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The Weight of Illness in *Due imperi... mancati*

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As an uncompromising indictment against not only war in general, but also the political philosophy of the nations involved in the First World War, Aldo Palazzeschi's *Due imperi... mancati* stands apart from the majority of other works of the immediate post-war era. In his text Palazzeschi consistently objectifies the evils and horrors of war through the metaphor of illness. This illness exists at three levels in the text. First, the personified nations suffer from the diseases of cancer and syphilis. Second, the citizens of each country are infected by war as though by a parasite. In contrast to these two instances of disease in the text, there is the wasting away that Palazzeschi suffers during the war. While in the first two instances diseases serve to express the culpability and responsibility of nations and individual men for the disaster of war, Palazzeschi's illness is an attempt to purge his person of personal guilt.

It is important to note that in *Due imperi... mancati* disease exists as both a real object and as a metaphor. On the level of nations it exists as a metaphor while on the level of individual men and women illness is both a documented fact of the war and a metaphoric expression of the war. In her study *Illness as Metaphor* Susan Sontag notes that a disease is often turned into a metaphor when its instance captures the popular imagination due to its mysterious or incurable nature. In such a case the horror "in the name of the disease... is imposed on other things. The disease becomes adjectival."¹ Thus it is not necessarily cancer itself which appears in the text, but cancerous nations and cancerous cities. Since each disease when used as an adjective carries the specific horrors and implications of its respective symptomology it is necessary to note why Palazzeschi chose to represent the diseases of cancer, syphilis and parasites.

The use of cancer terminology first appears in *Due imperi... mancati* with reference to Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire:

Che il Kaiser sognasse un impero grande come il mondo e forse più, e che la maggior parte del suo popolo ne gongolasse in lui fino da scoppiarne idropico, si capiva.²

For Palazzeschi World War I was not just a war of nations, but a war of nations that desired to be empires. The insatiable desire of empires to enlarge their territory is taken to humorous extremes in the chapter “Come doveva essere grande un altro impero” where the narrator worriedly searches maps to ensure that there is not some untouched piece of land that might be sucked into the war. While the desire of an empire to grow larger might seem natural, Palazzeschi emphasizes the dangerous nature of this excess. Thus, as the above example illustrates, Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire are not denounced for invading innocent countries such as Belgium, but for their excessive accumulation of people and land which creates giant tumors that threaten to explode. Such examples clarify Sontag’s claim that the terminology of cancer metaphors derives from the language of warfare: “cancer cells do not simply ‘multiply’ they are ‘invasive’...cancer cells ‘colonize’ from the original tumor to far sites in the body, first setting up tiny outposts” (64). That the aspect of imperialism Palazzeschi decries is specifically its abnormal multiplication of territories similar to the unchecked growth of cancer cells is demonstrated by the fact that he does not distinguish between reasonable and excessive colonialism, but rather represents all empires as “ammassamenti, enormi cancri sociali, impedimento al naturale fluire della vita umana” (152). For this reason the United States, which supposedly entered the war to cut out the tumor of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, but which ultimately tried to create a supremacy of its own, was, according to Palazzeschi, destined for the same illness as the empires it fought against: “il cancro vi roderà” (164).

The use of the cancer metaphor is particularly apt, for as Susan Sontag shows, cancer is frequently understood to be the result of excessive desire or ambition that goes unrealized. An individual’s frustrated desire grows into tumors, just as a nation’s insatiable desire for power and growth turns into colonized territories. Sontag supports the link between political ambition and cancer with a series of historical observations: “Napoleon, Ulysses S. Grant, Robert A. Taft, and Hubert Humphrey have all had their cancer diagnosed as the reaction to political defeat and the curtailing of their ambitions” (49). The notion that a person who values the fulfillment of personal ambition and desire above

all else courts eventual defeat and disaster is implied in Palazzeschi's question to nations, "Voi crescete senza misura e senza riflessione, non avete saputo fare altro dacché ci siete. Ditemi, che farete quando non ci sarà più posto per i vostri piedi?" (128) The connection Palazzeschi creates between cancer and unnatural or excessive growth points to the accusation that war does not emerge indiscriminately, but rather is an expression of the vice of nations.

While the adjectival quality of cancer is applied primarily to the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the United States, the other nations involved in WWI are not exempt from disease. Palazzeschi refuses the notion that war was an external force imposed on Europe by the actions of Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire alone, and claims that everyone is "ugualmente colpevoli di quello che è accaduto" (23). Instead of suffering from cancer, nations such as France are shown as victims of syphilis, a disease which carries heavy implications of moral wrong-doing and responsibility. Here too, Sontag's theories are useful for understanding why the adjective syphilitic is applied instead of cancerous. As mentioned, cancer's causes have always been mysterious and thus are said to be the result of a certain personality type that has an overabundance of inexpressible desires. In contrast, the cause of syphilis was well known; it was

the consequence, usually, of having sex with a carrier of the disease. So among all the guilt-embroidered fantasies about sexual pollution attached to syphilis, there was no place for a type of personality supposed to be especially susceptible to the disease (Sontag 39).

Therefore syphilis is not a sign that something is inherently wrong with a person, but rather a clear-cut result of an immoral action. Thus, while nations which initiated the war, such as the Austro-Hungarian Empire, had an inherently vicious nature, the corresponding response of force by England and France was an immoral act that allowed the conflict to gain momentum. Overall, beyond objectifying the responsibility of all countries for the war, the two diseases demonstrate the nature of each country's culpability.

While on an objective level this responsibility for war falls on the male politicians of Europe, and is fought by male soldiers, each nation is personified as a woman. Therefore, an examination of illness in *Due*

imperi... mancati necessarily entails a confrontation not just with diseased nations, but with diseased women. In the introduction nations are not shown as the noble, healthy mother figures of wartime propaganda posters, but depraved and amoral women. France is a prostitute who wakes from her sleep to flee from her rapist, China is an old lady to be seduced, and America decides to enjoy herself with the “sifilidi della fradicia Europa” (Palazzeschi 22). To understand how war, an institution that uses men’s bodies as its fodder, comes to be represented by the bodies of women, it is necessary to further examine what Palazzeschi believed were the reasons for war. Like many authors active during and after the war, Palazzeschi’s text seems to respond to an implicit question: how could such a horrible war with so many lives lost have occurred?

Palazzeschi’s answer is related to his notion of abnormal and unchecked growth which underlies the cancer metaphor. This over-reproduction is objectified in the tangled mass of angry body parts that Palazzeschi presents in the chapter “Visita all’umanità.” Like empires that grow without reflection, too many women bring babies into the world with too little thought. The lost bond of familial love between mother and child represents a loss of importance of individual beings. The thoughtlessness with which life is given results in the thoughtlessness with which it is taken. As Giorgio Pullini notes in his study of *Due imperi... mancati*, the fraternal love that one individual feels for another, which was so important to Palazzeschi, is lost: “Egli detesta la guerra proprio e soprattutto perché distrugge l’amore fra gli uomini.”³ In such a conception of the global situation at the time of World War I, the division of life that occurs during war derives from the extreme multiplication of life.

In Palazzeschi’s Christian humanist vision the peace and fraternal love he values finds its ultimate symbol in the female figure of the Virgin Mary. Thus he exhorts the reader: “pensate alla vergine, pensate a lei. Quale immagine più grande di questa? quale amore più puro del vostro per Essa?” (Palazzeschi 187). In this vision of the Virgin Mary, the greatest value of humanity is the pure love of a mother, whose production of a child is a sacred act. Woman has a responsibility to love her children and consider each of their lives as precious, just as a nation has a responsibility to value each of its citizens. In a corrupt society the image of woman is turned upside-down, just as are the responsibilities of a nation. Palazzeschi shows how the pure, loving image of the Virgin Mary is replaced in modern life with a very different image of woman and nation:

Eravamo avezzi a vederle [le nazioni] conversare e trattare negli eleganti salotti diplomatici così rigidamente signore nei décolletées, con superbi monili e diademi. Finalmente le abbiamo viste un po' più al naturale, quello che sono. In sottana e in camicia, in mutande... e senza, le abbiamo vedute sul cantero, spulciarsi, farsi il lavativo e farselo fare, accosciate sul bidet. Tirarsi per i capelli coll'inquilina, con quella di faccia, sbraitare colla serva, cavarsi gli occhi col ganzo. (153)

In these two images the woman/nation is shown as either elegant, cold, and removed from humanity, or overly corporeal and violent. Either way the woman presented by Palazzeschi stands in stark contrast to his pure image of the Virgin Mary and her malady comes to represent the malaise of all of humanity.

This notion of a woman's illness as representing the corruption of society translates to the level of individual man. Here woman serves as a vector of disease that corrupts the bodies of pure men through sex. Palazzeschi frequently parallels a boy's initiation in war to a visit to a bordello. Disrupting the notion of war as an experience that turns a boy's body into a man's, bordellos and war turn a pure body into an impure one. However, the impurity that results from bordellos is never referred to in terms of syphilis. Insofar as they affect the body of the nation, cancer and syphilis are diseases which form a distinctly political metaphor. In contrast, the metaphor of the parasite is used in reference to the bodies of individual soldiers.

War is an institution which requires control over the bodies of men. One way this control is established is through the military's regulation of illness. In war it is no longer up to the individual man to determine if he is sick, but the military. In this way, illness becomes part of military machinery as its individual nature is erased and its regulation ensures the body's submission to the rules of war. When Palazzeschi becomes sick he is thoroughly examined

ora il generale di sanità con intera la sua corte ripeteva la passeggiata fra le mie costole lungo i sentieri dei miei stinchi, e per i vicoli della mia bocca e dei miei occhi (Palazzeschi 100).

In this description a soldier is no longer an individual body that suffers from illness, but a piece of terrain to be traversed, surveyed and claimed, just as a foreign front.

As World War I was a war fought with conscripted soldiers, the military was required to 'infect' reluctant soldiers with the belief in the necessity of the war. The image of a parasite explains how despite the original reluctance of soldiers to embrace war, it eventually came to be assimilated as necessary:

La guerra, come un corpo estraneo che si sia introdotto a forza nel vostro organismo, nel vostro stomaco o intestino, che i primi tempi vi disturba atrocemente, con orribili coliche, tremendi acuti dolori, diarree e vomito, poco alla volta si fa posto, si posa, vi riposa (Palazzeschi 38).

War, like a parasite, is not easily flushed from the body. Even after all of the peace accords are signed it remains living in the body of the soldiers. This leads to Palazzeschi's grim statement that to end and eliminate war, "dovreste puntare contro la vostra stessa pancia le baionette che vi sono avanzate" (29). In this way war is not a rite of passage from boy to man but a fatal transformation of a healthy body into a corrupted body. Furthermore, the image of the parasite emphasizes the inability of the basic infantryman to rescue himself from the power of war. The responsibility in this case once again falls to nations and those who run them, for Palazzeschi notes that the parasite enters and transforms "col consenso di tutti quelli che erano ai poteri su questa terra" (29).

In contrast to the ubiquity of images of disease related to nations and soldiers, Palazzeschi rarely mentions his own illness in the text. Instead it appears as a short expository aside to explain why the location of the narrative shifts from the *caserma* to the hospital. Palazzeschi refers to his illness as *deperimento organico* which is a complex of symptoms that represent the weakening of the body due to lack of adequate nutrition and rest. Thus, the main symptom represented in the text is fainting. Since Palazzeschi mentions so little about his illness in *Due imperi... ancati*, it is necessary to look beyond the texts to other works of Palazzeschi to understand the nature and meaning of his illness.

In Palazzeschi's novel *Il Codice di Perelà* (*Perelà: Uomo di Fumo*) written a few years before the war, and repeatedly rewritten and reedited during his life, the main character is a man of smoke, whose principal

characteristic is that he is very light. The connections between Perelà and Palazzeschi are immediately obvious since, as the fainting and loss of weight show, the *deperimento* from which Palazzeschi suffers can be seen as a light disease in which the body loses some of its material heaviness. The notion of lightness versus heaviness as related to war appears in both *Il Codice di Perelà* and *Due imperi... mancati*. In the latter work Palazzeschi expresses complete disdain for D'Annunzio's vision of war as "una grande partita ginnastica" where healthy bodies compete in a playful manner (168). In the penultimate chapter of the book Palazzeschi contrasts the futurist image of war as a healthy and agile body: "un corpo che sfilato terribile sulla faccia del mondo, presa la sua via prima ancor di guardare, sarebbe corso diritto" with the heavy, clumsy reality of war:

s'ingrossò, gonfiò, non poté più muoversi, incominciò a gondolare idropico su se stesso, e quando la lurida pancia finì per toccare il suolo a quel contatto si liquefece con orribile fetore di cadavere (193).

Similarly, Perelà who has lived most of his life in a chimney and comes into contact with city life only at the age of thirty-three contrasts his first idea of war with its reality:

io mi ero figurato che gli uomini andassero nudi alla guerra, e che si facessero leggeri... ed io li vedevo carpire ali ad uccelli da usare come strumenti. Piombo... acciaio... ferro... Ma non cadono essi schiacciati sotto il peso dei loro arnesi? Come possono velocemente inseguire il nemico, e inseguiti come possono velocemente fuggire?⁴

In both texts Palazzeschi shatters the myth of war as noble and swift, and replaces it with an image of war as a heavy, immobile body. In this way we are brought back to the notion of war as an illness, a body that malfunctions.

In contrast to the corporeal malady of war, Palazzeschi's illness is a voluntary denial of his physical nature. Since *deperimento* implies he is not eating, drinking or resting, it becomes clear that he refuses to satisfy the needs of his body and therefore seems to renounce its very existence. Instead, Palazzeschi affirms that it is the intellect and soul which require nutriment: "Non di solo pane vive l'uomo ma di tutto quello che a Dio piaccia" (183).

Food rarely appears in *Due imperi* but when it does Palazzeschi eats quickly, “buttai giù il latte” or gives away his food, “più spesso la mia razione andò a beneficio della comunità” (Palazzeschi 52, 119). Looking beyond these two texts, Palazzeschi’s complex relationship with food becomes clear. Recalling his childhood, Palazzeschi emphasizes his hatred of soup “Bisognava mangiarla tutta, gnorsì, solo dopo averla mangiata ‘tutta’ si poteva scendere a patti col rimanente del vivere, ottenere qualche cosa, prima no.”⁵ This hatred of soup was exacerbated by the fact that it was constantly imposed on him by adults. While Palazzeschi notes that soup came to represent “la falsità della vita, i suoi giochi che si annunziavano, un intoppo ad essa,” it also becomes a symbol of the imposition of a precise, devastating authority (Magherini and Manghetti 7). However, this imagery of food goes well beyond childish repulsion. In the poem *La Fiera dei morti* soup is absent, but meat is abundant, for example: “chilometri di salsiccia/ che sembra l’ammasso degli intestini malati/ di tutti i morti.”⁶ While soup represents falseness and imposition, meat represents the body, disease and death. The deadly, authoritative nature of food and war combine in Palazzeschi’s prose to create what Nicolas J. Perella and Ruggero Stefani term: “[a] grayish soup of heavy artillery.”⁷

In direct opposition to the negative heaviness of war stand the figures of Palazzeschi and Perelà. Palazzeschi states: “io non sono nemmeno un uomo, non ci tengo ad esserlo, io sono una creatura sensuale, un palpito libero nell’aria” (*Due imperi* 31). In the same way, because Perelà is made of smoke, he is seen as “la sublimazione del corpo e dello spirito umano” (*Il Codice* 217). The parallels between Palazzeschi’s description of himself and that of Perelà are so close that they have led some to understand Perelà as a representation of Palazzeschi. In “Aldo Palazzeschi’s Code of Lightness” Perella and Stefanini note that it is possible to see Perelà as “a metaphor for Palazzeschi’s homosexuality, for his acute sense of being a misfit” (106–7). In such a view both Perelà and Palazzeschi are exceptionally different, both are an “essere di solo pensiero, di solo cervello” (*Il Codice* 217). They both desire to be normal and accepted, but remain constantly aware of the otherness that defines them.

The major difference between the two characters is that Perelà, but not Palazzeschi, is referred to as a purified man. Perelà’s smoky nature implies a birth of fire, and one of the theories of his origin is that he is a man who was burnt, carbonized and turned into smoke. During such a process the body is destroyed and Perelà is purified. It is specifically

for his status as a pure man that Perelà is entrusted with the writing of the state's new code. He represents an "essere di solo pensiero, di solo cervello" free from a body which might contaminate his judgment. Despite Palazzeschi's claim, "io non sono nemmeno un uomo" the fact is that he remains tied to his body. This body is the locus of guilt in his life as it betrays him through the otherness of his sexuality. It is therefore no coincidence that when berating himself he says: "basso amatore di te stesso, della tua carne" (*Due imperi* 117). Thus Palazzeschi's refusal to eat, to take care of his body is not a punishment so much as a desire for lightness. Through the denial of his physical nature Palazzeschi denies both the heavy, corrupted nature of the war he finds himself in, and his own homosexuality.

In conclusion, Palazzeschi's illness is of a different nature from the diseases which fill most of the text. The images of cancer, syphilis and parasites serve as expressions of the decay of nations and humanity in general. These sick bodies are heavy as they swell with an excess of fluids. In contrast Palazzeschi's illness makes his body light and empty. His illness is an attempt to purge his person of everything that is heavy and guilty in the world, such as war and sexuality. Through his illness Palazzeschi attempts to reach the light nature of Perelà and therefore the status of a purified man.

Notes

1. Susan Sontag. *Illness as Metaphor*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978. 58.
2. Aldo Palazzeschi. *Due imperi... mancati*. Milan: Oscar Mondadori, 2000. 21.
3. Giorgio Pullini. *Aldo Palazzeschi*. Milano: U. Mursia, 1965. 77.
4. Aldo Palazzeschi. "Il Codice di Perelà (1911)" in *Tutti i romanzi*. Ed. Gino Tellini. vol. 1. Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori, 2004. 141-2.
5. Simone Magherini and Gloria Manghetti, eds. *Scherzi di gioventù e d'altre età: Album Palazzeschi (1885-1974)*. Firenze: Pagliai Polistampa, 2001. 7.
6. Aldo Palazzeschi. "La Fiera dei morti" in *L'incendiario*. Milano: Edizioni futuriste di 'Poesia,' 1913. 235.
7. Nicolas J. Perella and Ruggero Stefanini. "Aldo Palazzeschi's Code of Lightness." *Forum italicum* 26:1 (Spring 1992): 108.