

Anima mundi. Between Light and Darkness

The contradiction between mystery and reason characterizes the entire photographic and artistic exploration (lasting over ten years) that Giuseppe Ripa presents in *Anima Mundi*. And so it is from these two poles, both essential to an experience of faith, that we consider these pictures, very different from one another but held together by a kind of common theme that ensures their unity and, moreover, their extraordinary essentiality. And if the mystery is adumbrated in the very first photograph, concentrating on Plato's theme of the cave but also on the contrast between darkness and light and on the slender gap that separates one from the other (the opening of the cave), only reason explains, and in a way contains, Ripa's tenacious travelling among the countries of the world, in search of a faith that exists in nature, as it exists also in mankind, but especially in history.

Travelling and not wandering, pursuing one's own identity, with a map marked out in precise stages: *mystery, asking, silence, dialogue, awaiting*.

The mystery of faith gives rise to prayer that in itself contains man's fundamental question. Prayer is nourished by silence and is open to dialogue, to the contamination that characterizes the places of faith and pilgrimages, where the encounter with diversity becomes the substance of an ecumenism that, leaving the Church aside, consists in the common aspiration towards God.

The sense of awaiting comes from this conjunction of prayer and silence and the shared path towards the contemplation of mystery.

In an almost circular fashion the journey comes to a close where it had begun: the perception of mystery is an awaiting, an expectation that man's destiny should be fulfilled in history, giving a meaningful perspective even to death.

In this the man of modern societies, strongly associated with a Judeo-Christian identity, differs from the man of ancient societies because, whereas the latter lived in a powerful union with the rhythm of nature and the cosmos, the former seems powerfully conjoined with history, the sense of which he seeks to find.

Ripa seems to move with equilibrium in history (without any concession to histories), but also in nature, shunning the hazards of the picturesque and conceding little to the sublime, avoiding narrative or literary delays, but also the perils of mystical drifting.

His journey is essentially rational, as we said, although pervaded by the religious sense of awaiting and the density of silence and prayer. Mystery is everywhere, but above all in ourselves. Sounding it out is arduous work, very much like that of the theologian or philosopher. The journey as a search for truth, setting itself in an analogy with philosophy, with profound powerful thinking from Seneca to Bobbio, from the Gospel to the Koran. In the long run Ripa seems to feel the need not so much for cultured quotation as for a pause, and perhaps an attempt at synthesis.

A long journey in the spirit and the reason, with tremors of doubt appeased by silence and contemplation. The idea is that in the world and in time there is a great impulse towards the transcendent. Almost an attractive force that unites everything and everyone (*anima mundi*), intervening in the history of mankind and subverting it so as to make it unique and unrepeatable, like the picture that the camera and the mind capture, sometimes in a snapshot, sometimes singling it out from the tangle of the visible.

A cave, as we are saying, that smacks of Plato marks the beginning of this series of photographs, which suddenly urge us along a path, as Ripa indicates in the second photograph, where the way happens to wind between mountain and water, towards an indefinite, misty horizon. This search for sense and directions recalls Pascal and the whole hesitant quality of our human bearing, realizing our smallness in the cosmos. From Pascal's anxiety and the Romantic concern of Foscolo and Leopardi, Ripa seems to draw the lay sense of infinite and of man's solitariness before such greatness. Thus, quoting Friedrich, in this *incipit* of eye and mind, Ripa portrays a figure with its back turned and in the shadow, standing out against the immense, majestic glaciers of Greenland. This intentional and, as it were, programmatic photograph certainly stands apart from the rest, which immediately resumes the theme of the travel in a long, steady sequence of sapient images, rightful heirs of the finest tradition of photography, from Cartier-Bresson to Salgado.

Henri Cartier-Bresson is an important reference point for establishing a link with a great school, also based on the ability to reconcile the photographer's way of seeing with that of mind and, in short, to extend the space of the visible beyond the actual boundaries of the photograph, creating a fascinating effect of fusion between virtual space and real space that reveals a profound humanistic culture, to which the tendency to bring out the monumental dimension of things is also due.

Sebastiao Salgado, on the other hand, corresponds to the eye's attempt to reach the most reserved, recondite truths of the world and of mankind. His monumental dimension is diluted in the incisive, liquid gaze of his characters, whose humanity exudes from every details, from skin, hands and eyes, becoming one with the landscape, the place of man and at the same time of his mystery. Ripa's *La preghiera nel Sahara (Praying in the Sahara)* cannot be isolated from a cultural context that, although, on the one hand, taking us back to what we said earlier about the ten years and more that he has spent travelling around the world, appears, on the other hand, to be indebted to Salgado's expressive power. Yet Ripa's picture seems utterly independent, characterized by a slowing-down of vision that serves for the perception of silence, understood not in an adjunctive sense but as constitutive of being.

In this connection, Ripa excludes all dramatic tension from his pictures, attaching importance in man's activity to the spiritual dimension, where its identity can be perceived, which is something different from mere anthropological abbreviation. Ripa's religious sense consists in, and insists upon, this choice of a spiritual rather than anthropological notion. The man praying in the Sahara is apparently fold in upon himself, becoming, even physically, a closed form, a stone in the desert. What Ripa really wishes to reveal is a ritual dimension, as one can gather from the pictures that follow, where the ritual gives meaning to the gestures of the person praying and ultimately links them to those of other men, in a choral movement that does not interrupt individual concentration but harmonizes it with a plurality of voices that express the religiousness of a people.

Ripa seems to be interested in the contrast between the individual dimension of prayer and its choral dimension, manifested in a composed rituality that is not devoid of exteriority. It is interesting to note that in the Western society prayer has gradually become internalised so that it has acquired intimist connotations, becoming almost an experience of consciousness, that, at most, gives rise to an ethics where it is not hard to see the globalizing signs of a common feeling. It becomes legitimate to ask oneself whether what survives in this praying is belief in a paschal God rather than some vague aspiration to go beyond the boundaries of natural.

As a photographer Ripa works with images but he asks questions in them, and he attempts to give answers. In this respect, the juxtaposition of two Ethiopians at Addis Ababa is truly emblematic, one of them white in his long tunic, folded in upon himself in prayer like a cocoon with his long staff between his hands, and the other, standing beside him in Western clothing. Both of them have a sculptural quality, accentuated by the intensity of the light concentrated in the one praying, while the other is significantly in shadow (so much that one is tempted to think of photographic trickery); the two of them represent different worlds, and if the first looks completely firm and solid in the environmental context, the second seems foreign and provisional.

The contrast between light and shade, between bright and dark, established in the very first picture of Ripa's travels, seems to have become a linguistic constant used for such deeper exploration of images as may be necessary.

In this connection, the whole section devoted to the theme of silence seems to be pervaded with the tremor of a light that stands out sharply in the places of belief, picking out now one area and now another and finally becoming lost in the distance in long fields of vision, merging the motionless majesty of architecture and the movement and transit of people into a single whole. Places of beliefs, places where the spirit thrills among pointed arches and in the fluttering of garments, enlivening and renewing ancient memories. Everything is present and alive in the inquiry that Ripa pursues in his travelling, a journey of the soul rather than of a person.

And if a journey is a displacement from one place to an *elsewhere*, Ripa's journey, which has lasted so many years, is characterized by a constant to-and-from movement of his soul, towards the soul that he intuits in people and back to his own again, *anima mundi*, very much in a circular sense. A spiritual geography impels Ripa towards the thresholds of mystery, of secret silence, where prayer begins and dialogue becomes possible. But this, too, first of all between self and self,

and only afterwards does his voice mingle with other voices. The eye sees what the soul recognizes.

During this years, Ripa has taken hundreds and hundreds of photographs. Now he is presenting seventy-five of them. The operation he performs is a distillation that is useful for visual and mental clarity. From it comes a smooth, flowing photographic continuum in which each picture dovetails with the one before and hints at the one that follows.

Thus the first photographs devoted to the theme of dialogue is also tense with silence, despite the deep, somber sound of the *tung-chen*, a telescopic horn that seems already to be spying out the way to Labrang, in eastern Tibet, where the light cuts out geometric patterns and draws black figures against a wall of dazzling brightness. From this exterior the dazed eye penetrates the darkness of the ceremony of the puja, a collective prayer formed in a penumbra that clearly separates *inside* from *outside*.

Between light and darkness the soul of the world pulsates and indicates a way of salvation, like the one from eastern Tibet to Lhasa, prostrating oneself every three steps.

Devotion or superstition? Neither one nor the other, I think. One places one's trust in a way made by one's father's fathers and even earlier. Who can interrupt it? And is there any point in asking oneself about the sense of giving oneself up to such an ancient tradition? What man has the right to interrupt it, to break the chain that goes beyond time and history? Beyond.

This is a way towards the *beyond*, to where the soul of the world is. *Anima mundi*.

Paolo Biscottini