

MMXX

Gaetano Pompa

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Mutmassungen on ourselves

Every work by Gaetano Pompa begins and ends with a conjecture. The idea of the conjecture becomes central to his artistic language once it encounters *Mutmassungen*. The artist himself makes this clear through the following anecdote: “*Mutmassungen* is a Germanic word which translates loosely to conjecture. My friend Uwe Johnson from Pomerania (...) used this word in his 1960 book *Mutmassungen über Jakob* (*Speculations About Jakob*). Since then, I have used it as well, as an homage to him and because of the beauty of the word.”

The story in Johnson’s novel, referred to by Pompa, revolves around the reconstruction of the mysterious death of Jacob, an East German rail worker. Throughout the plot, fragments emerge in which characters recall Jacob in divergent and contradictory ways. These different accounts never in fact correspond entirely and each voice adds a detail which complicates, instead of clarifying, the reconstruction of the facts. The reader does not have an investigator steering the way, nor is there an epiphany in store for the ending. The author accompanies the reader in the reconstruction of a puzzle by handing over only a part of its tabs. The unsolvable mystery of the death of Jacob as told by Johnson transforms the conjecture from a closed narrative device typical of every detective novel, into an open narrative device. By this logic it is possible to conjecture without end, for the pure pleasure of conjecturing the conjecture itself. Gaetano Pompa had probably, over time, ripened the same idea. His encounter with Johnson offered the center around which to catalyze his own version of it. From that moment onwards Pompa is no longer compelled to seek out the most ancient of amulets charged with managing everyday apprehensions. *Mutmassungen*, the conjecture, will do the dirty work for him: it will be his Pinocchio, his hunting dog, his disguise, his finest paraphernalia. Once the role of the conjecture in Pompa’s oeuvre is established, value can be found in his interest for the trade and for invention.

I can no longer find the declaration in which Pompa manifested his sense of *malaise* towards (art) criticism. Perhaps I inferred it from the lines in which he expresses his praise toward the world of peasants. Particularly in the nineteenth century, a modest number of artists celebrated the truth of the hoe. Examples of this are both noble and well known. Millet, Fattori, Van Gogh: angels and gleaners, oxen and carts and potato eaters. A sentimental plethora unfamiliar to our companion. In fact, Pompa’s own outings through the countryside dodged rice weeders and stone breakers. He preferred the sensual curves of a landscape to their sentimental excesses: “Humans draw the landscape tracing along its terrestrial crust *via* their own labor [...] I love peasants because they are serpent-like, because they are close to the earth.” Not one callus-ridden / callused hand or crumpled garment. Pompa chased men from the soil. And what remains on the ground is an enchanted biblical ecosystem in which snakes, having to tend to the landscape with monastic care, are no longer tempters, but decorators. Rather, the human is not there, replaced by her most noble alter-egos who since time immemorial populate the fantasies of women and men. In order to uncover them, one ought to explain that Pompa’s deep time encompasses future and past all in one bubble: there’s the extroverted Commodore, the generic Cherub, the Angel and the Archangel, the Satyr (who is also onanist, (or in simpler terms, a masturbator), like the one in this exhibition), but also Ezra Pound, Barbarossa, Queen Elizabeth I, Zoroaster...He introduces almost all of them to us (through) *Mutmassungen*, conjecturing with and over them, being preoccupied with more or less difficult enterprises, based on the size of the painting, as is meet since art has been art. For a maternity scene with saint, a meter or so will suffice. The same goes for the capturing of a fugitive. For an annunciation one needs a few more centimeters, as one does with a battle between our conjecturalist and the Archangel Gabriel too.

As for the phrase I am unable to find on his aversion to art criticism, it is possible that I attributed the thought of Daniele Milvio and Emanuele Marcuccio to Pompa. In their research into XX century vernaculars, MM have kept clear of the distractions afforded by the kind of art chatter that throws off course. Better a

swapping of orifices, best if the law of gravity were to be employed in favor of just falls and voices of truth, St. Michael the Archangel, may he be subject to the will of the Conjecture. Strange god *Mutmassungen*, who knows not any other belief other than the joy of conjecturing. Looking at the paintings, it is evident how *Mutmassungen* is a refined human animal. Gaetano Pompa showed it the art of posture, and, above all, he trained it as one does a little bird, to say the word only by singing it. In fact, *Mutmassungen* does not know how to write. To communicate it is enough for them to become architecture, a rule of a game, music. Instead, it certainly knows how to dress and is familiar with the value of a garment. As far as costumes go in Pompa's work, one could embark on a PhD or open a fashion house.

With the intent of understanding more, I now would like to conjecture a bit over the author. A quick glance at the tribute, featuring late-century works, that MMXX dedicates to him, might tempt us label Gaetano Pompa as post-modern. This, due to the years almost coinciding, although it's a little late since we are in 1996. But more due to the mixing of times, geographies, and styles, all distant from one another. Due to the rehabilitation of the figure, keystone or, depending on the perspective, a 1980s point of no return. Certainly, his record is amiss: biography, exhibitions in the right company, and apparitions in the necessary registers. But his codes are also different. Pompa does not juxtapose the elements as is done in post-modernist free collage (other Italian examples are the architectural designs of Paolo Portoghesi or the ceramic adventures of Luigi Ontani), rather he reassembles like one reassembles types/typefaces in a story: a battle between knights, a parade, a grand event. The mixing is moved by a narrative will that is transformed by illustration: from Trojan's Column onwards, yet without ever reaching us in the present. Rather he stops long before us, in search of eruditions in a world that still guarded them. It is there that he also transported some amongst our closest already mentioned fathers: Pound, Ray Bans, Kafka. All so pompous and formal, that staying within the strictly historiographical realm, rather than speaking of 'figure' in Pompa's case, one ought to speak of 'figurine'.

From conjecture to conjecture, Pompa could be a post-modernist ante litteram, a pre-post-modernist or, more likely, a pre-modernist in ancient times. Yes, it's true, faced with his paintings, it is unclear whether he was born in the wrong time or whether the time we have drawn as we know it should be left to those moderns, over there, still anchored to the the XX century.

Denis Isaia

Translation: Chiara Siravo