

# SNAGS IN PALLADIO

By Michele Manzini

## PROLOGUE

1.

In 1557 Tintoretto painted "Susanna and the Elders".

Susanna is nude. Her earrings, hairstyle, and the bracelets around each wrist accentuate her nudity. Her legs are positioned as a double opening, horizontal and vertical. In front of her, together with toiletry articles, is a large rectangular mirror. Susanna could look towards the mirror and see her sex which, however, Tintoretto does not paint or even hint at. In the scene the two old men are hiding in positions that would have made it impossible for them to see Susanna. So the elders do not see Susanna, and Susanna sees neither the men nor herself. She looks at nothing and sees nothing and if, in the tension of the painting, seeing were possible for a moment, the men would manage to see only a smooth and closed body.

The Renaissance view, fertilised by Platonic thought, allows us to see a determined and finished body: a closed body from which are eliminated protuberances and adjuncts and where, as Bachtin was to say, "all the orifices are closed". The eternal completeness of the body is dissimulated and kept secret." In *Phaedo* it was written that the task of philosophy is to "pry apart the soul from the body", and it was argued that a known subject is a subject that has no body, that has renounced the body. The body is "oppressive, heavy, earthy".

2.

When in 1556 Andrea Palladio, together with Daniele Barbaro, undertook the publishing project of the "Four Books of Architecture", he committed himself to print as their frontispiece the allegories of Geometry and Architecture which indicate at the top the figure of the "Regina Virtus" with her sceptre and book. By associating virtue with architecture Palladio glimpsed the possibility of concretising in space the "necessary truth" of mathematics. In this way art approached knowledge; knowledge itself is virtue united to science and the intellect, because it is interested in a distinct knowledge of what surrounds us, a knowledge gained through incontrovertible proofs. What Plato had already discussed in *Philebus* thus became an incontrovertible idea. Mathematics is born from the intellect, and those arts that are based on numbers, geometry and all the other mathematic disciplines, have the character of greatness; and it is in this that there is to be found the dignity of architecture.

It could be objected that, from Alberti onwards, the study of harmony was conceived of in terms of applied calculation. However, never before Palladio had this argument been subject to an analysis so coherent and connected up.

3.

About two decades before Palladio's publication, Doge Andrea Gritti laid the foundation stone of the church of San Francesco della Vigna in Venice which had been begun on designs by Jacopo Sansovino. Soon enough inconsistencies of the proportions of the plan led the Doge to charge Francesco Giorgi, a Franciscan monk from the monastery which owned the church, to write a memorandum about the Sansovino plan and to propose some solutions. Giorgi had become famous with the publication in 1525 of his "De Harmonia Mundi", a treatise which brought together Christian doctrine and Neo-Platonic thought. All his suggestions were accepted and for the most part undertaken; all the proportions of the building were based on the Pythagorean-Platonic philosophy of harmonic numbers.

This was the victory of a knowledge that has no body, that has renounced its body. It was possible to arrive at truth and goodness only by sacrificing "the barbaric slush" of our senses, of our desires, of our passions and our body.

4.

For a long time everything followed along that path without any apparent hesitations. The following decades, with the crisis of the Aristotelian and Ptolemaic system, were to be dominated by doubts about the value of any kind of cognitive relationship. Descartes countered this uncertainty with the certainty of reason. "Abducere mentum a sensi bus", tear reason from the senses, was to be his great gesture, because error is hidden in sensation and the experience of the body that derives from it. The subject was to be the field for this controversial battle, one in which the Ego of reason reduced each of sensation's cognitive claims to that "glassy and transparent" Self that Benjamin was to speak of.

5.

However, very soon thought was to stumble into an insidious trap.

The new territories that reason by itself managed to discover were too vast, and the paths along which men followed reality were too agile and secure. As in *Heart of Darkness*, the world had been filled with "rivers, lakes, and names". It had ceased to be a swirling "white space" where mystery reigned and in which it was not only possible but also necessary to design "magnificent reveries". This had become the real place of darkness. A space where thought had drawn a boundary that excluded impenetrable territories, the gloomiest and darkest places; territories in which there lived only the forests and labyrinths of madness, illness, of irremediable otherness. Reason cannot guide us through those mists.

6.

In these worlds inhabited by the body, the senses and experience, there entered artists and poets who wrote detailed logbooks of their explorations. But these voyagers were attracted by two horizons. On the one hand, the wish to pervade those spaces with a harmony consisting of order and measure; on the other hand, the seduction of darkness, a seduction to the point where Conrad lost himself in darkness or Sade in madness. But on the line separating the two paths vertigo awaits us. On one side is the brink of the gloomy and unfathomable abyss, and on the other the mysterious face of possible but always ungraspable happiness. The two seem equivalent, equally terrible and frightening because words do not exist for either, everything seems mute and unrepresentable. This is the "seasickness on the land" of which Kafka spoke, the alienation of our usual intelligence, one that leads us out of the ancient house of language, out of the context in which we are used to reading our experiences. This is the knowledge of the precariousness that can make us understand that other paths are possible with respect to those historically followed by humanity. It is possible to translate what seems mute and unrepresentable into a language and sense. Otherwise it is the thought of *The Man Without Qualities*. The movement of Musil's thought becomes a unique "figure" that for him was able to contain what stands "undecided between two worlds". In this figure, the fragments of the world that surrounds us do not recombine into a conciliatory and definitive image, but remain a portion, a part, by surpassing the limits of the concept and going beyond the fascination of the image. The subject that remains divided in Descartes' Self, and in the mystic Self of the feelings and passions of the body, takes on a complex, plural, and confrontational form that is the real battlefield on which is decided the relationship between the subject, the worlds, and history.

7.

On the horizon there reappears the confrontation between the "I think" concept and the "it thinks" of the body, which had already been enunciated by Zarathustra. A confrontation that becomes a contradiction, a confrontation that is the contradiction. But in that area the density of concreteness is also flanked by the possibility generated by pathos: what might have been and has not been, what could be and never will be. And so a new plan takes shape. A surface on which the possible and the impossible pushed to the extremes become equally real. This is the extreme image of reality. A reality of boundaries where there can live only a thought that has the possibility of being: a thought of boundaries.