Preface: Gadda (Pasolini) and the theatre. A sacred act of knowledge

Fabrizio Gifuni

The text and the video recording of the performance presented in this volume are part of a wider theatrical initiative that has been developing over time. At the heart of the project was the desire to organise a grand account of the transformation of Italy: what we were, what we have become and what we have perhaps always been. In this way, I thought, we might understand how we can have arrived at this point. A map of the chromosomes of Italy and its people, this is what I had in mind, so that we might better orient ourselves in a present which is too often dark, opaque and dangerous.

For this reason, some ten years ago I began a long and enthusiastic journey with Giuseppe Bertolucci, borrowing the words of two among the greatest Italian writers of the twentieth-century, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Carlo Emilio Gadda. I felt that there was a strong connection there, despite the diametrical opposition in terms of education, artistic vision, language and view of history. Through various phases of work, between 2004 and 2010 two performances came to life: *'Na specie de cadavere lunghissimo*, from texts by Pasolini and from a poem by Giorgio Somalvico, and *L'ingegner Gadda va alla guerra o della tragica istoria di Amleto Pirobutirro*, based on texts by Gadda with interpolations from *Hamlet*.

What has emerged from this double take is a relentless stereoscope of our recent past. Pasolini's civil reflections on the anthropological transformation of an entire country come together, like the tiles of a unique mosaic, with Gadda's notes on the Great War and his psychoanalytical interpretation of fascism. Two very different artistic and philosophical visions thus get interlinked, the qualifiers standardly applied in this case – progressive and conservative – finally giving way to the sheer force of two intellects in continuous movement. A furious love for one's country is what provides the common ground: a love which wins these

two writers, on the field of battle as it were, the right to pass judgment on what they are witnessing. It is for this reason, I believe, or more precisely, it is because Gadda and Pasolini tear themselves to pieces through their commitment to their country, that their words have, today, a specific and substantial weight, as if they were loaded with a special form of authority. From the act of self-demolition, from the constant shipwrecking of the self, Gadda and Pasolini derive, in fact, the force of their reasoning as well as of their writing. In this spiritual yet secular exercise resides, I argue, the ethical status of their thinking – for it is not enough to express high-mindedness and agreeable thought. One must earn the respect of others.

Just as was the case for the work on Pasolini, *L'ingegner Gadda va alla guerra* is based on texts which were not originally intended for the stage. My first study dates back to a reading I made at the Museo della Fanteria, Rome, in 2006. The sources that I finally chose to disassemble and reaggregate into a new text, this time destined for the theatre, were *Giornale di guerra e di prigionia* and *Eros e Priapo*, as well as two discarded fragments from Gadda's major novel *La cognizione del dolore*. The first text, the *Giornale di guerra e di prigionia*, is the direct testimony of Gadda's participation in the First World War (Infantry, 5th Alpine Regiment), from 24 May 1915 – the first day of training for Sottotenente Gadda at the stores in Edolo – to the first days of 1919, when the future author of *Quer pasticciaccio brutto de via Merulana* returns home after almost two years of imprisonment in a German war camp. *Eros e Priapo*, written in all likelihood in 1944–5, takes instead the literary form of a libellous pamphlet attacking the erotic psychopathology of the Prime Minister, Benito Mussolini, and the pathological attraction that the Italian people have, periodically, for tyrannical figures affected by what Gadda calls narcissistic delirium. Written in a reinvented sixteenth-century Florentine Italian and subtitled *Da furore a cenere* (*From Fury to Ashes*), the book dissects the erotic ties that unify power with the masses through a dizzying linguistic excursion based on notions taken from psychoanalysis.

Fusing these two texts together is the job of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, and of Longone, the village of Gadda's childhood and family holidays. Hamlet is a lot more than just a literary passion for our author. Gadda joins himself, one might say, to this character as if to an archetype that profoundly represents his life story. An awareness of one's own intellectual stature within a society and a time that are 'out of joint' is what they primarily share. They also have the same devastating relationship with their mothers, whom they similarly locate in the centre of a

lethal web of lies from which they must free themselves. Predisposed to melancholia and excited by infinite neuroses, both in the end are constrained, in order that they might live in the world, to pretend to have a particular form of madness. So if Hamlet ends up taking on the role of Yorick, the ideal court jester of his childhood, Gadda will transform himself into the literary genius we know, disappearing behind a language that is out of the ordinary, indeed *extra-ordinary* – a mad gamble turned into a new way to communicate with the world.

This is why I took to imagining Gadda as a no longer young Hamlet with no father or mother to invoke or curse: more nervous, more choleric, left alone with his ghosts, his language buffeted by flashes of protean genius. Always on the verge of a tragic madness, yet at times also hilariously comical, and rich in method. Yes, rich in method. An Amleto Pirobutirro, in sum, not just Gonzalo Pirobutirro, as in Gadda's novel – even though in the novel too the Hamletian motif was rich. A newer protagonist of *La cognizione del dolore*, shadowing Gadda's greatest story, a further alter ego rewinding the tape of his neuroses, and walking slantways, like a crab, on the table of his memories. The resulting descent into a hell of old wounds that had never healed over, till the original wound appears to have been arrived at, leaves this new character – part Gadda, part Hamlet-Gadda – at the existential lowest point possible, which is also the mine of his immense art. His participation in the Great War, the defeat at Caporetto, his detention in the German prison camps and the death of his younger brother Enrico – all of this will change the writer's life and that of his alter egos forever.

But pain is never only private. On the contrary, it inexorably makes itself public. And, implacably, the fury of our *Gaddus*, as he liked to call himself, wields his axe on his own country – the same country he is willing to defend with his life – on its people and on its governments. Written from the somewhat uncomfortable observation post of the trenches and the war camps, his *Giornale di guerra e di prigionia* pierces the veil of patriotic rhetoric, in a true and excruciatingly painful act of love. Having acquired knowledge of his state of mind and feeling, this Hamlet of a certain age is now fully equipped to analyse the distortions of a history that is cyclically *out of joint*. Once the breach is made, the torrent is unstoppable. With the passing of time – how much is the question – the collective madness of a 'frenzied people' has consigned the country, *his* country, to a tyrant who 'runs about after women', to 'a hyper-histrionic ham' suffering from 'hereditary violence'.

This new chapter was the ideal sequel to what I had begun years earlier with the performance of those 'lettere luterane e scritti corsari'

taken from Pasolini. I decided to present this new work to the public calling it, with Gadda's words, a 'sacred act of knowledge' and handing it over as a secular ritual for a civilised society that wants better for itself – something useful, perhaps, for whoever is now trying to pick up the threads of a country in tatters. In *Eros e Priapo* Gadda writes:

the crimes of the sad mafia and all those 'enthusiasts' of crime having reached or rather permeated every imaginable form of pragma, that is, each recess of the Italian system (with a blanket penetration, oh! yes, really), it is obvious that all our cognitive activities and the universal functions of the soul must intervene in the judgement of evil suffered and evil committed.

Such pained words invite hope, I believe, because 'the sacred act of knowledge with which we have to redeem ourselves' may already be 'a sign of the resurrection, if a resurrection is possible from such horrendous wreckage'.

Translated by Christopher John Ferguson

‘And what is your environment?’
‘My environment is more or less the universe:
the totality of time and the totality of space.’
Carlo Emilio Gadda