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The Restless Mind of Italian Humanism: On Massimo Cacciari's *La mente inquieta*

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Abstract

Massimo Cacciari's *La mente inquieta* [*The Restless Mind*], first published in 2016 as an introduction to *Umanisti italiani. Pensiero e destino* [*Italian Humanists: Thought and Fate*], is now being reprinted as a separate book with some additions. Cacciari's intention is to emancipate fifteenth–century humanism from the Heideggerian and post–Heideggerian assumption that it was not real philosophy and nothing more than philology and erudition, marred by an anthropocentric, essentialistic ideology about what "man" is or is supposed to be. Cacciari's argument is that philology "is" philosophy; it was so from Valla to Vico, and from Leopardi to Nietzsche. By re–reading Valla, Alberti, Ficino, and Pico in this light, Cacciari deemphasizes the anthropocentric reading of humanism and brings to light its internal tension, its fundamental "insecurity." There is a tragic component in humanism. It struggles, on the one hand, to harmonize the classical tradition and the Christian heritage and, on the other, to come to terms with the impossibility of harmonizing the city at both the philosophical and the political level. A "tragic" and unfulfilled longing for "peace" runs through the humanistic debate of the fifteenth–century up to Savonarola's failed attempt to a radical reform of faith and politics.

Keywords: Alberti, Fortuna, humanism, Pico, possibility, virtuality.

For a long time, and certainly after the political unification of Italy, fifteenth–century Italian writers, philosophers, and intellectuals did not enjoy a good reputation in their own country. At the height of the Risorgimento and immediately afterwards, when the imperative was to portray Italian culture as "one" and always striving toward the geographical and political unity to come (to show, in other words, that Italy had always existed and its cultural continuity had never faltered), the cultural figures of the *Quattrocento* seemed to fail the task of representing Italy, and their reputation in the newborn kingdom was not very high. Regardless of the high opinion that Hegel expressed toward Italian humanism in his lessons on the history of philosophy (an endorsement that, alone, should have had the Italian Hegelians think twice about the matter), the humanists were

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hastily grouped under the rubrics of grammarians, rhetoricians, philologists at best, or just minor *literati* (it was a century without poetry, it was said). Being categorized in every field except philosophy definitely did not help their reputation in an environment where philosophy was endowed with an idealist supremacy.

As Rocco Rubini has noted in his highly documented *The Other Renaissance*, hardly anyone wanted to be related to historical figures who had not shown national feelings and who, seemingly sheltered in their disciplines, even seemed content of the intellectual segregation in which they lived.[1] Moreover, what lineage had they left? There were Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino, but where were their followers, where was their school to be found? Likewise, one could ask where the followers of Tommaso Campanella or Giordano Bruno were. In the history of Italian philosophy, one had to wait until Giambattista Vico came along for a Vichian genealogy to be acknowledged. And even in that case, it took time.

If the first "Vichian" of European repute was Jules Michelet (thanks, however, to Vincenzo Cuoco and Francesco Salfi), the first "Brunian" was Schelling with his dialogue *Bruno* (1802). For a revival of Bruno on the Italian soil, we must wait for Bertrando Spaventa.[2] Bruno, however, has only a distant relationship with humanism, and he is removed from the Renaissance too.

A recent re–assessment of the difficult legacy of *Quattrocento* humanism comes from Massimo Cacciari's *La mente inquieta* [*The Restless Mind*].[3] Originally written for the seminal anthology *Umanisti italiani*, published in 2016,[4] Cacciari's introductory essay has now been revised, augmented, and published as an independent book.

Cacciari is not afraid to look back at the now worn–out *Quattrocento* diatribe that started after World War II. Against Oskar Kristeller's negative judgement (according to which the Italian fifteenth century did not produce a philosophy, not even according to the most generous standards), Eugenio Garin and Cesare Vasoli attempted a serious re–evaluation. This was certainly done in the name of historicist continuity, but also with a deep appreciation for the original contributions of thought in an age that, to many, seemed to have spent all its strength (but what strength it was!) in painting and architecture, leaving nothing to speculation.

1. Rocco Rubini, *The Other Renaissance: Italian Humanism Between Hegel and Heidegger* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 1–20.

2. Luca Oliva has recently traced Bruno's reception in Italy in *L'ontologia della materia. Giordano Bruno tra Otto e Novecento* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2018).

3. Massimo Cacciari, *La mente inquieta. Saggio sull'umanesimo* (Turin: Einaudi, 2019).

4. Raphael Ebgi, ed., *Umanisti italiani. Pensiero e destino* (Turin: Einaudi, 2016).

Is this dispute not buried now under the weight of mere historiography? Cacciari wants to show that this is not the case. And if he takes the side of Garin and Vasoli, it is certainly not in the name of rediscovered historicism, but rather to clear away any doubts. The humanism of the fifteenth century is not "waiting" to be re–evaluated, because its importance cannot even be doubted. The goal is neither to return to a generic Germanic *Humanismus* nor to reactivate the old controversy between Sartre's *humanisme* and Heidegger's seemingly definitive criticism (a controversy that in fact precedes the Kristeller–Garin–Vasoli disagreement). Rather, the point is to show that all that grammar and rhetoric that kept the *literati* of that distant century busy was meant to give the foundation to a new ontology of language. At the same time, the matter is to highlight the necessity that such ontology be grounded in the actual practice of philology and, if we can use a modern term, of general linguistics.

The basis of this new ontology (it does not matter that it was never systematized) consists in the awareness that language is irreducible to any easy theory that reduces to a mere instrument at the service of the human will. Cacciari proposes therefore to read the *Quattrocento* humanists against the rhetoric of humanism, as philosophers of language, not in spite of their philological concerns but precisely because of them, and as thinkers who have faced the unfathomable essence of language with the same "restless mind" of Seneca (*mobilis et inquieta homini mens data est*) and perhaps, we add, with the same *inquietum cor nostrum* of Augustine. Pushing Cacciari's suggestion even further, we could say that philological humanism was the deconstructionism of the fifteenth century and, at the same time, it was much more. On the one hand, Lorenzo Valla's linguistic analysis showed how the medieval ontology was marred by an insufficient understanding of grammar (in the Middle Ages, they were inclined to forget that "being," "ens," is first and foremost a participle). On the other hand, Valla's work, together with others', highlighted how language strives towards the Truth that is nonetheless independent from the empirical language in which Truth itself is embodied. Like Spirit, Truth acts where it wants, in the language and in the historical epochs it wants. This freeing of Truth from a privileged language (from the language of Revelation, that is) made possible the grafting of classicism onto Christianity, which was the heart of the humanistic enterprise.

We must therefore re–read the classics with new eyes, from Dante's *De Vulgari Eloquentia* (for everything begins with Dante' "linguistic turn") to Petrarch and then up to Savonarola, which is to say the point of catastrophe of the entire humanistic project. Cacciari's thesis is in fact that humanism is in its essence a tragic philosophy. Covering the distance that separates Athens from Jerusalem in view of a cosmic renewal (*renovatio*) was an infinite task

(literally: a task that could not end), desperate in many ways and with full awareness of the tragedy it faced. Humanism wished to be a philosophy of Peace and Concord. Yet, already in Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Allegory of Good Government*, painted less than twenty years after Dante's death, Peace is an isolated figure, languidly laying down on a couch with an olive branch in her hand and nobody paying any attention to her. Humanistic peace was, to be sure, a "philosophy" of peace, a "theory" of peace rather than a political project; yet a philosophical peace between the classical heritage and Christianity as well as a theological peace between Roman Catholicism and the East–West Schism (not to mention the Western Schism of 1378—1417) was the necessary prelude to any politics of peace. Or, at least, that was the hope.

Such hope was put to the test during Savonarola's years in Florence, and it failed. Ficino's change of heart — first a supporter of the terrible Dominican and then his fiercest denier — gives us the measure of the bitter disappointment experienced by intellectuals and common folk alike. The legacy of the humanistic project was then collected by Machiavelli, certainly no longer as a philosophy of Peace, and its tragic side was now in full view.

But the tragedy of humanism did not emerge from the political–religious failure in Florence; it predated it. Cacciari's main argument is how inherently tragic the philosophical anthropology of humanism already was — and if it was not, it became so after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Leon Battista Alberti's trajectory from the solid optimism of *Intercoenales* and *De Familia* to the desperate but lucid account of human affairs in *Momus* and *Theogenius* is the case in point. From Alberti's *Theogenius* to Machiavelli's *Asino*, human beings are *incurabiles*, and their restlessness, which is also the source of their glory, cannot be "healed." The worst that human beings can do will have to take its place alongside the good that comes from them. The contradiction is tragic yet essential for it cannot be overcome, and here is where anthropology rises up to philosophy. The charge of anthropocentrism always leveled against Italian humanism, having Pico as its favorite target, must be not just lessened but dismissed altogether. If human beings stand at the center of creation, halfway between beast and angel, then humans are constantly torn apart, in a true Dantesque fashion, between the two opposite natures, without the possibility to release the internal and external tension. Human beings are "miraculous," yet every miracle is terrifying in its own way; and human beings are miraculous in their misery as well as in their triumph.

Where, however, the *Quattrocento* humanists reached their philosophical peak was in their treatment of *fortuna* [fortune, luck, chance]. Cacciari points out how in his *Disputationes*, Pico includes *fortuna* within his non–systematic "system" by highlighting both sides of the issue: on the one

hand, the world is not ruled by *tyche, fatum, casus, fortuna*. There is a Mind at work, after all. On the other hand, sheltering human beings from *fortuna* is just impossible. Pico's aporia, roughly the same that Alberti had subjected to an allegorical treatment in *Momus*, stretches back to the past and moves forward to the future, from Dante to Machiavelli.

It is not out of place, therefore, to expand on Cacciari's acute analysis of Pico's and make an attempt to turn *Fortuna* (fortune, luck, chance) into a category of "active nihilism" (Nietzsche's terminology) that did not bog down the Human Being — whatever the Human Being was and was not — but, on the contrary, spurred the Italian Renaissance as much as predestination spurred Protestant capitalism (and if Italian Renaissance ultimately failed in the political arena, it was not for lack of *Fortuna*; planetary forces were at play that overwhelmed any game of chances).

Again, we must begin with Dante. In *Inferno* VII, 70–90, Dante attempted (in Boethius' and Brunetto Latini's wake) to recruit the ancient blind force (*fortuna imperatrix mundi*, fortune, the empress of the world) as an assistant to Divine Providence. Yet Virgil, who pronounces the speech honoring *Fortuna*, does not sound entirely convinced, nor does Dante. The very notion of *Fortuna* is uncomfortable within the boundaries of a divine plan. But later on, as soon as fortune was de–theologized, it generated an astonishing amount of active or productive nihilism by means of assessing the sum of chance, risk, multiplicity, and unpredictability that a society needs in order to thrive, fail, try again, succeed, or fail again.

Fortune's underlying assumption is that the essence and the agency of the human being are undecided, oscillating, everything and nothing at the same time, and that the world has not been judged yet. Dante broke the ground by having a figure from classical antiquity openly praise fortune as an angelic intelligence in an admittedly problematic Christian context. Others followed in their own terms: Petrarch in *De Remediis Utrusque Fortunae*; Boccaccio in *Decameron*, Day Two, where fortune is the thread that provides an appearance of destiny,[5] and mostly Alberti, whose treatment of fortune paves the way to Pico's *Disputationes* and Machiavelli's *Asino* and *The Prince*. In Alberti's *Theogenius*, the question is, How can we defend ourselves from unfair, mean fortune after we realize that "we" indeed are the first culprits of our misfortunes — because of our ingrained restlessness, never satisfied

5. See Charles M. Radding, "Fortune and Her Wheel: The Meaning of a Medieval Symbol," *Mediaevistik*, 5, 1992: 127–138; F. Petrarch, *Petrarch's Remedies for Fortune Fair and Foul*, 5 vols., trans. C.H. Rawski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Ciabattoni, "Decameron 2: Filomena's Rule between Fortune and Human Agency," *Annali d'Italianistica* 31, 2013: 173–196; Marchesi, *Boccaccio on Fortune (De casibus virorum illustrium)*, in Victoria Kirkham, Michael Sherberg, and Janet Levarie Smarr eds., *Boccaccio: A Critical Guide to the Complete Works* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 245–54.

with the present things and always "hanging on varied expectations" (an anticipation of Cassius', "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars?").[6]

The link that connects fortune and active–productive nihilism is less theoretical than practical. It is nonetheless philosophical, as it belongs to practical reason and it is a matter of ethics. To be precise, it is an ethics of the void that opens ahead of our steps every time we try to put the perfect world of theory into practice. "In theory," everything works fine. In practice, fortune spins the wheel, reducing theory to nothing. Yet fortune is not nothing; it is present, alive, and active everywhere. It shows, however, the *quantum* of nothingness that is inherent to all human enterprises, the bridge that human endeavors will never cross, lest they fall into the abyss of absolute *nihil*.

By making nothingness visible, fortune makes it a companion and a corrective to human action, which is successful, when it so happens, precisely by incorporating fortune's unpredictability together with the nothingness that comes with it. Otherwise (Cacciari's observation), why would the Romans, tempered by their harsh discipline, build so many temples to the goddess *Fortuna*? The expectation that we, humans, can change the entire fabric of reality may be already nihilistic at its core. The destructiveness inherent in human action cannot be reversed into an all–encompassing productivity, which would be another nihilistic myth. This is where fortune intervenes. Rather than just causing human agency to fail, fortune protects the same agency from its own nihilism. For fortune is not chaos; on the contrary, it gives chaos a shape and perhaps a destiny. It is the transcendental limit of human action, the quintessential unpolitical force, and, most of all, a *katéchon* that keeps human *hybris* at bay.

In the brief introduction to *La mente inquieta*, Cacciari observes that humanism is definitely less "modern" and therefore much deeper than contemporary "Italian Theory." It is a brief observation, almost a punchline — a jab, indeed — that deserves to be taken seriously and dealt with elsewhere. A new reflection on humanism, however, can make us aware of the many ways in which the cluster of philosophical production known as Italian Theory can meet its internal deadlocks, which can be summarized — if I may venture to say it — as an insufficient distinction between potentiality and virtuality. The tragic nature of human beings does not put them in a deadlock when it comes to action. It is not tragedy that leads to impotence; what leads to impotence is the complacent contemplation of the endless possibilities of possibility itself. In *Purgatory* XXX, 115–117, when Beatrice

6. *Sempre suspesi a varie espettazioni*; see Leon Battista Alberti, *Theogenius*, in *Opere Volgari*, ed. Cecil Grayson (Bari: Laterza, 1966), vol. II; Progetto Manuzio electronic edition, 17; author's translation.

says that Dante was such, "virtually," that any propensity in him would have succeeded (*questi fu tal ne la sua vita nova / virtüalmente, ch'ogne abito destro / fatto averebbe in lui mirabil prova*), she is not saying that Dante as a young man "had potential," as if he were a student who could do better if he just put more effort in it. She is saying that his virtues were all present, already at work, when he decided to change his path.

A reappraisal of virtuality (not "everything is possible," but "everything is already here," in full display, and it is up to us to activate it, always knowing that fortune — "she" is already here as well — may thwart our plans at any moment) is the end of theory and the beginning of action — be it artistic, ethical, or political.