

INDEX REVIEW

July 2023

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This issue is entirely illustrated by **Franco Mattichio**, author of the covers of “L’Indice” since 2012.

Mattichio is one of the most well-known and appreciated illustrators on the Italian scene. He made his debut in 1979 by drawing for the culture page of the “Corriere della Sera”. Later he worked, among others, with “Linus”, “Linea d’Ombra”, the Sunday edition of “Il Sole 24 Ore”, “Internazionale”, “Lo Straniero”.

In the 1980s he created Mr. Jones, a blindfolded cat who starred in a comic series of surreal stories.

He drew the storyboard for the animated opening credits of Roberto Benigni’s film *Il mostro* (1994), while in December 1999 he made the last cover of the second millennium for “The New Yorker”. Mattichio has also realised numerous book covers for the most important Italian publishers (Einaudi, Rizzoli, Mondadori, Guanda).

Mattichio is also author of several art books published by Nuages. In 2006 he published the collection of drawings *Esercizi di stilo* (Einaudi).

Mattichio’s entire comic production was recently republished by Rizzoli-Lizzard in two volumes, *Jones e altri sogni* in 2016 and, the following year, *Il signor Ahi e altri guai*.

For Vanvere he published *Libretto postale* (2012), *Libretto postale 2* (2014), *Animali sbagliati* (2016), *Ho dimenticato l’ombrello* (2019) and *Animali sbagliati 3* (2020).

His works have been shown in numerous exhibitions in different Italian cities (Turin, Milan, Varese, Florence, Rome). In 2017 he inaugurates a personal exhibition at the Galerie Martel in Paris.

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The durable and the ephemeral of our artistic ancestors

by Francesco Remotti

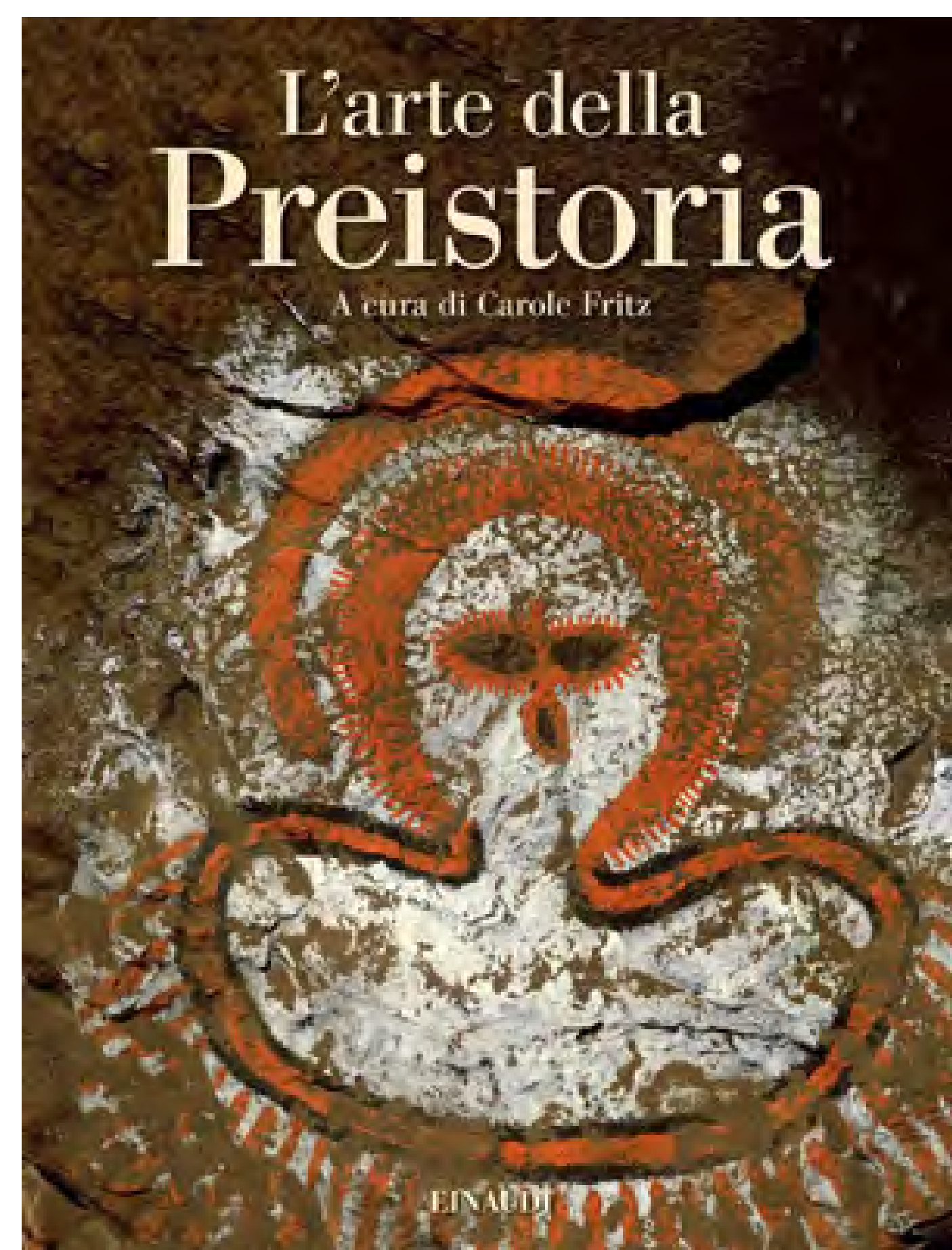
THE ART OF PREHISTORY

by Carole Fritz

*Original edition 2017, translations by Valentina Palombi,
pp. 620, € 140,
Einaudi, Turin 2022*

None of the Palaeolithic artists ever thought of the idea that, many millennia later, their works and those of their colleagues scattered all over the world, would be reproduced in one volume. However, there is continuity between us who leaf through this book and those who could contemplate the depictions produced by their contemporary artists on the walls of caves or rock shelters. These experiences are united by the explicit and conscious choice of fixing on durable support images that are entrusted with the task of crossing entire historical periods.

None of those artists could have ever calculated how long their creations would last. In any case, some of them have come down to us, even if we noticed them not so long ago. At the beginning of the 20th century, their discovery was a real cultural shock, for which we were not prepared: such a refined art produced by primitive beings (that we imagine are bearded cave dwellers), completely absorbed by an incessant struggle for survival! The book edited by Carole Fritz repropose this cultural shock, inducing us to revise our ideas on art, as well as our ideas on the species that we are: a species that, advancing in the most diverse parts of the world, could not help but “to mark” with its “art” the places it discovered and frequented.



Not all places, but certain places, are chosen as places of memory; for example, on the top of dangerous cliffs or in caves located in the bowels of the earth. Even inhabited places were inevitably marked, but the marking with lasting art suggests different, culturally selected, separate (and already for this reason “sacred”) places. In fact, there are signs that last for a long time, indefinitely, and signs that instead exhaust their presence and functionality in the space of a short time. Leafing through this grandiose atlas of prehistoric art worldwide, one risks falling into a sort of optical illusion, namely that the art of our ancestors is concentrated here. Here instead the “lasting” art of our ancestors is brought together, the art with which they wanted to challenge time, not from becoming something of themselves, of their own culture, of their own ideas. If they have been able to produce such a durable art, it is legitimate to ask with what other types of arts they have filled their days, their lives, marked their gatherings, their daily places: an art produced with ephemeral materials, delivered on perishable media. Prompted by ethnology, we could perhaps assume that even in prehistoric societies there was an artistic production destined to “disappear” in a short time: art is not made only to “last”; art is also made to become aware of time, to experience time, becoming death. After all, those distant ancestors of ours certainly knew the art that takes place directly in time, inherent in becoming an art that vanishes the instant it is produced: the art of the word (mythical and poetic tales), the art of songs and sounds, music, and dance. Thinking of companies that have produced such an impressive and refined “lasting” art as the one illustrated in this book, how much “ephemeral” art have they made use of in their history? It would not be bad, when leafing through this book and being admired by its representations, to imagine filling their silence with words, sounds, gestures, that is, with equally sparkling and significant artistic products, even if evanescent and for us – as already for them – completely unrecoverable.

After all, it is the authors of this book themselves who feel a similar need for integration, as when they propose to apply a “mythological model” to

the interpretation of wall art. In fact, this can be conceived as a series of “mythograms” (André Leroi-Gourhan), or as ideas and illustrations of narrative contents: the myths, destined in themselves to change over time, would have found an anchorage in the permanently painted and engraved images fixed, valid to slow down the evolution of the narratives, to stem and channel the inevitable lexical and semantic transformations of the stories. Significantly, the volume concludes with a quote from Mircea Eliade, who underlined the “revolt” of traditional societies “against concrete time” and their “periodic return to the mythical time of their origins”.

There is a risk in adopting what the authors call a “mythological model”: attributing purely imaginative contents to myths, tending towards the uncontrollable sphere of the supernatural and the sacred. Even a book like that of Gwenn Rigal, very shrewd in the exposition of the theories gradually examined, bears in its title (*The sacred time of the caves*, Adelphi, 2022) the predilection for this aspect. To avoid this risk, it is necessary to realise the role that culture has played in the survival of these societies even in the most distant periods of prehistory: culture has intervened, or rather the human species – including, most recently, *Homo sapiens* – have clung to culture, the more they lacked genetic information in directing their behaviour. It is not difficult to think that among the fundamental contents of culture there is real scientific information that is essential for orienting oneself in the environment in which one lives. Science is too necessary to survive and co-exist with other species. In the book we are commenting on a long-confirmed fact, namely the prevalence in wall paintings or engravings of animal figures, very often represented with great naturalistic effectiveness, while human beings are often almost always reduced to highly schematised representations. What do paintings and engravings of animals bring to light, if not a focused and scrupulous attention to their anatomy, as well as of their movements and their behaviours? In short, a sort of zoology and ethology, falling perfectly within the notion of “science of the concrete”, which Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Wild Thought* of 1962 saw as innate with myth and art.

It is probable that societies attached to their culture have felt the need to permanently fix their naturalistic knowledge, together with the sense of beauty that comes from the observation of other animal species.

The human figures – it was said – appear mostly stylised, reduced to linear signs, most likely having symbolic meanings and functions, or traced back only to magnified parts of the body, such as the vulvas, breasts, and buttocks of Venus statuettes. In addition to this, can we believe that in the meantime the human body was the object of accurate aesthetic interventions, such as tattoos and scarifications, destined to last until death, as well as equally significant ephemeral interventions, such as ornaments and facial paints? Finally, what are all those hands imprinted in the walls, if not the signalling of what most distinguishes humans from other animal species and which allows them to produce both durable art, as illustrated in this book, and ephemeral, which for prehistory we can only imagine, but which seems very difficult to ignore?

F. Remotti is professor emeritus in cultural anthropology at the University of Turin



We are the last chapter of the novel

by Elisabetta Starnini

The curator of this sumptuous volume with splendid illustrations is an archaeologist specialising in the study of “prehistoric art”, a researcher at the Cnrs of Toulouse as well as scientific director of one of the most famous French caves for its antiquity and exceptionality of Palaeolithic wall manifestations, that of Chauvet-Pont d’Arc in the Ardèche. Many other internationally renowned authors cover a wide geographical area, from Eurasia to the Americas, Africa, and Australia.

A necessary and updated theoretical reflection on contemporary thought on what is meant by “prehistoric art” is placed in the second part of the volume. The first essentially deals with manifestations and sites of “rock art” or “wall art”, terminologies that define the aesthetic appreciation that we express today for the representations that extinct humanity has created on rock walls and inside caves with various techniques: graffiti drawing, engraving, painting, sculpture and clay-manipulation. However, today there is much debate about the real reason and meaning to be attributed to these “artistic” manifestations which represent what remains of the Homo sapiens imagination starting from the upper Palaeolithic and the profound knowledge of the nature of which they were a part.

The word “decoration” is often used in the text in relation to representations: an essentially aesthetic appreciation, typical of contemporary culture of Western origin, shines through in the vocabulary used. In fact, the verb to decorate implies the intent to beautify, but this is probably not the intention that moved the hand of those who left the representations.

Several scholars of prehistoric art have proposed that the figures painted on the walls of the caves represent a symbolic language with which stories, beliefs and events were communicated. The latest discoveries have also shown that individuals of all ages entered the caves with representations of wall art, including children and women, thus casting doubt on old hypotheses according to which they could be exclusive places, dedicated to particular rites and whose access was reserved only for certain individuals of the group with particular roles, such as shamans. These new discoveries and studies have opened the question of who was the creator of these representations: men? Women? The children? All together?

Entering an underground cavity was often a courageous activity, which involved the exploration of unfamiliar, dark and potentially dangerous environments. In some caves with paintings and engravings, stone lamps were found, fed with animal fat.

In some cases, the construction of temporary wooden scaffolding has also been hypothesized to allow the walls to be drawn on to be reached in height. This activity must therefore have been considered by groups of Palaeolithic hunters as a particularly important expressive need, which prompted them to challenge dangers and difficulties. However, almost all anthropological studies agree



in underlining the magical-religious origin of wall art, a spiritual need that would be at the basis of prehistoric representations.

Prehistory is traditionally considered that very long phase of history during which we witness the physical, cognitive and cultural evolution of man, starting from the appearance in Africa of the first forms of bipedal hominids, about three million years ago, up to introduction and diffusion of

writing in the Mediterranean basin around the first millennium BC. New tendencies of thought suggest rejecting the idea of a prehistory as opposed to a history and propose to consider this vast period of time as a “profound history of man” (Daniel Lord Smail, *Profound history. The human brain and the origin of history*, Bollati Boringhieri, 2017) that we can investigate and write using other types of documents, mainly of an archaeological nature.

Aside from small critical points (for example questionable statements on the possibility of directly dating the paintings), this monumental work, aimed primarily at the community of prehistoric art scholars, will certainly also be appreciated by a wider audience for the quantity and quality of the images, the breadth of the issues addressed and the importance of the topics covered, including the ongoing debate on the ability of our Neanderthal “cousins” to express themselves with graphic gestures.

Finally, let us ask ourselves why it is important to study and learn about such a remote past in a society like ours, projected towards an increasingly technological, virtual and

cybernetic future. The answer lies in a simple consideration: not knowing who we are and where we come from is like reading only the last chapter of a novel.

We will know how a story ends, but we will never know how it began.

E. Starnini teaches prehistory and protohistory at the University of Pisa

Expressive juggling, weirdos, rebellious spirit and irony by Bohumil Hrabal

Where the beer ends, the story begins.

by Nicolò Moscatelli

With few exceptions, Czech-language literature has never enjoyed the attention it deserves in Italy (or elsewhere). Just leafing through Ripellino's *Praga Magica*, published in 1973, we would find dozens of cited authors who had not been translated then and have not been since. And it is a great pity: because in the last century and a half or so, Czech-speaking writers have built a very singular *Wunderkammer* which always seems to have rewarded the superb eccentricity of each of its specimens – in work and, very frequently, in life – but reveals to a slightly less hasty examination certain recurring and distinct elements, as in its robust vein characterised by the propensity for the grotesque and the bizarre, for expressive juggling, for popular and fragmentary epic, for lewd and insubordinate and subtly melancholic humour.

Bohumil Hrabal, whose translations fortunately are not in short supply, is one of the champions of this line; and his *Compiti per casa. Riflessioni e interviste* (*Homeworks. Reflections and interviews*) has just been published by Miraggi in the “NováVlna” series (pp. 224, € 19), entitled to the Czechoslovakian *nouvelle vague* which, in just ten years, was able to give so many gems to the history of cinema. (There were adaptations of Hrabal's works shot by directors of that *nouvelle vague*: Menzel above all but also Jiří Menzel, Věra Chytilová, Jan Němec, Evald Schorm, as well as a Juraj Herz at the beginning – still playful, but already busy developing the techniques and disturbing atmospheres of his mature films). The “NováVlna” project, which is entirely dedicated to Czech literature, is meritorious; and it would be nice if, to the living authors published up to now – and who, with the exception of Hrabal and Čapek, make up the entire catalogue – the series could in the future also add the giants of the past century, from Vítězslav Nezval to Jiří Karásek, from Ladislav Klíma to Vladislav Vančura.

Compiti per casa, edited by Alessandro Catalano and translated by Laura Angeloni, is a tasty collection of miscellaneous texts: reflections and interviews – as per the subtitle – as well as short narrative tests, prose poems or political allegories, speeches from conferences or considerations on paintings, about cinema and writing. The individual texts are not dated, but the succession is clearly chronological and develops in the handful of years before, during, and immediately after the Prague Spring and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968: an increasingly central theme as the book progresses. (In the dark years of “normalisation” Hrabal’s works would then be published only in *samizdat*, without this having prevented him from becoming one of the most read and loved writers in his country).

And the title is “Homeworks”, but it is clear that Hrabal was not much at home: because there were his wife who wanted to chat and the cat who lay down on his typewriter, and the postman who rang the bell and the friends and admirers who dropped by – and then he would go to the brewery. Therefore, he says, his books are so short (cf. “L’Indice” 1986, n. 7). The brewery is naturally the place of choice for Bohemian literature, its characters, and authors (as well as their fellow citizens). But, for Hrabal, this is even more true: the narrators and characters of his novels and short stories, his celebrated “freaks”, are all always ready to ramble on a whim in a hubbub of tavern voices, each episode recalls another and opens to new unpredictable and often absurd digressions, but acrobatically held together by the story-telling mastery of a tipsy storyteller who somehow always finds the thread of the conversation. And *Compiti per casa* contains interviews granted in the brewery, praise of the breweries, complaints because it is hard to write in the brewery – but it would be worse to try it at home, because then you would just want to go to the brewery.

This had already been the domicile, office and burial place of Jaroslav Hašek, his declared master (together, among others, with Ladislav Klíma: authors for whom, we read here, the work is “a gloss

... to life”, and the same is true at least in part for their successor). Many of Prague’s old breweries still have a plaque saying Hrabal, or Hašek, used to drink here. The grandfather of a dear friend of mine was the latter’s drunken companion, and one evening they decided that two was not enough. They rang the bell for a third party and asked him to follow them to the beer hall. The unfortunate man, already the victim of a ruthless hangover (*kocovina*, lo *gnaul’io* or cat’s lament) from the night before, made excuses; until Hašek, a war veteran, took the revolver out of his pocket and pointed it at his head saying “now you come with us and have a drink”. He put on his jacket, went with them and drank. Hrabal was then president of the Golden Prague, a society with no members (one could not be admitted or expelled, and the police therefore did not have access to the lists; membership was made private) whose goal was to drink beer and enjoy it. And this kind of more or less goliardic associations had its own local tradition, of which Hašek was once again a forerunner with his Party for Moderate Progress Within the Limits of the Law founded in a Vinohrady beer hall.

Several times, in these articles, Hrabal is keen to specify his own literary genealogy, or at least the great monuments to which he looks. And it is true that, on the one hand, the breweries offer an inexhaustible repertoire of materials to an author who on several occasions and too modestly (but also asking not to be taken literally) has defined himself as a simple transcriptionist or film editor, someone who, like the exceptional photographer Václav Chochola – to whom one of the short essays is dedicated – comes from the countryside with wide eyes and knows how to find beauty, joy, adventure and poetry in every alley. In the brewery, anecdotes, jokes, entire biographies, micro-stories are listened to and transcribed, which you just need to put together in a more or less coherent structure (Uncle Pepin’s “disconnected reasoning” would constitute “the perfect manual for assembling the narrative”; but the structures of Hrabal’s narratives are anything but naïve or improvised, as these interviews confirm).

It is there that we laugh and cry about our fellow men and, together with them, we find the noble spark of humanity at the bottom of souls enraged and saddened by existence, exhausted by work, enslaved by power. After all, “What do men all over the world prefer to do once they get off work?”, asks Hrabal, and the answer is soon given: “drink until they reach that euphoria that drives them to tell stories”. In the brewery he could experience an extension of youth and toast to old unfulfilled dreams; but in the brewery he could also and above all, thanks to his *leicastyl* (Leica style) and his very fine (anti) literary ear, take “colloquial snapshots” of the spoken language.

This is actually one of the debts that he most often recognises to Hašek: the democratisation, the “sliding downwards” of the literary protagonists in the hierarchy of the represented



society must correspond on Virgil's wheel to the search for a different, poetic and anti-literary style, founded on the vernaculars and the jargons and the flashes of linguistic inventiveness and the 1,000 word games and colloquial turns of phrase overheard between the tables, as well as in the workshops, at the hydraulic presses, in the train stations and behind the theatrical scenes. Hrabal did a 1,000 jobs and of each he remembers glimpses of unexpected beauty, even if of course the best thing is to tell the engineer that you go to the archive, tell the archivist that you go to the area manager and the latter that you go in the workshop, and then go to the river to swim. They are the "non-standard elements" created and refined like a jazz improvisation by an entire community of anonymous inventors of genius on which, from Hašek onwards, contemporary literature can and must be based, alienating jewels that break with the conventionality of language, highlight the poetic function, delight whoever sees the icasticity, the irreverence, the humour. It is not for nothing that Joyce is among the greats repeatedly mentioned here, and Hrabal recounts in *One day* that he toured the houses in Zurich: without finding memorial plaques but advertising posters, company slogans, neon signs and newspaper posters, from whom, however, he believes he can learn much more about the master.

The latest texts in the collection become more and more overtly political and leafing through them it even seems to witness live the expansion of the limits of what can be said publicly and explicitly around the period of the IV Congress of Czechoslovakian Writers, in 1967, and at the time Dubček's experiment with socialism with a human face in 1968. Hrabal never poses as a talking cricket and indeed recognises that he himself often suffers from a sort of ethical *esprit de l'escalier*: that is, complaining only when needed and telling the truth along the way (the same one that appears in the motto – *truth triumphs* – on

the presidential flag or "huge tablecloth", and that Hrabal imagines, in *The game for the truth*, intent on a long game of ping-pong which corresponds to the history of ideas) only when he already climbs the stairs. There are those who, returning to Hašek, have defined the typical Czechoslovakian citizen of the 60s as "a Švejk who has read Kafka and Marx", and I believe that the definition has already been applied to Hrabal himself. Švejk, the soldier who pretends to be stupid or maybe he really is, had already been the paradigm of a certain type of resistance to the vainglory of power: that is, the one that ridicules it by taking its claims literally, and there are not a few Hrabalian narrators who practice the art. And then, in the space of a few months, that expansion of what can be said – of which Hrabal, although naturally happy about it, feared the possible repercussions on the quality of future literary production, at the risk, according to him, of sinking into the "comforting water of the opportunism"; and certain comments by Godard in *Pravda* come to mind – one sees it interrupted, the limits recede, close. The book, in fact, will be printed but not distributed. However, the political dimension is inseparable from a writing based on the spontaneous polyphony of the whole society and above all of the little ones, each represented with his own voice and his own happiness, his own pains and his own extravagant monomanias: and this is the reason why Hrabal cannot think of fleeing abroad, abandoning all the weirdos only in collaboration with whom – so he declares – he was able to write his books, and to whom in exchange he "tried to teach a certain rebellious spirit, the art of not being afraid and to overcome situations that make blood run cold with humour and irony". And at the end of *Compiti per casa* he reminds us: hearts high.

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MICHELE FERRERO

CONDIVIDERE VALORI PER CREARE VALORE



di SALVATORE
GIANNELLA



SALANI
LE STANZE

THE FIRST BIOGRAPHY OF
THE MAN WHO SYMBOLISES
ITALIAN EXCELLENCE:
THE INVENTOR OF NUTELLA