

The “sacredness” of the scientist: Moruzzi in via San Zeno narrated by Mario Tobino

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ABSTRACT

Giuseppe Moruzzi as described by Mario Tobino, writer and psychiatrist of his time, is reported through a visit of the latter to the Institute of Physiology in via San Zeno and to some aspects of their correspondence. The resulting image is that of the true scientist, protagonist and entirely dedicated to research and culture, guide for young students, example and glory for his Country.

Key words

Ethical sense • Behaviour of social groups

Chi non ha patria non ha da esser né sacerdote né padre

The one who has no fatherland should not be a priest nor a father

Ugo Foscolo

“He was entirely entangled in his subject”. This is the beginning of the article entitled “A scientist” that Mario Tobino¹ wrote in 1971 in “Il Corriere della Sera” (Tobino, 1971), the leading newspaper in our country. This phrase is followed by a note of modesty: “I noticed that as I entered, and the reason of my visit appeared of little value as well as the invitation I was about to issue, which I did anyhow, but that immediately faded as if (had) never (been) pronounced. I arrived at the Institute of Physiology in via San Zeno at eight o’clock in the morning. Moruzzi was in the library, a man of about sixty years of age, slender, height slightly above average”. In a few words Tobino outlines the intensity of the relationship between Moruzzi and the topic of his study: like a priest before a sacred object. Nothing

else is of any relevance: even the invitation he was about to issue becomes an irrelevant banality.

“He was keeping his eyelids half-closed as if his mind needed that lampshade. His forehead was broad and steep. He restrained his words as he uttered them, as if he wanted to probe them before speaking: in addition he had that emilian accent which anchors the feelings to the syllables”. A description which reminds the image of a scholar in the School of Athens by Raffaello: in the centre of the painting he keeps his eyes lowered in a state of intense concentration and writes something on a paper.

In Tobino’s writings – in his books, essays, articles – there are some characters who stand out against a background and take on an explicit sacral significance. These are the most diverse people who share a passionate quest for truth, directed to all men. This is the essence of their lives: therefore who dedicates his life to it can assume the traits of the priest, that is of the one who deals with and conveys sacred things for the benefit of mankind. These persons belong to

every social condition: in the case of Moruzzi, a scientist who searches for the deepest truths of nature with the most effective methods, his emotion is more intense. It is worth reminding, however, that in his book diverse characters are treated in an analogous way. In *The Desert of Lybia* Tobino describes with sympathy and admiration Mahmud, the arabian who loves his homeland and becomes his compatriots' point of reference (Tobino, 1952). In another book *The Ember of Biassoli*, a man of the people, Piè di Cavana, a communist worker of a village in Liguria is, in contrast, dramatically alone in keeping faithful to his ideas keeping the direction and the feelings of his eyes unchanged as before (Tobino, 1956): in fact, when the black fascism seizes power, his comrades one after the other, submit to the new order. Only Piè "was looking as before". Beaten several times, his house finally surrounded, he is able to flee, but is subsequently killed. His mother and Tobino's mother, both religious, when speaking about him evoke the image of the priest.

Again, in the case of Moruzzi and of Piè, the key to their personality is in the intensity and direction of their eyes. This definition of the sacred for such different persons, vowed to different destinies, does not take away anything from the greatness that Tobino attaches to Moruzzi; both of them shared a total dedication to their missions, one scientific, the other literary, in favour of the mentally ill. Tobino passed almost his entire professional life in the rooms of his psychiatric hospital, likewise Moruzzi meant research as a continuum.

The article continues: "Silence reigned in the library where we were and piles of books made the walls warm. The free spaces were hung with the portraits of great physiologists".

Moruzzi invites him to visit the institute and Tobino notes that the researchers were pale. "It is true" says Moruzzi "Yes. That's why: because they work too much. Never a pause".

And Tobino's comment: "The institute was pervaded by a ritual-like hum".

Suddenly Moruzzi, "a humanist", quoted Manzoni. It is now Tobino who becomes protagonist for some time: the man who spent entire nights reading letters and notes of don Lizander² and now comments on Manzoni's correspondence with other men of culture. "Moruzzi was listening with the rapture and modesty which are the first gifts of the great

scientist". In this context Tobino feels that beyond Moruzzi institute there are in Italy a number of other similar islands.

This "sacredness" of the true scientist is characterized by a strong ethical sense, a dimension which includes research and a rigorous evaluation of facts: the new discoveries will be spread among professionals for the good of mankind. There is no place for profit or corruption of any kind: the scientist will not sell himself to the great capital or to ideologies of any kind, his research must be free and stem from curiosity and empathy, against self-interest and power. Moreover, he is ready to fight for what he thinks is right for mankind both in his field and in matters concerning, for example, the freedom of his country. In this conference we have a beautiful example in Carlo Matteucci who fought for the independence of our Country in 1848-49 like several other Italian scientists of that age. At all levels the scientist is ready to entirely commit himself: a sacred and heroic figure.

The love of Moruzzi for Italy is extensively described by Berlucci (Berlucci, 1986). Besides, Moruzzi became famous at the end of the forties: at that time I remember Pisa full of ruins, our country poor and without resources. The United States was generous with brilliant scientists and Moruzzi received important offers with considerable advantages; in that context he would have been likely to receive a well deserved Nobel prize. But Moruzzi's choice is to stay in Italy (Pisa), which reveals a patriotism of the same nature as Tobino's: fidelity to his country, culture, and history. This is made clear when he deals with the despair of the scholars in the centuries after the fall of Rome, followed, however, by an unexpected recovery when Europe started to flourish, universities were founded and cathedrals were built (Moruzzi, 1949).

In those years Tobino, patriot and partisan during the war, writes *Passion for Italy* (Tobino, 1958) and sends a copy to his friend Moruzzi who appreciates the book, but he is so honest to note some divergence of opinions concerning Germany. He writes on this topic: "As a matter of fact the entire history of post-war years is a lesson of humility for all nations. It tells us that there is not a people exempt from the danger of creating a criminal state while the everyday chronicle, everywhere (including Italy) makes us think that men prepared to become SS are available

everywhere. The criticism against one country alone can favour a sense of righteousness in the citizens of other countries and weaken the defenses. Never has the danger been so great in my opinion”.

These considerations anticipate what we now know about the behaviour of social groups after the studies conducted in 1971 and subsequently by Zimbardo, a socio-psychologist of California (Zimbardo, 2008), showing how the power of social situations can profoundly alter the values and morality of large social groups. At the time of Moruzzi's letter these studies had not been published yet. This letter shows a Europeanism which Tobino's writings lack: their correspondence, the reply of Tobino to Moruzzi with more questions than certitudes, summarize the significance of a friendship without shadows with solid common traits and with an eagerness to discuss different points of view.

Both Moruzzi and Tobino devoted themselves to studying the brain, one as a neurophysiologist and the other as a psychiatrist and writer. Their friendship flourished towards the end of the sixties when those entirely dedicated to these studies were sharply attacked. Science became the “so called science”, torturing animals, “bourgeois”, servant of capitalism. During the visit of Tobino to the institute Moruzzi added sadly “If these people won, research would be destroyed. The beginning of darkness”. On that point of view Tobino had a worse fate: the writer who in the early fifties revealed the reality of psychiatric hospitals and the profound humanity of the mentally ill with *The Free Women of Magliano* was attacked, scorned and, like Piè di Cavana, remained alone while the colleagues who shared his views succumbed and an obtuse contempt for psychiatry, disguised as a progressive attitude, was triumphant. In that period among the books that Tobino sent Moruzzi with some lines of dedication there was *The Last Days of Magliano*, an account of the circumstances in which the psychiatric hospital of Magliano was closed. The thank-you letter that Moruzzi sends Tobino is sorrowful: “In front of so much suffering which could have been avoided, it is natural to ask oneself: why did they do that?”. And the answer is given in a few lines at page 25: “The one who lacks personality, devoid of talent, mut-

tering the same words time and again, is finally in the limelight, and can spit out those words; he is an innovator, a revolutionary, an executioner, and ends up being someone. The mode whirls him, spins him, makes him happy”.

These last considerations where Moruzzi shares Tobino's thoughts remain valid today.

The image of Moruzzi described by Mario Tobino in this article and in other writings is that of the true scientist who is at the same time protagonist in research, guide for young students and glory of his Country: a precious example for science and contemporary society, both threatened by the prevalence of commercial aims which risk masking and manipulating truth.

Notes

¹ Mario Tobino (1910-1991) is a famous Italian writer and psychiatrist, author of several books on various themes, including episodes of last war, descriptions concerning mentally ill persons and a defense of psychiatric hospitals.

² Don Lizander was a nickname of Alessandro Manzoni.

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