

## *The Texts of the Convivium*

### **THERE IS IN MOANING AND WEEPING THERE IS A SHADOW OF PLEASURE**

“È pena troppo barbara / sentirsi, oh Dio, morir / e non poter mai dir: / Morir mi sento! / V’è nel lagnarsi e piangere, / v’è un’ombra di piacer, ma struggersi e tacer / tutto è tormento”. (“It is a far too barbaric sorrow / to feel, oh God, dying / and never be able to say:/ I feel as if I’m dying! / There is in moaning and weeping, / a shadow of pleasure, / but being consumed and, at the same time, keeping silent / everything is torment”).

These are verses taken from Pietro Metastasio’s *Antigone*. It expresses, says a comment, “like a sensual pleasure in punishing, a low, subdued throb, the sweet torment...” In the middle of the eighteenth century, we are in a Metastasian climate. But other authors, and other common people, know how to say similar things in a much more brutal and tougher way. “Master...” asks Dante to Virgil... “Who is that mighty one who seems to heed not fire, and lieth lowering and disdainful, So that the rain seems not to ripen him?”

We are in the inferno, where the blasphemers are tormented by a rain of fire. Capaneus realised that Virgil is speaking about him and so he wastes no time in giving an expression, more than to pain, to rebellion, to stubborn anger from which he is taken. “Such as I was living, am I, dead. If Jove should weary out his smith, from whom He seized in anger the sharp thunderbolt, Wherewith upon the last day I was smitten, And if he wearied out by turns the others. In ngibello at the swarthy forge, Vociferating, 'Help, good Vulcan, help!' Even as he did there at the fight of Phlegra, And shot his bolts at me with all his might He would not have thereby a joyous vengeance”.

Capaneus was inflicted with eternal suffering. But another idea that recurs in traditional theology is that of temporary suffering, sometimes, unspeakable, that God allows to be inflicted on His creatures in view of the attainment of greater good. One may well wonder why God has to make us pay so dearly for this greater good that He promises us.

Even the more innocent creatures, such as children, appear condemned to suffering the most atrocious punishment and suffering.

In the *Karamazov Brothers* by Dostoevsky, such a possibility is keenly deplored in the famous confession of Ivan to his brother Alexei: “It’s not that I don’t accept God, don’t get me wrong, but it’s this world created by Him that I can’t bring myself to accepting”.

As for the suffering of children, if this suffering “serves to complete that amount of suffering needed to pay the truth, then I would state in advance that the whole truth would not be worth such a price [...] And then, they have over-estimated that harmony, the admittance is really far to expensive for our pockets.

“Therefore I will make haste in giving back my admission ticket. And if I’m an honest man, I should give it back as soon as possible. This is precisely what I will do. It’s not that I don’t accept God, Alésa, just that I want to respectively give him back His ticket”.

A mother, says Ivan, whose child was torn to pieces by dogs, cannot and should never forgive those who tortured and killed her son. Her immense pain and sorrow of a mother could forgive him but never the torment of her child torn to pieces: not even when he himself forgave him.

The final harmony can wait: “I don’t want any harmony, for the love of humanity I don’t want it. I prefer to remain with all the suffering to avenge. I prefer to keep my unavenged suffering and I unappeased disdain, eve though I may be wrong”.

Furthermore, one should remember the protest of Rieux, in *The Plague* by Camus: “I will refuse to death to love this creation where children are tortured”.

A friend of Camus narrates that he, as an adolescent in Algiers, saw a lorry run over an Arab child, killing him outright; and in front of the poor desperate mother couldn't stop himself from exclaiming: “See, the heavens don't answer!”.

If God exists and He is almighty, then He is certainly the first responsible for evil and death; and we can't worship such a God; and not even can we believe in Him; and if we believe in Him our honesty itself will force us to blaspheme Him: this is what Albert Camus calls the “metaphysical revolt”. He doesn't believe in God, but he wants to declare Him, pragmatically with the sole aim of subjecting Him to refusal and rejection.

There is an affinity with Malraux, who, in *The Royal Way* expresses the wish that God exists “so that one can cry his own revolt against Him”.

Camus' metaphysical revolt is the refusal of a world where everyone suffers — even the innocent, even children — and where everyone dies. Alongside the consideration of pain there is a new element here compared to that of Dostoevsky: the vision of death as the end of everything, which cancels everything making it useless, in vain; therefore there is no more hope and life itself appears to be entirely absurd and without meaning.

The same theme dominates the philosophy of a Sartre.

In rejecting this universe where “the generalised death penalty defines the condition of men”, Camus' *l'homme révolté* «refuses to acknowledge the power that makes him live in this condition. The metaphysical insurgent is not therefore atheist, as one may think, but necessarily blasphemous. He simply blasphemes before everything in the name of order, denouncing in god the father of death and the supreme scandal”.

These are philosophical blasphemes, from intellectuals of a high level. But one shouldn't be so surprised that to lower socio-cultural levels, the blasphemy has become a kind of pet phrase, a little like the full stop and the semicolon of a sentence.

That which traditionally used to be called the sacrament of “penitence”, is nowadays called the sacrament of “reconciliation”. By confessing one's own sins and asking for forgiveness, one is reconciled with God. But the examples adopted up until now are of aversion, of a rancour, of an irreconcilable hate.

It is an attitude that one can assume and maintain not only before the Divinity, but also before men. The experiences of relationships with our fellow men, propose a varied, almost unlimited record of cases to us of such a phenomenon.

Balzac (in *Papa Goriot*) points out: “If the human heart finds rest by climbing the high grounds of affection, it rarely stops along the steep slope of feelings inspired by hate.

I remember a woman, who, forced to live with another in a climate of reciprocal repulsion, found herself in a painful state of loneliness when this other woman died. When asked to explain why, she replied with these words, which then form an hendecasyllable of extremely high poetic regard: “Non mi è rimasto più nemmeno l'odio!” (“I am left even without hate!”)

Someone to hate is nevertheless someone who keeps us company.

After the quotation of the classics of worldwide literature, the testimony of this woman like many others, sums up well that sense of intimate pleasure that one could feel who hates someone, who nurtures an irreducible hostility towards him or her without any prospect of making peace not even in the most distant future.

I remember a speech held in a teacher's trade union meeting by a brawny, vigorous and full-blooded colleague who often used to explode as became his character. The most incisive thought expressed by him on that occasion was that in the trade union and political fight, things were better for us when “we had it in for someone”.

How could we “have it in” for a God who doesn't exist? Here we have the need to create one for us by using our imagination and to affirm him pragmatically with the sole aim of making him sit in the dock so that we can convincingly question him.

Abstracting from any metaphysical valuation, the most elementary spirit of observation forces us to notice how plentiful – so to speak - the spirits of black humour are. There is a huge number of those who are always dissatisfied, gloomy, hypercritical, irritable, those who complain, those afflicted with doubt, the inconclusive hyper-scientific, those who always see the glass half empty instead of half full, the ravens and other birds of ill-omen.

Certain intuitions of Dostoevsky, Sartre, Camus etc, well deserve every attention. But one shouldn't carry them to extremes. A pessimist of discreet doses can curb every superficial and easy optimism; in the same way as he can contain, on the contrary, the sad joys of wallowing in negative thoughts.

I am speaking here about pleasures and joys seeing as, as a matter of fact, closing oneself up in sorrow and grief without any prospect of coming out of for centuries on end could indeed be, in the convolutedness of our soul, “a mixed blessing”.