

Lei dunque capirà © 2006 by Claudio Magris

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initial pages:

No, I didn't leave, Director, as you can see, I'm still here. Thank you again for the special permission, truly exceptional, I realize that, don't think I'm not grateful to you. He too was all excited, he never thought he would be granted authorization to enter the Home, when he requested it, so he could come and take me back. Of course he was afraid he hadn't thanked you enough, and in fact someone – I couldn't see who, in this dim light; you can't see very well in here, a shadow slips away before you can make out the face, aside from the fact that they all look alike, we all look alike, it stands to reason, in a place like this – someone thought he turned back at the last moment to thank you again for your concession and that was why... The fact that things then turned out the way they did is nobody's fault – or rather, it's my fault, but it doesn't matter who does what in here. At least that's what those outside think: to them we don't matter at all anymore.

To him, however, I did and still do matter, very much so, seeing as he took the trouble to come all the way down here and didn't give up, like the others, faced with the Rest Home's strict regulations prohibiting its guests – for their, for our own sake – from receiving visits that would threaten our peace and tranquility. Not to mention going out, just imagine, that's all we'd need, to find ourselves in that infernal madhouse, that bedlam of traffic and ill-mannered people or worse, not to mention the awful weather, from which here at least we are sheltered. But he really loves me, he is as much in love as on the first day; he fell head over heels and couldn't be without me. When my health unexpectedly deteriorated, he forced me to enter the Rest Home – an attractive, comfortable, well equipped place, no doubt about it – and he bawled and ranted and let himself go, not shaving and not even changing his underwear. He bored every friend he met with a long story about his misfortune and how lonely he was. It wasn't enough for him to know that I was close by and well cared for, better there than at home or in the hospital, he would say, that's for sure, but how can I manage all alone, I wander around the empty rooms as if they were someone else's, a stranger's, if I open a drawer it's always the wrong one, I reheat the coffee from the day before, revolting, and the bed, the empty bed... On her side I can still see the slight depression left by her body, he would say excitedly; it's impossible, I know, the sheets have been changed who knows how many times since then, but it's there, yes, there, he repeated, that slight hollow beside me, with me, her absence by my side, my life's companion, I can't even find my books anymore, it was she who kept them in order, no, you can't possibly understand...

After a while even his friends avoided him, that persistent melancholy was annoying to people, not to mention the breast-beating, accusing himself of God knows what failings... It's the accepted thing, they would say, everyone does it, when someone is ill there's nothing else to be done, Rest Homes are there for that purpose, for our loved ones, for their well-being when they are not well, because when they are ill – and God knows I was ill, with that damned infection, fire and ice, the breakdown of my entire body, worse than if I had been bitten by a venomous snake – we don't know how to help them, what to do for them. That's why Rest Homes exist. We have to resign ourselves, indeed be content and at peace with our conscience, when we accompany them there and entrust them to that qualified staff.

But not him, oh no, the heart has its reasons, he would say, the heart breaks, and if you tell it not to break, it breaks just the same, like mine, he mourned, oh, I can't go on, thinking of her there, in that place, in those large wards or tiny cells, in that rabbit warren, surrounded by all those others, shriveled up like mummies, soiled; I know they clean them up right away, everything is always kept in order, even the garden, but

meanwhile she, she who is so beautiful and delicate and dreamy – yes, that’s how he sees me, he’s truly a darling man, my husband – with that face and that smile untouched by the years, in there with all those others – she may well be comfortable, he added, she doesn’t lack for anything, I know, but I, what will I do without her, lucky her, poor me, have mercy, have mercy on this unhappy lover... If you think I’m exaggerating, he would tell his friends, it means you have no heart and no feelings, you have no poetry in your heart, who can ever understand my pain and torment, my suffering, a poet’s grief...

And he would start to write, in those notebooks of his that I’m so familiar with; he would write my name and then something else, and again my name and something more, but afterwards he would tear up the sheet and throw it away, because he realized that he couldn’t think of anything to say. He knows these things, it’s in his blood, he notices immediately if he comes out with something trite – he’s always excused anything he did, with women moreover he allowed himself to flit from one to the other whenever he pleased and he also expected to be understood and forgiven, since he was so swayable and susceptible... – but with words, no, there he excused nothing, he sensed at once when something wasn’t right and did not aim to deceive.

In short, only when we were together did he feel entirely serene, confident – even about what he wrote, after he had read it to me and had seen in my eyes – or rather on your mouth, he would say, when my lips, pouting a bit at first, parted slightly, almost a smile, no, not yet, but... – I would prune his words, of course – excessive, immoderate and magnanimous as he has always been, he lavished words profusely and I pared them for him, discarding the rind, the core and even a lot of the pulp, when it was necessary. He would not have been capable of it, fervent, unrestrained and compulsive as he was, always a morsel and a glass too much, but he let himself be put on a diet by me and he knew that, if something remained on the plate after I had passed everything through the sieve, it was truly something good. With you, he would say, with you at my side I know who I am and I’m not so bad.

final pages:

Behind there, he would say, showing me the impenetrable doors of the Rest Home when we glimpsed them from afar as we strolled around the outskirts of the city, you can see things as they are. Here outside all we can see are those doors, whose gleaming convex laminae reflect splintered images of things that lengthen obliquely or inflate and swell if we move backward or forward a little, growing thinner, expanding, shrinking. All we know are those ephemeral travesties, not the truth that lies hidden on the other side, behind those bronze mirrors. But I, my love, he would say to me, can no longer celebrate only the mirages of those mirrors, those illusory reflections. My song must be about reality, truth, that which holds the world together or dissolves it, no matter what the cost. Even if that cost is life – I didn’t ask him whether he meant his or mine – or else it must fall silent, which for me would be worse than death.

And then, Director, I felt a stab in my heart; a flash of light, a thunderbolt that shatters the darkness but also the spirit, because I realized what it was that he would immediately ask me and I knew that it was all over. The road impassable, the bridge collapsed, the abyss insurmountable. It seemed to me that I could already hear him asking me about the Home, and about you, Director, about the Foundation and about us and about what it’s really like inside here and about how things, love, the world, really are. Naturally, because he too, Director, is convinced – like everyone, like me before I came here – that once you enter the Home you finally see the truth for what it is – no longer veiled, reflected and distorted, disguised and made-up as it is seen on the outside, but directly, face to face. Oh to sing the secret of life and death, he would say, who we are whence we come where we are going, but the perimeter is unyielding, the pen fractures against the bronze doors that conceal destiny, and so you’re left outside to puzzle hopelessly over passing on and enduring, over yesterday today and tomorrow, and all you can do is put the pen in your mouth and suck on it, because only the great, horrific Truth is worthy of song – at least of his song, he didn’t say it but he thought it – and that Truth can only be known behind those doors.

There outside, Director, people are yearning to know; even those who pretend they have no interest in

knowing would give anything to know. He's yearning to know more than anybody, because he's a poet and poetry, he says, should uncover and tell the secret of life, tear away the veil, break down the doors, reach the bottom of the sea where the pearl is hidden. Maybe, I thought, he had primarily – only? – come to get me for this reason, to know, to question me, so that I might tell him what lies behind these doors and he could take up his lyre and extol a new, unprecedented song, a song that tells what no one else knows.

I could just see him, clinging to me, awaiting my every word, his green eyes feverish... and how could I tell him that... You see my point, Director. How could I tell him that here inside, apart from the light that is so much fainter, it's just the same as outside? That we are behind the mirror, but that the back is also a mirror, no different from the other. Here too objects deceive, dissembling and changing color like medusas. There are a great many of us, like outside; even more of us, which makes it all the more difficult to know one another. I've spoken with one or two, but nobody knows where he's from – oh sure, the city, his parents, even his grandparents, although their memory grows dim, but as for what he's seeking, the secret of his origin and end, nobody knows anything about that. We even form friendships, from time to time even a flirtation or maybe something more, a little fling, an affair, but here too it soon becomes impossible to tell the difference between one and the other and before long it's the same old story, mix-ups and misunderstandings. In next to no time you no longer know if you love each other or if it's just routine, and then all the rest, whining vindictiveness fits of pique, in short just like back home.

For that matter, why should we know more than those on the outside, more than we ourselves knew when we were out there? And you too, Director, why should we be able to see you here? We assume, as we used to assume, that there is someone running the whole shebang, but who he is and what he's like and how he is... why should we know that? Those ailments and infirmities that sent us to these corridors and to these dark vales, those small calamities of the heart or brain, the venomous bane of a snake or a gas valve don't help us to better understand this immense labyrinth of before and after, of never and always and me and you and...

We're on the other side of the mirror, but it's still a mirror, and all we see is a pallid face, without being certain whose it is. If someone breaks a leg, he doesn't expect to see the Director because of it, and racking one's brains isn't of any more help. The river flows, blood flows, a dike breaks, the water overflows and floods the fields, the swimmer goes under, sink or swim, re-emerges, goes on swimming without seeing anything, either in the blinding midday light or the dark of night.

Tell him that I, even here inside, know no more than he does? He would have had a stroke, that bard of mine. I could just picture his complaints, a man who was done for, a poet whose theme had been stolen from him; he would think that cosmic conspiracy was all a scheme against him, to break him, to condemn him to silence. If he told others that here inside it's just the same as outside, they would rip him to shreds, especially his fervent female admirers who worship him as a guru, and if he kept quiet about it he would feel like a coward. But most of all, how humiliating, to have come this far, all the way down here, only to find out that it wasn't worth it, that behind the door there is nothing to report.

I could just see him, harrowed dismayed panicky livid in a huff furious with me for having spoiled it all for him – and then the days and nights together, me at his side and him looking at me crooked, the pain in the ass who brought the curtain down on his stage, scared that I would blab it around to others, embarrassed to be seen with me, he who had departed for the unknown world like a hero and returned empty-handed. And when the time came, for him or for me, to return to the Home again, this time for good, what a farce having to repeat our goodbyes, now merely polite formalities. All of a sudden I felt exhausted, spent; the thought of starting all over again, cooking, washing, making love, going to the theater, inviting people to dinner, thanking them for the flowers, talking, misunderstanding and misinterpreting one another, as always, sleeping getting up getting dressed...

No, impossible, I couldn't have done it, I couldn't do it. I felt so tired all of a sudden. Still, perhaps I would have gritted my teeth and swallowed my fatigue and I would have carried on. Women can do that, they do it almost all the time, even when they no longer know why or for whom. Even the idea of having him always

underfoot again didn't exactly... but most of all the idea of having to keep quiet about it, changing the subject whenever he asked, whenever he wanted to know, given how sensitive, how fragile he is...

So that's the reason, Director. No, it's not what people said, that he turned around out of extreme love, unable to be patient and wait, and therefore because of too little love. Nor was it because, had I gone back with him, to him, he would no longer have been able to sing those sweet, poignant songs that expressed the pain of losing me, of every loss, songs that had been around the world, distributed by juke boxes and later by CD's, loved by everyone, who would continue to love them only if he still sang them and others like them, his torment over my absence, the wind that moved the strings of his lyre, that made him a poet only if he was without me, for the ache of being without me.

I've heard that silly gossip. No, Director, it wasn't on account of such a pitiful, trite reason that he turned around and lost me. That's a false accusation spread by envious colleagues who want to depict him as a narcissistic egotist to make him lose favor with the public, maybe the same ones who spread those rumors about the pretty boys whom he supposedly consoled himself with in my absence, infuriating all those adoring female admirers of his, jealous enough to scratch his eyes out. No, Director. It was me. He wanted to know and I prevented him. God knows it cost me. Yes, it's true, I was tired, by now I had gotten used to the Home, almost fond of its routines. Still, I would have loved to go out for a little while – just for a little while, we both knew it – into that summer light – at least for one summer, a summer on that small island where he and I... Even by myself, even without him I would have been happy to go walking there.

But I would have destroyed him, by going with him and answering his inevitable questions. Me, destroy him? I'd sooner be bitten by a serpent a hundred times more venomous than that tedious infection, rather than do that.

You will therefore understand, Director, why, when by then we were almost at the doors, I called to him in a strong, firm voice, the voice from when I was young, on the other side, and he – I knew he would not be able to resist – he turned around, as I felt myself being sucked back, lighter and lighter, a paper doll in the wind, a shadow that lengthens retreats and merges with the other shadows of the evening, and he watched me, petrified, but safe and sound, and I vanished joyfully from his view, because I could already see him returning to life tormented but strong, unaware of the void, still capable of serenity, perhaps even of happiness. Now in fact, at home, in our house, he is sleeping quietly. A little tired, of course, but...

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