

Controra Ep. IV and V

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Controra Ep. V

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Curated by

Like A Little Disaster

OPENING RECEPTION

5 and 6 November H. 6/9 p.m.

5 November - 10 February 2023

Open days/ hours: **Saturday and Sunday 6/9 p.m.** and by appointment at
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Like A Little Disaster is proud to present the fourth and fifth episodes of the nomadic and periodic exhibition series "Controra".

The "controra" is a space-time suspended in the sunny early afternoon of Southern Italy - from noon to 4 pm approximately.

It is the time of day when the sun casts its shadow straight and the body disappears, leaving room for poetry, mythology, and the fear of meridian demons.

These are the "heavy hours" dedicated to dreams and nightmares, hallucinations and "Fata Morganas", the hours of idle indolence, experienced and performed in anarchist opposition to the efficiency of the production flow dictated by chrono-capitalism.

One must refrain from going to open and public places and it is appropriate to exile oneself in one's own home, shutters closed, in dim light and in silence. One may doze or sleep, but it is not the only expected activity; indeed, thinking, reading even just a few pages and meditating on them, taking notes, caring for, loving oneself and devoting oneself to active idleness. The controra is an oxymoron, where otium proposes a reflective inversion to the course of our thoughts.

Ep. IV - In defense of *controra* -

It is in September that many people feel a particular melancholy: when they are obliged to go back to work and leave the seaside behind. Above all, when days get inevitably shorter, they carry the memory of controra: a dazzling time, which is supposed to be between one and four in the afternoon,

in which the whole of Southern Italy, sunk in a pool of scorching heat, commits the sin of sloth and rests without any remorse.

The fullest inactivity (the one involving bodies which, sweaty and already greedy, seek shelter among the folds of ever white linen- with lemon leaves tucked inside the pillow) takes place in the southern south of the devils – or behind the pages of a newspaper, whose reading will be easily interrupted by the dream of the body lying next to it.

Controra, strictly linked to light, is a ritual which takes place in the dark, in imagination's favourite place, behind half-closed jalousies, behind which, as if to better conform to the dim light, the tone of voice declines into a whisper and gestures slow down, almost catapulted in the middle of a wait, in which time and space are suspended: the golden reverberation of the streets seems to no longer exist and, in the respite of a dimly lit room, the crowded clangs of life are exiled. This is what a room looks like in the summer in the deep South: perfectly suspended.

The controra is associated to specific rules for the whole family unit: men, already accustomed to not doing anything in the home, consent that even women - mothers, aunts, grandmothers - interrupt housekeeping to devote themselves to private matters such as carnality in the nuptial bed or, simply, to giving their bodies some rest; but first those same women will shush the children into absolute silence. They, like it or not, will have to fall asleep in no time at all. A precept almost impossible to satisfy on command, but which, every afternoon, thanks to widespread lethargy, will be miraculously fulfilled even by the most recalcitrant children. Private matters are then satisfied.

Those hours will also be the time for gossip and secrets about what happened earlier today. Hardly does the discussion touch on tomorrow: the future, in the southernmost south of the devils, is not contemplated much, while in Sicily it is so far removed, that in the island's vernacular the future tense is completely missing, and not only because of superstition – prevalent in any decent civilization – but also because of a mythical historical legacy, which is inextricably intertwined with personal fate: "*oggi ci siemu, rumani nun si sapi*".

A fatalism of this kind, very reluctant both towards modernity and towards its precepts, which are based on the linearity of time, is one of the original cornerstones of *controra*: since each man is assigned an unintelligible and circular destiny, the only way to endure it is give in to it as much as possible. Here, this giving in - which at its worse becomes sloth - is perfectly mirrored in the way of living and thinking in the South, through an immeasurably slow, almost eternal conception of time. Of course there is never any certainty that tomorrow will come, but over there afternoons are endless, flooded with light upon light; all one can do is find refuge in a little bit of shadow, slowing down actions to the same pace of the everlasting midday.

We must not believe, however, that *controra* starts at the time of postprandial idleness - for the layman, the so-called "nap". If anything, the opposite is true: it begins precisely when you sit down at the table; it is there that the *controra* is beautifully set. Despite forty degrees C or, perhaps one should say thanks to one's heroic insubordination to them, we eat as if it was the last meal of somebody sentenced to death: parmigiana, steaming chicken broth, *pasta alla norma* - fried aubergine is a diktat to which it is cowardly to rebel - caponata and fish, inevitable in all its variations; obviously, during the meal, abundant wine will flow to wash down thirst and bewilderment.

The metaphor of somebody sentenced to death is neither random nor improper: one must forgive and forget the absurd anxiety of existence at least at the dining table, thanks to that generous wisdom which allows one to mix, equally earthly, the fruits of the earth with the art of consolation.

One's gluttony must be satisfied, but also and above all one's spirit. Finally tamed, it may give way to that ancient, medieval sloth - monks were its followers - which arises in the middle of an abundant and full life. Never the other way around. It is precisely from a sort of intoxicated satiety that the *controra* draws its origin: once necessities are satisfied, one can indulge in the glories of the superfluous, excesses and imagination, of which the South, for the record, is all too full. It is all here, the unbridled luxury of *controra*: a careful waste of daily time, almost like a Zen exercise, only apparently silly and useless.

It is only in the midst of abundance that one can devote oneself to an unusual practice in present times: inaction, best represented by reading, which in the *controra* is very often stopped to better reflect on what has been read, and speculation, which perhaps does not lead to any efficient conclusion, but opens a gracefully unbroken dialogue with oneself and, again, a dream of impossible things, those things which are now too far away and those things which we will probably lose because that is the way it should be: life is a succession of separations and "wasted time", if you know how to use it, can be a prerequisite of that.

The comparison between the north, strenuously industrious, rich and yet stressed out, and the south, perennially backward yet more inclined to leisure, regardless of the obligations of the market, cannot certainly be a coincidence. *Otium* versus *negotium*, where the former, for conditions to be fulfilled, imposes the fulfillment of what is necessary as the ultimate goal, while the latter - which has an uncontrollable desire for endless matter - does not know what to do with merely necessary things, except as a mere starting point.

To underline the blessed differences between one *modus vivendi* and the other, the most incisive example remains working hours: in the north there is no longer any lunch break and even Sundays themselves, once considered untouchable - patron saints days and the remaining bank holidays - are now the most productive of the year; in many areas of the South, to the contrary, all holidays still resist and on any given day opening hours for trade are quite flexible, closing at one and reopening after five, give or take half an hour. Starting from June, then, in certain carefree provinces it is not at all rare to find shops that open in the afternoon only on demand, despite the economic crisis.

Certainly there are all and sundry pros and cons on both sides, but what we are talking about here is the consideration that one has for one's own time, inaccessible to others, and how it should be treated: it can be relegated to the tight and cramped times of leisure, that is, during what few holidays the Italian state allows, or cherished, day after day, slightly opening those old jealousies, to be among the most agreeable of time-wasters: those who, while lying on the sofa, just stare at the ceiling without a thought even remotely touching them. Here, those very modern Oblomovs will reach what the transcendentalists and the wise have long and earnestly sought: emptiness.

The key to understanding *controra* is precisely in empty times, and is sometimes immediately forgotten afterwards: far from any definite and definitive form, it refers to being and feeling somewhat indeterminate. Whoever gives way to it, even though he or she is here, is also, perfectly, elsewhere. This carefree interruption of reality is a condition which unsettles the unspeakable, while operating the indemonstrable.

Can you do that?

Ep. V - Meridian Demons -

It was the English Norman Douglas, wanderer in Calabria between 1907 and 1911, the head crowded with Hellenistic memories, who was the first to associate the *controra* with the ancient family of meridian demons. In Capo Colonna, not far from Crotona, in the still and shadowless heat, it seemed to him that he was reliving that noon which for the Greeks was the heavy hour, the hour of divinations and mirages, when the temples are uninhabited, the Sirens weaken the sailors and the Nymphs lead their worshipers to delirium. "*Controra* they now call it—the ominous hour. Man and beast are fettered in sleep, while spirits walk abroad, as at midnight". So he noted in Old Calabria, at the height of his long itinerary from Lucera to Crotona. He then quoted *psalm 90*, where it is said that those who live in the shelter of the *Most High* will have nothing to fear *ab incursu et daemonio meridiano*, from the assault of the meridian demon; brilliant invention with which the Seventy, followed by Jerome, personified as a demon what in the Hebrew text was anonymous devastation. But if the meridian demon was for the ascetics an insidious tempter, who came to visit them in the desert when the sun was higher and macerated them in sloth, the neo-pagan Douglas, blind to the discernment of spirits, was immediately bewitched by the flattering features of that genius "candid and benign". He had fallen into her mercy. Here it is, the first temptation of the midday to which many still succumb today: to make the *controra* the image of a satisfied idleness, to recite yawning praises of laziness and slowness, to be mirrored in the complacent mirage of an inner south that is all luxury, calm and voluptuousness, even proposing it as an antidote to the excitement of modern life; in short, to petrify the meridian demon in meridian thought. The first obstacle to these affectations is perhaps already in the word itself, *controra*, which Matilde Serao (*Il paese di cuccagna*) defined as "the Neapolitan period of the day which is equivalent to the Spanish siesta". And, however, if the siesta refers to the sixth, the canonical hour which corresponds to noon, the *controra* has more uncertain roots. Battaglia gives a very thin etymological clue: "Southern voice, from against and now", and the meaning of that against is not clear. Could it be understood in the sense of curse, as in Douglas's ominous hour? The common opinion seems closer to that of the Lucanian Leonardo Sinigalli, who described "that white part of the day that we call the *controra*, the adverse hour" (so in *Furor mathematicus*). The adverse hour: which prevents work, mocks at any effort as a vain feverish frenzy, gets in the way of every regard, and leads to the surrender of sleep.

Maybe we are bewildered by our personal meridian demon, who carries luggage and a toothbrush to follow us everywhere for a lifetime, but we persist in thinking that that "against" bears with itself the traces of a fierce, bloody fight, a fight between Jacob and the 'angel; that the *controra* is one with that southern pessimism - another demon with creepy worshipers - that sees everything running towards death, as for the ancient ascetics already sloth was nothing but a disguise of sadness; that the adverse hour is in short repaid by the symmetrical aversion of those who suffer from its gravity and outrage. At the root of the *controra* would then be spite, resentment towards the passing of time, reluctant hatred towards the now; formula in which philosophers very far from Magna Graecia will perhaps hear the echo of another: "the will's aversion to time and its 'It was'" of which Nietzsche spoke. But let's let the echo dissipate. Step aside, Zarathustra: it's too hot here for your great melodramatic "yes", for all those philosophical poses and gesticulations; let our resentment simmer, and let sovereign contempt against time be exercised by dissipating it, squandering it, sleeping in broad daylight if necessary. A visitor from distant countries will mistake it for a blissful neo-pagan quiet, and playing

the part of the new Lotophages for the benefit of tourists will give a certain pleasure. So here is this column of ours, which has little in common with the surviving column of the temple of Hera Lacinia under which Douglas met his meridian demon. If that was Doric, this tends to be the Corinthian one, which is the elzeviro of the capitals even if it rests on the unstable plinth of contemporaneity.