

PLANT AFFECTIONS AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

The Geranium or *Pelargonium* is probably one of the most common plants to be found in households all over Europe, or decorating their balconies and window-sills. Yet, who bears memory of the fact that this plant, which is indeed considered an essential feature of Italian, Spanish, and European urban landscapes, originally comes from South Africa, as Rocío Arregui reminds us in one of her paintings? And, to be sure, many other allegedly Italian, Spanish or European plants share a similar fate: Although their remote origins and original identity lay far away in space and time, they integrated into “foreign” environments, landscapes and cultures to such an extent, that they are no longer perceived as “foreign” elements at all. They have become distinctive features of these environments, landscapes, and cultures –that is, they have been assimilated into “other” communities or “different” identities.

What does the story of the Geranium highlight? I believe it provides a hint for a brief reflection, that I wish to develop in connection with Rocío’s artistic research, and with her amazing paintings, drawings, performances, and installations.

PLANTS AND THE MULTICULTURAL RIDDLE

The “truth” on the Geranium’s origins does not prevent its belonging to “different” environments, cultures, and landscapes. Nor has it prevented the plant to play an active role in shaping different identities. Nor has it prevented the Geranium to adapt to new contexts, climates, etc. Of course, the issue is much more complex when applied to human beings. However, there are certainly analogies with plants: in prehistoric times human beings as well spread all over the world starting from the African continent; and just like plants, they adapted to extremely diverse environments, landscapes, climates; finally, they gave an active contribution in shaping new cultures, styles of life, landscapes, etc.

On the other hand, nowadays human beings often seem to forget something quite important: they fail to recall that any discourse on the “truth of the origins” is not at odds with the evidence of multiple identities, with the assimilation of diversities, or with the dynamic character of personal and social identity. Indeed, ethical or political problems arise when human beings misunderstand the meaning of the expression “true origins” by linking it with claims of strong, fixed and unmovable “identities”. Thus, what I perceive in Rocío’s paintings of plants and maps is this very memento of the dynamic and porous constitution

of our individual and social identity: her paintings provide a notable example of “dynamic cartography”, and recall the very spirit of certain literary works by Jorge Luis Borges and Italo Calvino (*Città invisibili*) among others.

PLANTS AND FEELINGS

But how did it happen, after all, that the Geranium (as well as other plants) changed place and merged into other environments, landscapes, and cultures? Maybe this occurred due to travellers who found the Geranium so beautiful and longed to make a present to someone they loved, or desired to adorn their household. Indeed, the human interest in cultivating plants and gardens is very ancient, and highlights a peculiarity of the human being, one that is remarkably manifest in Rocío’s works: human beings inhabit poetically –i.e. they give shape to the world by means of feelings and desires–. This is true especially for the domestic space, whose intimacy quite relies on the extent of the feelings and desires involved. Due to this reason a person’s home is generally considered something sacred.

Precisely plants are those tangible and visible elements, that embody the householder’s feelings, affection, and intimacy. Why specifically plants? Because they are endowed with life, I suppose. They are living beings, just as human

beings, although of a quite different kind. Indeed, the enquiry into the relationship between human beings and plants seems to be a key feature of Rocío’s artistic research. Her works emphasize that human beings manifest an active and affective need for plants. Human beings need plants especially in their domestic space, but elsewhere as well. Why? Just for utilitarian reasons, since without plants and trees life on the planet Earth would be unsustainable? I think Rocío provides a different answer, one that is more complex and is endowed with ontological relevance: As the philosopher Hans Jonas used to say, plants recall the human being’s “solidarity of interest with the organic world”. Of course solidarity has a win-win aspect: the preservation of humanity is possible only along with the preservation of the planet’s biosphere. So, there is after all a utilitarian aspect in the human “interest” for nature and plants. But there is something more: The human being’s affection-for and desire-of plants emphasizes an unconscious and ancestral reminiscence of the material constitution of the human being. After all, humanity is certainly rooted into living matter. The human being is made of the same biological substance of plants. This physical and material dimension of “solidarity” highlights more than just an utilitarian dimension; It is something “ontological”. Solidarity means that the human being “is” soil, derives from soil and in the end turns into

soil. It is part of the human essence and identity to belong to the natural and biological condition. The same to which also plants belong. In a sense, human beings and plants are thus closely related, as highlighted by poets like Gabriele D'Annunzio (*La pioggia nel pineto*) and Cesare Pavese (*La vigna*) among others, who underline the human being's mimetic attitude towards nature, and the dynamic metamorphosis thanks to which human beings renounce their principium individuationis and transform themselves into plants.

THE BURDEN AND BLESS OF THE HUMAN CONDITION

Rocío's works suggest me a further reflection. As I watched her *Performance autosostenibile / Self-sustainer performance*, I immediately recalled the Expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden by Masaccio (1424-1425). The two works are actually quite different, since in Rocío's performance there is apparently no trace of the despair, misery and suffering of our ancestors. On the other hand, I perceive a strong similarity, for both Masaccio and Rocío highlight after all the tragedy of the human condition, and its deep ambivalence. Due to Adam and Eve's original sin, we are condemned to carry on our shoulders the bless and burden of our condition: On the one hand, we perceive that life is sacred and endowed with meaning, freedom, hope, love, and plenty;

On the other hand, we perceive as well that our life is characterized by a nostalgia of Eden, and we definitely know by experience that ours is a condition of suffering, harshness, weariness, and death. The Selfsustainer performance magnificently symbolizes this tragic duality and ambivalence, and highlights that the joyful awareness and acceptance of our condition of need (need for plant affections, relations, etc.) is our responsibility as human beings. Accepting our destiny of sufferance and joy, life and death, sacredness and vulnerability is indeed the heart of the human condition. In the symbolic language of the Selfsustainer performance: I need plants and I know that my well-being relies on the relationship with them and with nature in general; However, my human condition and its needful vulnerability is a burden I ought to carry, and one that entails responsibility.

What I perceive from Rocío's works is the breath of Eden –i.e. a breath of fresh air that encourages us to enquire deeper into the meaning of that finally provides a piece of ontological good news–: just like Eugenio Montale's piece of poetry *I limoni*, Rocío's works seem to hint at the possibility that one day we might be able to return to Eden.

ANCHE TU SEI COLLINA (Cesare Pavese)

Anche tu sei collina
e sentiero di sassi
e giochi nei canneti,
e conosci la vigna
che di notte tace.
Tu non dici parole.

C'è una terra che tace
E non è terra tua.
C'è un silenzio che dura
sulle piante e sui colli.
Ci son acque e campagne.
Sei un chiuso silenzio
che non cede, sei labbra
e occhi bui. Sei la vigna.

È una terra che attende
e non dice parola.
Sono passati giorni

sotto cieli ardenti.
Tu hai giocato alle nubi.
E' una terra cattiva-
la tua fronte lo sa.
Anche questo è la vigna.

Ritroverai le nubi
e il canneto, e le voci
come un'ombra di luna.
Ritroverai parole
oltre la vite breve
e notturna dei giochi,
oltre l'infanzia accesa.
Sarà dolce tacere.
Sei la terra e la vigna.
Un acceso silenzio
brucerà la campagna
come i falò la sera.

Roberto Franzini Tibaldeo, 2014.