

# A Tin Box

Arduino Cantàfora

Could it have been the remoteness in which I now find myself, or the peculiarity of this house, of this road, of the name of this road, to impose on me these nocturnal wanderings of the mind which, for some time now, I have become used to living with?

Who or what is the true author of this writing, I will not be able to determine, and if at the beginning I could still venture the illusion of autonomous choices, it has been enough, after having gone through a few dozen pages, for me to realize that, slowly or in a rapid hurry, I can no longer guarantee to maintain a firm control of the contents.

As to the late professor of *latinitas*, inhabitant of the floors of this house, which now I, in his place, am treading, I would never have imagined him capable of opening up to me such a necessary perlustration into the protagonists and the anxieties of my life.

To fill his shadow, which to me will, in any case, remain of an absolute vagueness, other shadows have forced the threshold of my vigil and, through a precipitation of events, have crowded together within the walls of this room.

From the distance of memory, dormant for years, they have regained a fluctuating and at the same time vague certainty of presence.

– A thought for me! –

They say, as they look at me with a bit of melancholy.

– Stay a moment longer, don't go away, let me tell you. –

But I am doubtful and in pain, as I do not perceive any reassuring dialogue between them. I do not hear the sound of a voice, of a meeting resumed, as when, in the past, I shared in what they were living.

If I had at least been able to transform myself into the moderator of an assembly, in which each one could re-

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Fig. I. A. Cantàfora, *Ici les projets eux-mêmes sont souvenirs*, 1985, oil on wood, cm 30x40.

late, for himself and for everyone, other significant passages, and to recompose their peace, because there would still be many things to put in order.

Absolutely nothing.

It seems to me that they don't even see each other. They pass through each other's eyes into a total indifference regarding what has ever happened to the other ones.

– But how could you! – I say – I seem to remember that you loved each other. How is it possible that you don't want to remember that now! –

– Look into each other's eyes for a moment. If you don't want to talk, at least take one look! –

But nothing changes. They all keep their eyes on me, and even so, they don't take a single glance at each other.

– Aunt Angelina, you, who have always been so good, just tell your nieces one thing. Tell them now: it was nothing. Through this forgiveness you forgave everyone else and understood the precipitation of situations.

An unbearable illness.

It's impossible, you know, to go back home, and if you suffered undeservedly during the last months of your life, forced onto the horror of that bed, tied up like something disgusting, with tears streaming down your cheeks, yet you don't bear a grudge. –

– If you won't say it for them, say it for me and give me a little peace. –

But then I ask myself: what right do I have to ask her; what have I ever done for her that can justify it.

I can only stop talking and stay quiet.

And then you, like all the others, who with total foolhardiness I have summoned into this room, will you have wished to follow the path I have imposed? And even though they apparently loosened their tongues to tell me about fragments of their lives, will I, in truth, be doing them any service?

Thousands of miles away, why should I ever have deprived them of the absolute silence, there where they are now. A silence for which there is no way back and from where you cannot go forward.

It is certain that they cannot speak to each other, men, animals and things, and although they pass through my memory, they can never exist again.

In an honest reflection, what I can feel, in the awareness of the substantial futility of this convocation, is the undoubted pertinence to the place where it is taking place, in fragile support of my complete selfishness.

Will this be enough to justify it?

Fig. 2.A. Cantàfora, Avec le temps I, 2016, vinyl + oil on wood, cm 70x50.



Fig. 3.A. Cantàfora, Avec le temps II, 2016, vinyl + oil on wood, cm 70x50.



Fig. 4.A. Cantàfora, Finestra I, 2012, vinyl + oil on wood, cm 49,5x29,5.



Fig. 5.A. Cantàfora, Finestra II, 2016, vinyl + oil on wood, cm 49,5x29,5.



It's not an exam, everyone will come out with full marks. I would never allow myself to judge them, here or elsewhere.

The road on the edge of the woods and this house are really an ambiguous microcosm, a true receptacle for everything you want to put into it.

This I have learned, after that initial bewilderment of being there, that had forced me to move with such extreme caution.

They are both in disrepair and rather run-down.

They cannot allow any kind of preclusion.

In the boundless disorder they live in, they wouldn't even notice.

And perhaps it is precisely this chaotic nonsense that has stimulated a pathetic examination of my own origins.

But, perhaps, I'm just trying to put some order among the shards of various lives, that have rained down on me, for wanting to listen to them and to give a possible meaning to mine, almost as though I were playing at Angelino's job... He, along with all the other ghosts who, within the walls of this house, are feigning a life, in the impossibility of existing.

Exactly the way they had lived it when they were alive.

I'm searching for a concentrated precision, since, evidently, it will do no good.

What's done is done, and it's all water under the bridge now.

And in the name of the road, accomplice to the meaning of the house, I take the opportunity for a vast wandering that is associated, by other clues, with other eccentric and yet precise contents that it itself could mean. As it is of the domestic space in which I live.

Names attribute character to the substance they evoke, and if I live on *the road on the edge of the woods*, the content is declared by the intrinsic meaning of living on the edge. A territory of ambiguous exchange, as are all thresholds.

It doesn't matter, if now I don't see the vanished distinction. It is the name I listen to.

I know I live where two existential orders, along the borderline, have come into conflictual contact.

On this side, I see the streets I frequent, because in cities one has the right to choose and to belong; it is legitimate to have very precise ideas.

One day I would like to write about preferred urban geographies, unfortunately only my own, as I have no possibility to generalize them.

And so I represent them.

I also see, as for every city, pages of sadness, from obtuseness to injustice, from arrogance to suffering, in the wide range of shades so typical of human manifestations, and I cohabit them.

And I see the time of the city and the time of nature that surrounds it or that artificially lives in it. I understand that they are different yet at the same time intimately linked, because the one and the other; the time of the city and the time of nature, place us, the first in history, the second in existence: the two faces of our being humans.

The time of history should be meant as forever, in the sense of *semper*, to imperishable memory, and time is *tempus*: the nail, *clavus*, fixed in the wall of the temple of Jupiter Maximus, at the time of the Ides of September; "[because] there was an ancient law written in archaic characters and words that in the Ides of September a nail was to be fixed in the right-hand side wall of the temple of Capitoline Jupiter, adjacent to the chamber dedicated to Minerva." Thus wrote Livy.

The nails are there to keep count of the years that pass and with them, the events of the community, self-represented in the historicity, to give prominence to those episodes which were to be remembered forever.

It's not really like that, on the contrary, it's nothing like that at all, it's a continuous effort of translation, otherwise everything is lost in an instant and the nails remain there but represent nothing.

Nails are fine when they are able to transform themselves into an equal number of plots for actors well-practiced in the "*commedia dell'arte* of life" who, based on that past, manage to give meaning.

Paths with leaps into the dark are improbable, the original and founding meaning of things forgotten.

Memory precedes History, it is like *memini*: I remember, I want to remember, it is *mneme*, personified by Mnemosine, it is *anamnesis*, like the confession of one's own ailments that still structures the first stage of the doctor-patient relationship.

The time of reflection and, therefore, of the consequent representation, although constructed on chronology, is not only this; it invests in interpretative projects and is immediately transformed into remembered time. And every time, all the rhetoric of human passions reappears in a flash, accompanied by all our verbal linguistic apparatus which, if well-constructed on the time of certainties, of what is and what has already been, is also filled with hypothetical phrases. The Latins made a trilogy of



Fig. 6.A. Cantàfora, *Teatri di città I*, 2014, vinyl + oil on wood, cm 80x120.

the hypothetical phrase, and we all well remember having paid dearly for it at our school desks with disfiguring blue markers on the timid pages of the homework we handed in.

The specter of the *consecutio temporum* hid behind reality, possibility and unreality. *Consecutio temporum*, the correspondence of verbal tenses, that is to say, that the number of nails is structured on at least three levels. Among all the possible *filis-rouges* of connection dwells the time of reflection, that can have an infinite duration or last just an instant.

I reflect and represent things in the fullness of the time of thought.

It will always be an instant later; it can never be direct, it will never be the thing, but only a possible reflection on the thing: a hypothesis.

It's a world of mirrors, as in a catoptric image, the content of reflection. And mirrors, however well you polish them, will always remain a little deforming.

Certainly, we can walk through the streets of the city completely distracted or lost in a thousand contingent emergencies, we can go from point A to point B by the



Fig. 7.A. Cantàfora, *Teatri di città II*, 2014, vinyl + oil on wood, cm 80x120.

shortest path, ignoring everything we encounter, we can also become professionals of indifference, but sooner or later, the moment will come, when in lifting our eyes we will meet her, her, the city, and questioning her we will question ourselves and recognizing the huge worksite of accumulated efforts, we will understand her profound soul and how space and time, in her, tell of these efforts. Beyond this and beyond big History, although it exists, I think of the small history in which everything slowly metamorphoses, and that gives an account of impossible, never-written books. And the distracted observer will

become aware of the lights and shadows that inhabit it, as in a face, and will become aware of its uncertainties and even its bitter folds, as in a face. And he will become aware of the sequence in the very heart of simultaneity and will feel a shiver down his spine, because in an instant he will grasp, in an unrepeatably intuition, the inextricable complexity of the overlapping and juxtapositions. The time of his intuition will reveal to him, as if by magic, the other time: that of the duration of history. At this point he will lose his way and (or) change his life or never again raise his eyes to meet it frankly, and he

will let himself be lulled distractedly by the fashions of the idea of progress, based on commonplaces such as globalization, the unification of languages due to inevitable economic factors and ways of life. He will find himself a convinced affirmer; without even knowing the reason for substitution of the metamorphosis, which is the only true, inevitable and fatal encounter between people. But metamorphosis follows the rhythms of life and does not quantify the possession of an immediate expiration. He will live more and more in temporariness, in the ever-sooner; he will want everything immediately, even before having expressed a desire. He will dream of moving from one place to another in a flash. Where he arrives, he will leave a trace of dirt, and he won't feel at all bad about it. He will turn into an invasive tumor because he will want to be everywhere in any case; everywhere, his model will be the best, and if others haven't understood this yet, they should wake up!

But it shouldn't be like that, because all the beauty of our being human lies precisely in the meeting of types and the patient migration of languages.

The type is meta-historical, conceptually and in its applicative potentiality. For all types it is possible to retrace a path that is, by definition, dialectical and in which everyone can feel a belonging.

The answer; on the other hand, absolutely coherent and a result of the same arrogant indifference, is monocultural farming, murder perpetrated on the territory.

I am aware that we are now very far from the equivalence of the etymon *urbs*: city and *urbum*: "plough," as if to say that the city was founded by its own farmers and that there was an unrepeatable coherence between each city and its own territory. I know, this is no longer the case. And it's not a matter of regretting it, even if it wasn't unpleasant to see the farmers arriving early in the morning from their vegetable gardens just outside the city, between irrigation ditches and troughs, in the fertile soil of the Lombard plain. They arrived with their little horses trotting to the rhythmic jingle of bells. We were on the road to school, and the teacher was explaining the life cycle of a grain of wheat to us.

It was a simple and fundamental lesson, but it was also a very difficult, profoundly ethical lesson that gave form to the meaning of life.

Nature has nothing to do with historicity, it defines for us the sense of eternal return and the pleasure of expectation. Of that expectation for which things are identical to

themselves, even in the unrepeatable uniqueness of each subject: it is the Platonic "moving image of eternity" in which the time of existence is situated.

If history is the presence of memories, nature is repetition and renewal, it feeds the other need for memory inherent in us: the punctual expectation of the opening, every time, of the corolla of that flower.

Nature and history, agricultural territory and cities either founded the landscape, or had founded it, in the mutual ability to situate the sense of the infinite.

The city is within the landscape, just as gardens are landscape within the city, that is to say, in the time with no return of history.

Nature has other nails in the temple-time of Jupiter Maximus, or it has only one big nail at the beginning of everything, before all and after all, for which, we humans, ultimately represent an insignificant mishap.

It is only for our own good that we should constantly repeat this to ourselves over and over again, because if nature can easily survive without history, history cannot exist without nature.

Life has preceded us and will follow us in any case; everything will appear as ruins to other spectators, completely indifferent to the anxiety of our science and of our rhetoric of passions.

The Earth has existed for four billion and seven hundred million years, science tells us, that science in which we believe today, I do not know if they are many or few, I respect the life of the universe, I cannot even imagine them, but what I do know, and again it is science and history that tell us, is that, if we give a value of twenty-four hours to those four billion and seven hundred million years of the Earth's life, the presence of our world, founded by the *homo sapiens*, the world of history, the world of the name of things, the world of nails in the wall, cannot be calculated as more than a tenth of a second.

A tenth of a second that is "*traurigfroh*," both desperate and joyful, seeing that one is aware of it.

And here, *in the road on the edge of the woods*, directing my gaze to the opposite side, leaving behind me the bustling swarm of the city, of the city's culture, amidst its lights and shadows, I imagine that on the other side there is the kingdom of nature, of the profound voice of necessity, established along the woodland's meandering paths, where labyrinthine progress was an intrinsic condition of advancing, unless one were able to recover the codes of recognizable signs, as animals know how to do.



Fig. 8.A. *Cantàfora, Domenica*, 2006, vinyl + oil on wood, cm 80x120.





Fig. 9. A. Cantàfora, *Domenica pomeriggio I*, 2006, vinyl + oil on wood, cm 80x120.



Fig. 10. A. Cantàfora, *Domenica pomeriggio II*, 2006, vinyl + oil on wood, cm 80x120.

Inside it, in the heart of the woods, dwells the mystery of the other life. For centuries, those who have ventured there have done so at their own risk. In the forest, western man has moved, not always following a rational order but, almost in the grip of a delirium, thinking that the only possible activity able to justify all the dangers he was facing was robbery.

For generations, one after the other, our world has believed this.

In the forest, no intelligible light could be detected, because we, in our fears, could not see it, in an underlying injustice, superimposing the objective physical danger, for the fragility of our being, to the most ambiguously subtle spiritual allegories that, within it, found an expression of all the possible evil.

It is no coincidence that Dante undertakes his journey there, in the heart of that dark woods, for facts related to his spiritual drama, finding in that image the most appropriate evocation of the place of fear and not of the structured balance that, beyond the human hand, manages to survive very well, as always.

Fatally, with such a thought, the straight path is lost, because we are no longer able to understand it.

The entire patrimony of legends tells of it.

In forests you encounter treasures, guarded by dragons, and only thanks to the cunning that allows you to kill them, will you emerge, after a thousand vicissitudes, with

your pockets full of gold. In fact, to be more precise, the vicissitudes always precede the killing. When it is all over, all the impossible paths of approach, as if by magic, will dissolve, and you will come out of the forest in a flash.

The forest has been relegated to meaning the darkness of the conscience, for a contradictory sense of guilt, covering all the evil that has been brought into it.

And in the typical symbolic reversals, veiling the truth of where evil actually dwells, it itself, from innocent, has become the incarnation of sin and guilt.

Thus justified, heroes will pass through it; they will have to travel far and wide, endowed with enchanted swords to disrupt it. Avengers, in essence, of an "unutterable" that, to be honest, dwells more inside, rather than outside us. But thanks to the alibi constructed through it, the great question will be able to move to an exterior, to accuse those who are not to blame.

In our typical conception of the idea of infection, we will produce little monsters in the test tubes of the laboratories of thought, to spread them in the darkness of the night, at the edge of its boundaries.

In an unpredictable interval of time we will imagine, forgetting that we ourselves introduced them, that they have become enormous and very dangerous and that they have always lived there, and that the time has come to free ourselves from that monstrous slavery, to free ourselves in an act of holy salvation. Only in this way will



Fig. 11. A. Cantàfora, *Domenica pomeriggio III*, 2006, vinyl + oil on wood, cm 80x120.



Fig. 12. A. Cantàfora, *Domenica pomeriggio IV*, 2006, vinyl + oil on wood, cm 80x120.

it be possible to block the horror of the demand of unworthy bloody sacrifices, of unimaginable cruelty, which they continue to ask of us.

But is that true?

Where does evil come from?

From those who brood it in their soul.

And once you set out on a path, there's no going back.

That is the true meaning of destiny.

Until that moment there must occur, every year, on predetermined dates, sufferings and cries of young innocents to offer to the dragon and to the dark thicket of trees and rocks, from which he will emerge, on that day, to claim, according to the predetermined covenant, what is due to him.

My first encounter with these atmospheres, full of obscure extorsions, I had between the folds of my Uncle Gaetano's productions, whose proto-Romantic character seemed to be perfect for keeping them alive and the blank face of "Mezz'ommene" hid the monstrosity of the demands of that entity, halfway between the human and the beastly, the real protagonist of that zone of shadows, of limits and borders. I would like very much, now, to be able to remember in detail the complexity of the dark dramas that my uncle's imagination was able to set in motion, where kings and princesses, squires and heroes, lived together on the small scene of his inventions and, above all, I would like to listen again to the conversations

of the family audience that followed with equal participation my anxieties with their nails digging into the skin of their knees.

– But come on, Gaetà...–

Especially if it seemed to them that my anxiety was becoming too intense.

And in the morning, seeing the puppets in the box that was their home and from which they re-emerged only during my stays in Rome, I was amazed that that pile of wood and multicolored fabrics could, in the game of the scene, become living matter; so full of life and so exciting. I still have a very nice memory of that box, and I can no longer determine how much I have added to it over time to increase its contents. Thinking back on it, I see, imprinted in the enamel of the colored tin, the curtain of a theatre, with the boards of its protruding proscenium. The circular tarpaulin in the white and blue background came alive in the blowing wind, and there was also a red banner, waving in the sudden gusts of wind.

The surroundings were reminiscent of a lagoon landscape. In a field in the background, the apse of a church crumbling away amidst the dead growth of a bramble thicket was sinking into a vague ground, full of fragmented ruins, and in the foreground, also full of ruins, four characters with bizarre headdresses followed the motion of a magpie watching them from one of those capitals disappearing half-way into the earth, like a teacher watching his pupils.



The multicolored lid left me perplexed, not allowing me to understand what the original contents had been, whether a huge quantity of cookies or something else. What I knew, was the present one, enclosed under a greenish-blue sky, animated by golden clouds that faded into the distance of a marine swamp.

Mezz'ommene and all the others had been enclosed there for such a long time, from long before I had come into the world, and before the debut of the theatrical talent that Uncle Gaetano had shown to his sisters, in their youth, when it had provoked the same tense reactions in them that I was now experiencing.

The time that had passed, the strongly urban Roman context, in a certain sense, must have dampened the imminent urgency of the contents of that story-telling, as it had probably been at the time of their faraway Abruzzo, a time when all the gossip they heard could only corroborate the heartfelt intimacy, in a justified tension, of a true sense of fear.

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However, it is certain that his scenic dramas, thinking back now, were not simple banalities and always managed to place themselves on the edge of a frontier condition, where man must cope with an imperious and distressing nature.

And it was precisely here that his perverse taste was situated, when, within the representation of an untroubled celebration, came the cruel request of that Evil, claiming his fatal and necessary portion of happiness.

As though it were not given to men to live, apart from the sufferings of everyday life, another space, without having to pay a price for it.

It was only in this way that one could think of maintaining a peaceful relationship with that severe and cruel nature, more stepmother than mother.

To me, my uncle's fables opened up those greater ones that, along the way, we have all encountered and that are established on the mountain of sacrifice.