

Piero Guccione

*Sorrow and wonder*<sup>1</sup>

“If it is true, as Aristotle suggests, that sorrow and wonder are at the origin of philosophy, the same cannot but hold true for painting”. So claimed Piero Guccione in an interview dating back to 1988, highlighting what he held to be the antinomy *par excellence* that informed and permeated his entire oeuvre. A painter concerned with the interplay of space and light, who often used figuration as a pretext to ease his work towards the shores of philosophy, Piero Guccione oscillates between a visual tradition that harkens to ancestors like Antonello da Messina and a modern-day practice – in the unlikely company of fellow Italians Ettore Spalletti and Valentino Vago – wherein he aspires to a sort of *absolute blue*. In the words of critic Domenico Porzio, “his works, once seen, must then be read.”

Guccione was not unlike a highwire acrobat, a man whose art was nourished, and spurred, not only by the antithesis of sorrow and wonder – an emotional current that runs through all his work - but also by polarities such as movement and memory, or exactitude and infinity. When we look at his maritime horizons, for instance, how can we not think of Leopardi’s *L’Infinito*, with whom the painter shares the experience of sounding the otherwise fathomless spaces where “thought drowns” and to flounder is bliss? Silent horizons where sorrow and wonder, oblivion and amazement, coexist in a synergy that the painting of Guccione exalts in every detail, suggesting links with other poets like Ungaretti, whose books *Il porto sepolto* and *Il sentimento del tempo* come to mind.

A shy man, extraneous to both the avantgarde movements of his time and the machinations of what’s come to be termed the “art market”, Guccione remained faithful not only to his own personal “Sicily” (Sicily as *topos* and myth, as well as bloodied land and history), but to a nonconformist idea of painting which he summed up as follows:

*“If I painted the sea as the sea ought to be painted, if I painted the color black as black ought to be painted, I would only end up painting a picture, whereas I’d want this image to be pure emotion.”*

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1 The Italian *dolore*, here rendered as ‘sorrow’, can be variably understood as ‘pain’, ‘grief’ or ‘suffering’. I have opted, for the most part and for obvious reasons, to privilege a meaning of the word that eschews any idea of physical pain but likewise avoids those understandings of *dolore* occasioned, for example, by death and loss. The *sorrow* here intended is universal in nature, inherent in our human condition – something other than a generalized sense of ‘suffering’. (A.M.)

And it is this *pure emotion*, between sorrow and wonder, that still earmarks Guccione's painting as a cornerstone of 20th century European art. But in the interstices of the seemingly obvious polarity that gives the title to this exhibition, there lies an elegant and obstinate sensitivity that systematically compels the artist towards his ultimate goal: towards what he himself calls, in a conversation with Antonio Motta, "*the definition of light*".<sup>2</sup> Let us weigh our words here. *To define* light, a project born from what the painter terms "my somewhat mad inclination", is the ambitious challenge that Guccione embraces, and finally meets. On show here, as evidence of the heights reached by the artist, I cite two remarkably different works: *La grande Marina* (1995) and *Nei giardini di Re Marke* (1998).

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I would have like to meet and get to know Piero Guccione. I would have liked to explore with him the connection, perhaps too facile, between his work and the poetry of Leopardi, which he seemed to tolerate but certainly not encourage. "When I paint, I never think about infinity.. I leave that for others to ponder,"<sup>3</sup> he again replies to Antonio Motta, who in their interview had prompted him on this point. (The title of the conversation between Motta and the Maestro - *The impalpable things* – is significant. What, ultimately, is more impalpable than light?) "I watch with near-reverential curiosity a video of another conversation, between the artist and Vincenzo Cascone, shown in the context of the exhibition, and notice that for the first fifteen seconds – mind you, fifteen seconds are an eternity for the start of a short documentary! – Guccione keeps his eyes closed as he begins to speak with his interlocutor. Head turned to the right, chin resting on his shoulder, so absorbed in his thoughts as to make sure that each word, each syllable aligns precisely with his intent, in those few eloquent frames we have, I believe, the measure of both the man and the artist. A reserved and contemplative figure, removed from the public eye, one might describe Guccione as a man from another time and place. And I perceive in those first choice of words of the video, in those initial reflections, an echo of his painting. Like he says to Antonio Motta: "Painting is a mental challenge that requires time. Over the years it's become for me something slower and slower."<sup>4</sup> And I think of the slow process of applying veil after veil of paint, strata of faint colors that at once seem to thicken and thin, in order to achieve – or at least

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2 A. Motta, *Le cose impalpabili. Conversazione con Piero Guccione*, Centro Documentazione L. Sciascia, San Marco in Lamis (FG) 2012, p. 24. The translation is mine. (A.M.)

3 *ibid*, pp.16-17.

4 *ibid*, p.26.

approximate – that definition of light that we see, especially in his seascapes, occupying the mind and hand of the artist from Scicli.

But if Guccione the man was of another time and place, what about his art? Is art to be considered a sphere of human endeavor shaped merely by the oscillations in taste of a given historical moment, in accordance with the views of critics, media, and institutions often compromised if not corrupted nowadays by a system that measures the greatness of an artist via the equation value=price? Or can we still believe, indeed insist, that there inheres an unfathomable core that resists the wanton trends of the marketplace, so that any *true* work of art enucleates something timeless? I've asked myself this question for longer than I care to remember, even as I know that it's a question that has long occupied much finer minds than mine in their lifelong dedication to the universe of art. But I must say that during my research on the work of Guccione, the question has taken center stage in an almost obsessive way. And here, I must say, I did not want to rely on the subjective – and therefore always fragile – register of *emotion*, no matter how pure, that Guccione himself invoked. The reported experience – perhaps the same *wonder* – of the artist as a measure of judgment and value could not suffice. I needed something else. And, as occasionally happens in life, an unexpected gift came to me, this time from a sort of... parallel universe!

Alongside my research on the Sicilian artist, I'd been reading a memoir by a well-known American poet of Italian descent, Dana Gioia, who had studied in the 1970s at Harvard with some giants of 20<sup>th</sup>-century American literature, including John Cheever, Elizabeth Bishop, and Robert Fitzgerald. In a touching tribute to the latter<sup>5</sup> – generally recognized, among other notable accomplishments, as the preeminent English translator of the *Iliad-Odyssey-Aeneid* trilogy – Gioia revisits the unforgettable classes and days spent with the poet, recalling how the latter had reviewed, way back in 1953, a book by the French philosopher and theologian Jacques Maritain titled *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*. In wanting to represent the crystalline coherence of his mentor's humanity, art and teaching, Gioia ends up quoting a passage from Maritain as cited by Fitzgerald in his review:

*If we were able fully to realize the implications of the Aristotelian notion of form – which does not mean external form, but on the contrary, the inner ontological principle which determines things in their existence and qualities, and through which they are, and exist, and act – we would also understand the full meaning intended by the great Schoolmen when they described the radiance or*

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5 D. Gioia, "Remembering Robert Fitzgerald" in *Studying with Miss Bishop*, Paul Dry Books, Philadelphia, 2021, pp.59-88. The Maritain quote that follows appears on page 79.

*clarity inherent in beauty as splendor formae, the splendor of the form, say the splendor of the secrets of being radiating into intelligence.*

Maritain, and Fitzgerald and Gioia with him, elaborate on the three requirements of beauty as postulated by Thomas of Aquinas – *integritas, consonantia, and claritas* – revisited, in more recent times, by James Joyce in his semi-autobiographical novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Earlier I'd written of the slippage, or what today we'd call the "interface", of Guccione's painting with philosophy. Personally, when I think about the distinctive features of his work, how can one not find in his paintings – in those tiny but cosmic condensations of light expanding in the direction of an absolute blue – the three *values* of integrity, harmony, and splendor? And aren't these values, thanks in part to the example and legacy of artists like Guccione, the very ones capable of transcending the limits of history, even of the history of art, and of thwarting, possibly, the wreckages of the post-human? Personally, I choose to believe - as Gioia must have experienced with Fitzgerald - that in Piero Guccione, too, a similar coherence was at work, whereby the man was one with his art; insofar as integrity, harmony, and the radiance of wonder could be equally discerned in the light of his humanity as of his brushstroke.

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*Lesser sorrows speak. Suffering that is great is mute.*  
(Seneca)

*Sorrow is all the greater when silent.* (G.

Pascoli)

I would like to close this essay on the art of Piero Guccione with some reflections on the other element of the antinomy from which the exhibition takes its title, namely sorrow. We all remember Tolstoy's phrase from *Anna Karenina*: "happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way". The phrase came to mind often, I must admit, as I struggled to identify in Guccione - on an immediate, visual level - the element of sorrow, considered by many to be constitutive of his art. I did not, however, want to revisit his biography, or dig up references to people, places and times that had threaded the artist's personal history. A man, and an artist, both discreet and polite, despite admiring Bacon's work Guccione, unlike his English colleague, surely did not howl and make public his own personal suffering. Moreover, despite being active in the art collective "Pro e Contro" (*For and Against*),

which was close to the Communist Party in the 1960s, he had little in common with contemporaries like the Florentine Vinicio Berti, or his fellow Sicilian Guttuso, who in different ways both used their art as a means of social protest, as well as to express their own personal distress during a most tumultuous time in Italian history. Guccione's sorrow, or *pain* if you will, was of a different order, and was to be found elsewhere. Perhaps it was "philosophical" in nature, and was surely not to be approximated via an attempt at crude reductionism. I had to return to his painting, and to the poetry he so loved.

My own beloved Ungaretti came to my aid, who only later did I learn was also a friend of Guccione during the years he'd spent in Rome. And I rediscovered these lines, from the poem "Variazioni su nulla" (*Variations on nothing*)<sup>6</sup>:

*The hand in shadow turned the hourglass  
And, of sand, the nothingness that flows  
In silence, is the only thing one hears  
And, so heard, doesn't vanish in the dark.*

To hear the silence. To hear the flow of silent sand. To hear the crumpling of time. So that, when *heard, it doesn't vanish in the dark*. Isn't this, perhaps, a key to interpreting the grandeur of Guccione's sorrow which, as Seneca and Pascoli remind us, *remains silent*? Guccione's sorrow is in his rarefied atmospheres, in his horizons verging on the impalpable, on their own dissolution. We find, or sense it, in those timeless distances that do not vanish, but to the contrary shed light. His is a whispered sorrow that envelops, intimate, and implicit in all things; a sorrow that extends beyond our human condition to permeate and embrace the entirety of creation. But I dare say that insofar as it takes the form of an atmosphere, of sea and horizon, of air, dust and limit, Guccione's sorrow is not "suffered" in any common sense of the term. His sorrow has something lofty about it, something noble. Something sacred. And it is this sensation—this *emotion*—that brings to mind the verses of another poet, Danilo Dolci, a visionary activist and contemporary of Guccione's, himself an adopted "son" of Sicily, who in a collection titled *Ripening in the Fire* wrote:

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<sup>6</sup> G. Ungaretti, "Variazioni su nulla" in *Vita di un uomo. Tutte le poesie*, Mondadori, Milano 1969, p. 252. The translation is mine. (A.M.)

*barely light*

*the most alone –*

*dark sea*

*a flash and*

*a boat*

*is less alone<sup>7</sup>*

And less alone are we all, before the doleful wonders of Piero Guccione.

- *Anthony Molino, Christmas 2023*

*(translated from the Italian by Francesca Del  
Grosso and Anthony Molino)*

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<sup>7</sup> D. Dolci, "Ripening in the Fire", in *Creature of creatures*, ANMA Libri, Saratoga (CA) 1980, p.68. Translated by Justin Vitiello.