo autore) rimane, così, aperta e sospesa, ribadendo la sua radicale ed inesauribile ambivalenza. L'unica conclusione che essa offre è la provocazione a guardare verso un'assenza, ad inscenare intorno ad essa ... una continua e sorprendente mobilità di posizioni prospettiche.²⁰

The rampant use of biblical allusions to promote the *approfondimento* of a certain message also has marked effects in *Perelà*. The extensive biblical analogy enables

²⁰ Antonio Saccone, *L'occhio narrante: Tre studi sul primo Palazzeschi* (Napoli: Liguri editore, 1987), p. 120.

the novel to assume the conventional configurations of a gospel, which may serve as a source of inspiration for emulation and redemptive action. Expressing his regret at Alloro's unwitting self-annihilation, Perelà stresses that he would prefer that people take *emulative*, not *imitative*, action with regard to his own "gospel" of *leggerezza*. The death of Alloro exemplifies Palazzeschi's manipulation of cruciform imagery: "...dal soffitto, a circa di due metri da terra, pende una catena alla quale è appeso un crocicchio di tronchi carbonizzati . . . Sembra l'unione di due tronchi d'albero congiunti rozzamente, e non è che un avanzo umano: Alloro." The switch from past to present tense for this description further underscores the plight of the man who had hoped to become smoke but made the error of imitating Perelà too literally.

Alloro's demise could also harbor significance as a comment on the role of poetry in a social and historical context. For Petrarch, "*alloro*" was a synonym for the "*lauro*," the symbolic dual representation of poetic inspiration and glory that finds its origin in the Greek myth of Dafne and Apollo. Alloro's death could well bespeak the death of a Muse in the Petrarchan sense, or perhaps a comment on the inevitable futility of literary and artistic endeavor. In the classical interpretation,

the "alloro" stood for the enduring effect of poetry in the public imagination. Its burning in *Perelà* seems a likely symbol for the image of poetic glory going up in smoke, probably as a result of public ignorance and incomprehension of the poet's message. This vision reflects Palazzeschi's apparent conviction that art can never exert any real effects on the actuality of life. In the end, no one, not even the artist himself, can attain true *approfondimento*.

The *alloro* appears again in a rather unlikely position in *Interrogatorio*. In the midst of recounting her turbulent history, the Contessa makes a seemingly superfluous reference to the shrubbery: "... *i miei occhi frugavano tra le foglie brulicanti degli allori*" (83), at which point the poet interrupts her narrative (an incivility he commits only rarely) to say, "*V'invidio... nel ricordo, quel momento.*" This "*invidia*," so carefully placed directly following the mention of the laurel, could represent a poetic sort of envy, the envy of his own muse, the covetous and unrequited desire to be able to *toccare il fondo* himself.

Perelà sacrifices his own well-being in an attempt at the psychological rescue of fellow members of his society. His tale becomes a story of attempted universal salvation.

Due to his own philosophy of *leggerezza*, Perelà never seems to act consciously in this respect. However, in blaming him for Alloro's death, the crowd thrusts his function as a "redemptive force" upon Perelà with the symbolic crucifixion of the man of smoke.

By contrast, the Contessa appears in a significantly more self-serving light and exerts little power as a larger redemptive force. She establishes stark oppositions between everyone else's *imbecillaggine* and *ipocrisia* and her own comparative *intelligenza* and *superiorità*, their *disagio* and her *equilibrio*, their *scontentezza* and her *felicità* (23). She does not extend her philosophy of unrestraint towards the liberation of her fellow humans from the bondage of inhibition. *Interrogatorio* could represent a parody of the gospel, a burlesque fabrication of an almost comic "gospel" of sexuality. Luciano de Maria believes the novel contains "*il tema della 'donna libera,' trattato con lo sberleffo e la sensibilità di un giocoliere.*"²¹ The relative seriousness of Perelà and *sberleffo* of *Interrogatorio* seem to trivialize the sexual form of rebellion, which appears as the only form of rebellion explicitly available to woman.

²¹ Luciano de Maria quoted by Orengo.

Through the actions of the Contessa, a specifically feminized approach to realization of the aims of *Controdolore* becomes possible. The Contessa demands to brandish her own tools of rebellion: "*Gli uomini possono dire scrivere gridare, quando n'abbiano la voglia, te lo scrivono sulla panca sul soffitto sopra il muro... sulla gobba del curato, la donna invece no, non mi par giusto, no?*" (44). She enacts the objectives of Valentine de Saint-Point's 1912 *Manifesto della donna futurista*, which encourages action, energy, and sexual empowerment on the part of womankind. Furthermore, Palazzeschi doesn't explicitly punish her at the end of the story, thereby distancing her from the "fallen women" characters who typically meet tragic ends as a consequence of their promiscuity. In fact, her sudden disappearance surrounds her with the mystery and intrigue that have historically created legends, and in that respect could represent a mark of distinction and quasi-deification. However, the author did not allow the canonization of the Contessa to become actualized; he left her story in a drawer, unpublished and, as far as he knew, unread. By not publishing her, he was in effect administering her punishment, condemning her to at least a temporary silence.

Introspection and psychological analysis became particularly fashionable at the beginning of the twentieth century due to the advent of Freud's brand of psychoanalytical theory, although the fundamental ideas had been in existence for quite a long time before. As Carlo Emilio Gadda wrote in *I viaggi la morte*: *Freud non [ha] scoperto nulla di interamente nuovo, ma soltanto ordinato, schematizzato, sistemato, ridotto in termini un materiale già noto da secoli.*²² Psychoanalysis predominated in the Romantic literature of the 1800s, which promoted the examination of the self. Freudian theory opened the field of sexuality in an academic and social context in the twentieth century, which seems particularly relevant to the case of the Contessa. After all, one of Palazzeschi's motivations in *Interrogatorio* was to "denuncia[re] la morale sessuale repressiva del tempo."²³ His implicit censure of the repressive society calls attention to the discontent and alienation of people who dare to think outside the paradigm by following their unconscious

²² Carlo Emilio Gadda, *I viaggi la morte* in *Saggi, Giornali, Favole e altri scritti* (Garzanti editore s.p.a., 1991), p. 462.

²³ Orengo, p. 1.

instincts. Lionel Trilling observes, interestingly, that a madman can also be referred to as "alienato" in Italian.²⁴

To a great extent, there has always existed a significant relationship between literature and psychoanalysis, even though the theory only became more fully articulated in the last century or so. As Trilling phrases it: "The human nature of the Freudian psychology is exactly the stuff upon which the poet has always exercised his art."²⁵ The idea of the "unconscious" has always figured strongly in literature, although the specific label came only in the twentieth century. However, with Freud came the liberal glorification of the unconscious and a more widespread acceptance of heeding the call of innermost desires, this, in fact, being often the most natural and best course to follow. Coming in the wake of Freud's appearance on the scene of modern thought, the works of Palazzeschi elevate the idea of following unconscious instincts to an exalted position.

It remains a question whether indiscriminately obeying commands from the unconscious provides a trustworthy springboard for the upheaval of social norms. Once broached, concerns about amorality or immorality with

²⁴ Lionel Trilling, "Freud and Literature," *The Liberal Imagination: Essays on Literature and Society* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 14.

regard to the works under consideration could frantically multiply. (After all, as Milan Kundera said, *leggerezza* can prove "unbearable.") However, in the realm of non-conformity, who can decree what is and is not permissible? The argument becomes circular: any limitations placed on protests against the "system" would likely originate from the system itself. Palazzeschi's humor offers no tenable solution to his own implicit questions but succeeds more vaguely, as Eco says, in "mak[ing] us feel the uneasiness of living under a law--any law." The function of art remains largely futile, as the Contessa wryly remarks: "*E le tue combinazioni ... si risolvono in superficiali e idiote ammirazioni da esteti di accademia, o in acrobatismi da saltimbanchi*" (36-37). In the end, even the *saltimbanco* is at a loss.

²⁵ Trilling, p. 33.

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