

Excerpt from

THE SPARROWHAWK

by

Gianna Manzini

*(La sparviera, Mondadori, 1956)*

English translation © 2020 by Anne Milano Appel

THROUGHOUT his childhood and adolescence, following his recovery, Giovanni felt a curious emptiness, almost like being secretly at loose ends; no doubt it was the memory, alive in a buried impression, of an absurdly heroic era, perhaps of an atrocious dictatorship; and he felt a sense of inexplicable nostalgia, and at the same time fearful anticipation.

Was it because of this illusion of pre-eminence that he dreamed of becoming an actor? Or because he lacked adequate words for that physical melancholy – a want which rendered his eyes so striking and lost – and sought them in the words of others, in the thoughts of others?

Indeed in his second year of humanities, at university, he was on his way to drama school one autumn evening when, standing at the edge of a piazza, he suddenly felt dazed and contented.

He took his cigarette out of his mouth, looked at it, then up at the sky; and realized that events, appearances, mysterious fires, dates, numbers, emblems, were circling in the air, whirling closer, then spinning away, more slowly at first, then faster, with no predictable direction whatsoever, even presuming a predetermined design existed. It was all about losing, finding and refinding, a perception that drove him into the quick of a grand game of craps, and finally put a face to chance, perhaps to good fortune. But a moment after glimpsing it he shuddered.

It was a shudder that introduced great confusion into the rheumy depths of his chest. And wary but also intoxicated, he distinguished, in a distance that was his alone, the delirium of a giant carillon in which a host of pins flew apart, along with a number of objects: shiny teaspoons, glasses, boxes, lamps, veiled lights, glaring naked bulbs, while a great white cloud of aprons, shirts, tangled sheets, and handkerchiefs, moved to a rhythm of its own, more adagio and almost gently; so that it gave the impression of a haunted celebration. A sheet of paper was enough to disrupt it, drifting down from a window and folded so that it had two wings: a white paper bird. At that moment the cough found again its old path in his bronchia and squatted there.

Waiting for the bus, he turned to look at a department store window behind him.

Just then, a salesclerk almost furtively crawled into the scene of brightly lit mannequins. On all fours, she was wearing a black smock, and her feet were wrapped in large sheets of white paper. Cautious and quick, she removed a raincoat from the arm of a dummy with a gold-lacquered head, and replaced it with another, darker coat.

“But why?,” a little boy on this side of the glass protested indignantly, turning to his mother. Who, in response, dragged him off as he took two or three trailing steps, his face turned to the cardboard figure.

As a boy, Giovanni had thought that acting was a bit like posing, creating a series of masks, learning to move in the scene, balancing the distances between himself and others, between himself and objects, without breaking the flow of words. Now he knew that acting is more than that. But what, exactly? The woman who had entered the window with her feet swaddled in paper suggested it to him. A manner and a gesture which revealed a lifetime. Behind her you could picture the house in which she lived and the street she had to take to reach it. Acting: accents and

mannerisms that create interior vistas; and particular visual angles that shorten or lengthen distances.

“The lucky number, the winning card,” a woman pacing up and down the sidewalk shouted. She promised wealth and no one cared. If only she had been an actress, she would have been able to offer... He bought the card himself. And as he did so, he missed the bus.

Too bad: all the more so because he was curious to see which student would be selected to replace the Queen in *Hamlet*, for the upcoming recital. Because the Queen, with whom Giovanni had studied and rehearsed up until the day before, had come down with the flu; that year it certainly didn't seem to be a mere seasonal illness.

Giovanni had been dragging out a flirtation with Marisa Graziadei, one of his most talented companions, for almost a year. She was a girl who, out of modesty, sacrificed the best of herself: though exceptional, she didn't dare believe in her own brilliance. Perhaps she viewed it as inexcusable boldness; so that, for now, an excess of discretion blocked her way to success. What a mistake, not to allow herself to strive diligently to reach the place where her sensitivity and talent would easily have brought her.

Strikingly blond, exceedingly lithe and willowy – a stalk of wheat, they said, left standing alone in a mowed field – she gave the impression that every gesture, every word was a triumph whose joy retained too acute a vibration, vaguely painful. She seemed like she needed to be helped, rescued, saved.

Once a knife grinder had been shouting “scissors, blades, knives” in the middle of the sun-drenched courtyard; the man worked the pedal, turning the grinding wheel on which drops of water trickled.

At the door, Giovanni waited for her to come out of the house.

Kids ran down from the various stairwells, handing the man knives and razors, or holding out large, very large or tiny scissors. Their mothers leaned out the windows, following them with their words and watchful eyes.

Bent over the wheel, the knife grinder kept calling “Scissors, blades, knives!”

Every household emptied out its domestic weapons, which piled up in the courtyard, wielded proudly by bold, lively, robust kids.

“They'll cut by themselves when I give them back to you. Scissors, blades, knives!”

Sharper, much sharper. The sun flashed overhead; the droning wheel glittered.

“Wait up!” Giovanni called loudly when he spotted Marisa at the bottom of the staircase. She stopped, bewildered. She was wearing a misty-colored dress. In the afternoon light, her loose cloud of hair lost its contour. “Hang on!” he called, and joyfully went to meet her: as if, alone, she wouldn't have been able to reach that cry; while he went forward with a graceful, almost melodious, ease, behind which shone a tremendous vitality.

“Scissors, blades, knives!”

They were already on the avenue, happy.

After going to her house to study, he later thought he saw in that quivering gracility of hers the reflection of a day-by-day struggle. A large family. Brothers and sisters all younger, and unrestrained. Marisa didn't even have the study table all to herself. “Move over: I have to iron pop's shirts.” The iron glided, thumped; bright droplets slid from the mother's fingers as she dampened the shirt to be ironed, spattering the notebooks. And at other times: “Be patient, Orsolina has to deliver her

work tonight.” A knitting job; so her sister kept running the carriage of a heavy knitting machine up and down.

Yet, on that table, one scholarship after another, she had won the right to study at the university and drama school.

Her father gave violin and piano lessons; and often played in the theater. A lingering elegance made him seem out of place and defeated in the midst of his family: like Marisa.

How did she do it, Giovanni wondered. All those times she appeared so graceful and refined, despite the pitiable wool knit cap and worn shoes, how was she able to withstand that bedlam, set herself apart?

He wanted to introduce her to his mother. “She has to like her”, he thought, beaming, “she can’t help but like her, so refined and polite.” Wasn’t that what his mother always longed for herself?

With a look, Giuliana discarded her. “She’s a larva, not a woman,” she said afterwards. And, to the girl:

“Pleased to meet you, young lady. Indeed, my son has occasionally spoken about you.”

“Often, Mama; very often”, Giovanni corrected his mother, displaying an animation which had to suffice for all three.

Then Giuliana, piercing both their hearts, said: “As you wish, dear; let’s say ‘often.’”

And that same evening at the table, resuming the subject: “Picture her when she’s no longer young: an old larva.”

“Love doesn’t ask for guarantees,” Giovanni had objected to himself, “and as for prophecies, it only foresees eternity.”

Nevertheless, the idea of a larva, and an old larva, gnawed at him.

That day, on the bus, as he was swaying in the aisle, hanging on to the strap for support, he said to himself: “Maybe love is something else; maybe all I love is my hold on her.”

In that sense, his encounter with Marisa had been a discovery and a triumph. Because, until then, when it came to women, he had always had to overcome a vague fear: not mistrust, nor suspicion; rather an aggrieved hesitation: as if there were something he had to be forgiven for – him, the most popular, most sought-after young man around.

He was also distinguished by an elegance in which negligence and innovation blended. Was he conscious of it? Was he guided by instinct, or was the effect studied? Moreover everything, in him, suggested a series of questions for which he had no answer. That dazzling, bold manner of looking, like someone turning around, starting to get up, then looking away and recovering his composure; that practice – the look and gesture together – left you perplexed. A painter would have portrayed him in three-quarter view, with his face averted, in the act of turning away from a keyboard, or a book, or a balustrade.

His big eyes lent a somewhat feminine touch, and his arched eyebrows fostered a wide-reaching look that would have seemed contemptuous if, instead, everything, in him, had not communicated affability and welcome.

During those years, his hair had gone from an angelic blond to a tawny color, before turning a beautiful golden brown; but the flair of the buoyant mane’s movements remained the same.

At gymnastics, he had always been the last in the row in height order. And on the day of his First Communion, embarrassed to tower over the children of his age by almost half a head, he kept his own head lowered as he bent over the kneeler, so that the priest had to tap him to make him raise it when he came by with the host. And so at least half of that great ecstasy was lost.

When seen alone, his height was deceived by virtue of his broad, noticeable shoulders. With his way of leaning forward a little, he expressed hope, in addition to generosity and trust: something unanticipated could arise to support a premonition, a secret expectation: so open was he to surprise that he flew to meet it.

But finding Stella again, after so many years, there in his school, was more than a surprise, it was an abounding grace. Reality outdid hope: because he had never doubted that he would see her return, indeed reappear.

That name, no longer pronounced since the days of their venturesome games, sprang up in his heart, along with tumultuous memories that, although tended and protected, had over the years assumed a lifeless fixity. Now, however, what an incessant reawakening they portended.

Dazed, he feels his blood throbbing against a wall that has become perilously thin. Yet it's a joyous throbbing. Albeit alarming. Intoxication and fear, like back then: only the stakes have been raised a notch. And rather than a competition, full of unforeseen surprises, to make an impression, it is an invitation, or a spur that urges you forward, to exceed the usual limits.

Once, in the room as children, a flash of lightning had lit up the little girl's face, distinguishing it forever from all the others, so that afterwards every lightning flash had become her face. Then time had begun to flow very slowly: days like months, months like lustrums; and centuries between one Christmas and another, between one summer and the next. Sometimes everything actually seemed to stand still: and it was ecstasy or tedium.

He looked at her, as if emerging from the contemplation of a dream landscape: in a dusty light, shapes of houses, and terraces, and leafy trees, along with small, vivid figures, and objects. A landscape to which he had long grown inured, and to which he then turned so quickly, the moment she arrived to illuminate and adorn it, that for a moment something flagrant and nearly convulsive remained on his face.

Stella was standing at the back of the room, with her head against a vase full of large dark branches, perhaps laurel; framed by that tangle, her face emerged sharp and clear. Behind her shoulder, a leafy frond rose to join one that poked out a little higher up.

She stared at Giovanni. Her eyes explored his face, quickly, as if for verification: lips, hair, forehead, chin; a searching look that recomposed, added, exactly as though noting the points for a story line. Moving, she went around the column that supported that radiant greenery, and her face reappeared a bit farther on between two divergent branches that enclosed her a little, and brought a vague hint of a smile. Giovanni in fact looked for something in the leaves above, perhaps a sharp edge, a fluttering.

After completing her circle and returning to where she was before, she still had those fronds behind, around and over her head, and still appeared wrapped in an impassive distance in which he alone could join her.

He imagined her in something light and flowing, perhaps the drapery in which the little girl once wrapped herself, a curtain all her own for a scene she splendidly dominated.

The only feature of her face that had really changed was the nose; longish and thin, it gave her a vexed expression, and lent a prickliness to her gaze that was unsettling: as if she were brazenly appropriating a look that was adult, and therefore illicit, and also surprising: because the celestial blue of those irises between the black lashes remained immaculate, implausibly limpid and childlike. And when the director introduced them, the dimples that, as at one time, appeared in her cheeks when she smiled were heartening and unexpected:

“Giovanni Sermonti, one of our most promising students; Stella Celenza, who today is the new Queen.” A slightly gallant emphasis was heard: it was obvious that the director was smitten. Instinctively he ran a hand over his cheek; and was sorry he hadn’t shaved. Thus, hastily:

“The young lady has already acted; she comes from Milan. She will take part in the recital and she will take the course.” Giovanni said nothing: he was afraid of words: he felt their pulsing quickly become unendurable. More than fear, it was the feeling of being faced with a diminished future; and that it was precisely words that would destroy it. Was he not by chance outdone? While there could be no doubt about it, life began at that instant.

A strip of carpet ran between the two of them, separating them with a wide red stripe. Beyond that carpet, a dais; and placed on it now was a settee that had an arm on one side only, high and slanting, so as to support just the head and back of whoever reclined on it.

Having climbed the two steps of the dais, Stella stepped behind the sofa. A curve of the armrest cut diagonally across her chest, exposing only one breast.

He had not moved: on this side of the carpet, he quickly counted the flowers that dotted the border. The feeling of new and almost irrepressible well-being that now invaded him had to be kept at bay even with such subterfuges: count things, mentally assign places in height order to the students who were chatting and feigning a certain disinterest in the two of them, try to guess what notebook Marisa was holding on her knees.: Because besides being magnificent, that great well-being was also threatening: not a serene expression, but an ardent impatience that profited from everything, even, now, from the dust raised by a cloth thrown on the sofa. In effect, that acrid dust was teeming with persistences and apparitions, which tickled the throat and nostrils with dogged gaiety. A sense of exhilaration sprang from everything: and it was a murmur, like that of the sea, with which Giovanni’s throbbing became one; so that he could be in that school and at the same time far away, where the two of them were more closely united.

Again he was aware of the threat of an abounding surge, of being lost, for which happiness could be to blame.

He looked up, and Stella reappeared amid that foliage, in which she now plunged her bare arm up to the elbow, parting the branches, and looked out, as if from a fake window.

Finally together, seated at a small table between a curtain and the window, they discussed the script, with the book under their eyes.

Their companions cast quick glances at them.

“What elegance!”, one of them quipped, alluding to the newcomer: “Are we at school or at a reception?” With a fingernail he scratched briskly at a stain on his jacket cuff, head lowered and frowning. The stain wouldn’t go away. He looked up and added, “Being so tall, she’s not going to look good on stage.”



Stella was trying to stop the naked light bulb, hanging from a wire, swinging over the table; looking up, the light was right in her face, making it look dull and pale, the eyes and mouth glaring.

“Being so beautiful, she can’t help but look good,” Marisa commented; foolishly so because being good-hearted is never enough to stand up to threats and dismay.

“What legs. Damn, what legs! But isn’t that dress too short?”

A girl sat down, annoyed when she suddenly remembered seeing a run in her stocking that went up to her knee, as she was hooking her garter before leaving the house.

“She manages to look like a princess; we’ll see if she can look like a queen.” This was said by a foppish little blond who was buffing his glossy fingernails on his flannel pants.

“Princess, queen, not a chance! Anyone who shows up when the course has already started has all eyes on him, as we know.”

“There’s more than one way to keep your eye on someone. That’s not looking: it’s ridiculing”, Marisa reproached him, turning her back.

“That’s all we need, a type like that.”

The majority of the group, full fleshy lips and bangs down to their eyebrows, was even more quick to trash her.

“I don’t like her. Too arrogant.”

To which, Marisa replied: “

If she’s good, we’ll no longer notice; or we’ll forgive her.” It was too much. The girl with the vicious mouth stared at her; and she reddened.

But there was Stella on the settee, waiting for young Hamlet to break in with the first line. She was transformed: erect, anxious, her jaw jutting forward a little, just enough to perfect her profile, beautiful tight lips, turbulent eyes: so queenly that even her simple stylish dress seemed regal: a flared turquoise skirt that matched the bolero jacket that she had taken off a moment earlier, exposing the white blouse.

Unseen, behind the curtain, Giovanni called,

“Mother, mother, mother!”

Was he hearing his voice for the first time or had his voice changed? A vibration all the richer, unexpectedly carried him beyond himself. Who was he? Where was he? He was left dumbfounded, within a dark nimbus of sonority that alluded to an ineffable communion, ethereal and secret.

“Mother,” he repeated, overcoming his confusion.

And now in that cry he heard something that bound him much more than he thought he could stand.

With a leap, he was on the stage, a step away from Stella.

“Very good. A perfect entrance,” the director broke in. “But move the curtain. Farther back, still farther back. You, now, need more space. Let’s begin again.”

Alone again, behind the backdrop, Giovanni feared his elation: excessive, almost foreign to the turn of events, it made him mistrustful. His memory itself, bright, but barely defined over time, like the ribbon of a current in the sea, constantly deprived him of the certainty that he had deluded himself of finding there, relying on it.

She, meanwhile, had resumed her pose, this time standing farther away from the chair arm. Waiting, her hand leveled at the settee, she lifted a thread of the old drape with a fingernail.

He called her three more times, with the assurance of an unprecedented audacity, according the entire scene a tone of splendid outrage.

Imperious, with a contained swaying of her head and torso, her eyes searching, the Queen asked:

“Why, how now, Hamlet! Have you forgot me?”

And a hint of mischievousness seasoned the sentence. Giovanni may perhaps have thought he could answer:

“Stella, my Star, a sign of my destiny”: because the girl’s lips turned up and stretched slightly. In this imperceptible way, she stepped out of character for a moment. Once again, he was astonished by his own voice, almost as if another burst of youth had bestowed it on him, astonished to hear that great vault of resonance above him where a flight of reawakened words perhaps hung suspended. Words which no longer needed to be articulated in syllables: vague, shining, they remained fertile with a fickleness profoundly familiar to him. And Stella had a yearning desire to be a part of all that magic. So that the dialogue took on a breathless course: the words circumscribed a space, protecting them both; and the fiction was an obliging means to broach their own drama.

But the director felt it was necessary to present the scene differently: the settee on the right, instead of on the left; and the curtain placed so that Hamlet would enter behind the Queen.

As they waited, Giovanni gazed around the room where the students were gathered; he smiled at Marisa, who, encouraged, came over to ask:

“Did you know each other?”

Without hesitation, Stella replied:

“Yes; we were about four years old then.”

He added:

“We met at my house, during a little party.”

Marisa opened a tin of throat lozenges and offered them.

“They seem to help,” she said. “Everyone recommends them.”

“No, thank you,” he said, politely refusing.

“Afterwards,” Stella smiled.

The flu had given the class an unusual look. All those scarves around the neck. And that rush to close the door as soon as someone came in; and turning around all together as soon as anyone sneezed or coughed. Giovanni watched as Marisa went back to her seat. Around her, everything always seemed a little blurry and misty. Like a figure viewed by a myopic, she remained at the center of faintly fabulous distances; and that gentle confusion between herself and objects, between herself and her surroundings, seemed to be an effect of bonhomie or trepidatious tenderness. You looked over her shoulder and glimpsed the constant unfolding of an increasingly blurry and alluring succession of landscapes. Her scant years could be pictured in places, dwellings, events, family groups, courtyards, gardens; which could thus replace her image by way of explanation. “Will she ever stand out, be really prominent?” he wondered, in a semi-attentive state that bordered on indifference. Stella, however, broke in to distract him altogether:

“Tell me about your mother.”

Not at all surprised that she still remembered her, he replied:

“I think I disappointed her a great deal.”

She questioned him with her eyes, raising her chin a little.



“Perhaps,” he explained, “she longed for me to be a diplomat, imagine! Or, in any case, hoped I would pursue one of those professions that are gratifying to mothers.”

“Is she still beautiful?”

“Maybe she is; but she wants to forget about that.”

It had been almost touching when the hairdresser did away with the white hair that had begun to turn her temples silver. She’d looked at herself in the mirror, beaming and terrified: “Dear God, what will people say, what will they think...”. She wanted her white hair back, yet she laughed at that glimmer of refound youth. Giovanni had been moved: “But no one will notice. They’ll only say you’re looking lovely.” The poor woman.

“Yes,” he repeated, “she wants to forget about still being beautiful.”

“Ah, I understand...”

Giovanni glanced at her doubtfully. Evidently she had heard him describe his mother as a provincial woman intent on appearances, obsessed by fear of scandal. “Would they have forgiven her a greater self-assurance? There are people for whom nothing is forgiven, not even virtue.”

He added: “She spends a lot of time in the countryside. Charity work... Oh, she believes in what she does,” he concluded.

“Naturally!”, Stella hastened to approve, with an obligingness too sympathetic not to be false.

“Naturally”: the word travels back in his memory, loses all meaning; futile and coquettish, it is a flight of syllables that accompany a snappy toss of the head and the tap of a foot. No doubt it went back to the lips of the little girl, intoxicating him like a gesture of exceptional self-assurance.

“Of course,” he continued to object to himself: “my mother believes in what she does.” Still, you could not deny that with every act she sought to project a certain impression, safe from any criticism.

He remembered her at the window, arms on the windowsill, like the time he came home at dawn and, spotting her, wanted to turn back. He did not forgive himself those impulses, so frequent; yet he could not stifle them. He had required so much care, it’s true; but, now that she would not stop remembering it, and let him know it, he thought it was a foolishly cruel way of pointing him out as delicate, of discrediting him; as well as harnessing him.

Once, in the mountains, he had seen her, frightened, approach one of his friends as they were about to dive into the water of a lake; and he was certain he was not mistaken as he read her lips: “It would be harmful for Giovanni; I beg you, please...”. The boy she had spoken to, an apathetic redhead, with pale eyes and loads of freckles, must not have grasped the reason for all that concern; so that moving closer she perhaps whispered: “Bronchitis...”.

A little boy, already in his bathing suit, chilled and hopping up and down at the top of the ladder, said to him: “Look at your sister, how worked up she is with the albino...”. Her slacks and white sweater made her look very young. “I beg you, please...”, she must have been pleading. Uncaring, Giovanni had dived in, and afterward nothing had happened.

The most loving mother in the world; but so vigilant, so foreboding, she couldn’t understand that by constantly watching over him, she was suffocating him; and ultimately it became irritating.

Stella drew closer:

“You’re distracted. Our instructor said you start acting before you enter the scene, much earlier; maybe even while sleeping.” She added: “A few minutes break and you’ve already abandoned the Queen.”

There was no doubt about it: she would not allow him to withdraw. A prodigious lightness filled him; but staked on a narrow, crumbly margin, as though of clay: the least little thing and it falls apart, the slightest thing and it all comes tumbling down.

They saw the velvet arras, raised by two men, behind which Polonius would hide, slide over, separating them.

Diligently, as though assigned, the others sucked their throat lozenges, recommended for those who had to spend time in an indoor environment. As they passed them around to one another, the metal tins glittered and the faint sound of lids snapping shut could be heard.

Stella’s eyes scrutinized him; so furtively that he had the feeling he had to recover something that had been deftly stolen from him. He ran a hand over his hair, bringing it down; and felt a slight, almost negligible painfulness of the scalp. His hair, becoming sensitive, more alive, almost thicker, was duping him with a trivial, laughable pain; so that he had to seek himself farther away, up above: and he found that he had curiously grown.

From that moment, resuming the scene, an imperceptible breathlessness became apparent in the rush of dialogue. Avoid all obstacles; ward off, avert all calamity, all fear; don’t let yourself get ensnared by anything; do it, now that the future hung suspended, like applause between two hands.

“Come, come, and sit you down; you shall not budge,” he imposed and pleaded, facing her.

“You go not,” he said pressing his fingers on her shoulders, “till I set you up a glass where you may see the inmost part of you.”

Leaning over her, he offered her his own face as the mirror.

There was a great divide between Hamlet’s thought and the intention that he brought to it, and therefore a small hesitation that bolstered naturalness and truth: as if, in order to possess the spirit of the lines, a slight deflection of attention were necessary, almost a rejection; as well as an innuendo that projected those words into an enticing obscurity. Which it deserved, superimposing on the character the resurrected shadow of a memory that, he was certain, bound her too.

The queen bolted, struggled, cried for help. Giovanni felt his fingertips, separated by a burning veil, press on her cool wrists without finding contact. He slid them further up, near the bracelet. That burning separated him a little from his clothes: neck from collar, shoulders from jacket; palm to palm, it overtook him entirely, up to his throat; it held him and isolated him; but in that new corporeal life the words, overcoming a constraining agitation, sparkled with emotional imprecision. An imperceptible tremor made them nascent; and the voice remained so open and supple as to make him think that he could insinuate between the lines, between the quivers.

“Sit you down, and let me wring your heart.”

A perfidious reasonableness reversed Hamlet’s passion; but this time too the timeless alternative was justified in the irony of that false pressure, of that comical contact.

“That girl is a devil,” Marisa whispered.

And the boy next to her:

“He’s the one who’s in control of the scene.”

“But look at her: she doesn’t need to move, or speak, in order to act.”

The other persisted: "She follows; he leads."

Yet Giovanni sensed that this was not the time when he could prevent her from getting away; but some other time, another time, and it would involve constant sidestepping and postponement, irreconcilable with the culmination of events that confronted the Prince and Queen Gertrude, Giovanni and Stella. Bide his time. Soon, like when the little girl spoke to him, swinging a door between them while holding on to the knob. Or when she questioned him, feigning a passionate interest in whose blaze he found words, gestures, revelations; before, soon afterwards, relegating him to a disinterested inattention that nullified everything.

But it was this disappearance, illustrated in a thousand ways, that made her more real, even while driving her away.

With that feeling of rebellion, he railed:

"An act that blurs the grace..."

And he spoke of blood and falsehood, of the "soul plucked from the body," of "sweet religion [that] makes a rhapsody of words," and of "this solidity and compound mass... thought-sick at the act." The words, learned, repeated, heard echoing in his room, sent back from the mirror, when, alone, he practiced his part, spoken and re-spoken on that stage, adapting different inflections, now leaped from his soul to his lips. At last they were his, his conquest. And yet, around them, there remained an aura, a delirium of bursting expression, in which soul and poetry spilled over.

He breathed the bouquet of Stella's hair. Moving closer, he smelled the scent of her face powder and her clothes. The smell of old stage sets, old tattered costumes, the worm-eaten sofa filled the air round them. Fragrant, the reality of her. Now, a knee on the sofa, almost standing on top of her, Giovanni saw glimmers flashing in the merciless clarity of her irises; he could make out a mole that extended an eyelid towards the temple, making her eyes appear slightly uneven: a trifling detail, but enough to give her a strangely sharp expression; and, as a clue, made him keep his mind and eyes on her face. And that inkling of time resurrected in the dusty odds and ends of the props was magical. So that Stella arches her eyebrows, tightens her lips, and there she is, regal, blending into the reams of curtains that, stirring gently around her, thrust her into the background of that fearful drama; or she holds back a complicit smile that, denied to the lips, finds dimples in her cheeks, and here she is, among other veils, other mists, in the story of that improvised game that drove them, as dare-devil children, in search of a ghost.

He's here, almost in her arms. He has his fingers on her wrists; he presses, squeezes. Yet a force infinitely greater than his takes her away from him; so that he is required to pursue her unclearly from one distance to another, from one reflection to another, each time finding himself surrounded by a renewed solitude, by a renewed sense of defeat: because ultimately it was on this word, on this pause, that the hiatus or truce necessary to come together should have taken place.

The result was a performance with lengthy suspensions, feverish, though somewhat enraptured acting in which agitated flights of words were sometimes interrupted by half-cries or whispers.

The students listened with a shade of suspicion: they seemed to be waiting to catch their fellow actors in a small deviation, a lapse of memory, to make up for who knows what, perhaps an injustice.

The portraits of the two husbands-brothers that Hamlet inflicts on the Queen, rather than images rising from the shadows, were real presences:

"...Here is your husband; like a mildew'd ear, blasting his wholesome brother."

Sitting in the last row, Marisa cups her hand over her parted lips; her neighbor, leaning forward, props his chin on his fist, his elbow on his knee; a girl whose scarf slipped out of her hands, does not bend down to pick it up; standing at the door, the blond young man scratches a pimple near his ear, not realizing that he's made it bleed.

Hamlet speaks of "rebellious hell," of "compulsive ardour." And the Queen coaxes, flatters, restrains him:

"O, speak to me no more;... No more, sweet Hamlet!"

But he has found something that relates more to his own story than to the Prince's drama. Standing apart from her, he smiles faintly, staring into space.

"What would your gracious figure?"

Distracted, his voice becomes tenuous, honeyed, almost feminine: submission, love, and fear filter it, so that it sounds extremely cautious and cleansed to the Queen who, with a costly susceptibility to ghosts, stares at him questioningly.

"Do you not come your tardy son to chide?"

And he accuses himself of having "lapsed in time and passion." What tardiness? And why was he surrendering now? To whom? Extreme anxiety: so that the ghost who now inhabits the scene becomes a thousand times more real than that of the betrayed and murdered King.

With a rush the Queen is behind him. Turning, his face is just inches from hers. In a fraction of a second, they burst out laughing together.

"What just happened? They laughed. Why did they laugh?"

"Be quiet."

On the stage, they pursued the same incubus. The anxiety became a small vortex of emotions, from which the ambiguous figure of the intruder who once fascinated them was resurrected, urging them on to a new game, at the end of which their rapport could acquire the significance of a bizarre rite.

But she was not an intruder, if he circled around her, at times fearing to approach her, at times wishing to glimpse a foolhardy likeness to his entire life. Who had let her in? How many years had she been waiting? Did he carry her with him, unbeknownst to anyone, or was it a trap, long awaited, which he had now fallen into, and from which he could no longer escape? Or was it a deadline that had to be met?