

*"Rome... is splendid these past few days: the four-square immobility of the heat is just what it takes to debase its trophies a little, to strip it bare and consequently show it in its most rarified forms". P.P. Pasolini, da Una lettera a Silvana Mauri, estate 1952."*

Many years before all this, before this vision of a "hell encircled by suburbs", an unheard of city smelling like "a great swamp scorched in the sun, sheet-metal layers of rags soaked and dried in the heat, of scrap-iron dealers, embankments branded with impurities"; before, in short, the muscle-bound violence of Rome would reflect the fury and the pride of the young Pasolini, another great Italian poet, one given to promiscuous displays of pathos, Ungaretti, was as if struck or gripped by fear, arriving in Rome along the via Flaminia by the Porta del Popolo, "where Montaigne had entered the city".

Confronted by the overwhelming power of a season associated with a colour or an excessive, exaggerated sentiment, he bethought himself of Gericault, flying in at a gallop, attracted and overcome as he himself had been; he saw then for the first time "the cardinal reds and the reds of the shade, the red of the wound and the red of the passion, the red of glory, each of the reds enfolded in the red which the old travertine marble and the sluggish water of the Tiber gulped down beneath the sunsets of a Roman summer".

Little by little he got used to the city. Autumn with the plane trees shedding their leaves in the gusts of wind over the Lungotevere, brought him understanding.

Is it necessary to "enter" Rome to be truly subjugated by it? A city which, having belonged to someone, now belongs to no-one, shines more brightly in the eyes of those who pass through, who make no part of it. Like wayfarers, hardy "Grand-Tourists" unused to the splendour and not yet exhausted or emptied by it: perennially blinded, intoxicated by uncertainty, disposed to the Visionary. Anna Keen is among their ranks. She hangs on the margins of Rome, if margins there ever were. She traces their profile following the walls and continuously testing the gates — thanks to Popes and Emperors no longer closed or open, benevolent guardians of an invisible city punctuating the circuit of a watch long since suspended. Anna never chooses or selects according to preference; rather she imposes the sequence on herself, so to speak, as a plan, a route she must follow, convinced that after a little resistance ever the least eloquent might somehow reveal itself in a gigantic surrender to the exercise of attention, to a gaze of singular patience. And so Anna stands in front of the gates as though in front of an irrevocable STOP. She knows they represent the turning point of a genuine vertigo, so many antennae, each set to pick up calls and signals immeasurably broad, intense, the presentiment of a sort of looming fatality. As though in surrounding and besieging the city she is, paradoxically, all the more invaded by it.

For as much as we are trapped in a miserable world where insignificance and mediocrity triumph, this young painter has re-established contact with the monumental, with Excess and the Magnificent: something only seen, today in certain great stage designers, rarely now amongst painters.

Exhausted by the over-abundance of energy, by the force which they themselves emanate, it might be said that these urban landscapes are Caprices on fire, or rather actually consigned to the flames by some Baroque lost to our memory and now regenerated, oddities which fantastically mix the most eminent constructions, ruins breathing of an immemorable past, with life as it is.

And yet everything is of a striking truth; for through I know not what obstinacy or simplicity of gaze, Anna, this confidante of immoderation, accumulates data from every tiny detail, even the least significant; and there is no shadow, no texture of a flag-stone, no tram-wire or turn of a corner which does not demand to be represented with extreme devotion and absolute fidelity.

I am also touched by the transfiguring physicality of all this unglossed Roman magnificence lying next to dross, with a smell of humidity and the superb decomposition of everything; an intuition of the corruption and sometimes of the darkness of beauty, without splendour. It is almost as if it were no longer a question of an architecture created by man, but rather a sort of lavic sedimentation, of insensate geological constructions traversed by silent rolls of thunder, reverberations of the earth and dust, echoes from beaten stone roads; what returns again and again in Keens pictures and in returning defines and stabilises their style, is the agonizing spacial perception of a contemporary scene; and between its glories and its failings and its menace, the cars, the road-signs and the sickly artificial street-lights are called to bear witness to the undeniable actuality of it all. And in this way the city finds its licit forms: because, as the great Anna Maria Ortese writes, only "to re-voke landscapes of the past is not possible; you could say God forbids it, for there is in them something of that Eden granted to man one time only... and which he can never re-enter". Looking at some of her drawings, her sketch-books, and her visual notes, you understand that Anna works with an infallibly sure touch, which captures in a stroke a cornice, perhaps, or a coupling-hook, or the pivot around which the foreshortenings multiply, dragging the eye along diagonals and pulling it into the distances.

Higher up Anna captures unquiet and stormy skies; in her own words, there is something seething there — and you don't know why, but they're beautiful. Roman skies are difficult skies for a northern painter with a luminosity of uncertain definition. And yet the eyes are filled, lost in the grip of the current they can go anywhere without rupture. Anna confesses that she cannot stand being closed in by her subject no matter how impressive, and for this reason, whenever

possible, reaches out into the distance. If this is true, as Cioran has said, that we are all followed by our origins, Anna contemplates this limitless Rome as if she were still looking at the open sea beyond the rocks of her British Isles.

Marco Di Capua