

## **Hannibal or Anti-history**

For Emiliana and Matteo

“Each story is accompanied by an indeterminate number of anti-stories, each of which is complementary to the other.” Claude Lévi-Strauss

Hannibal is the son of Hamilcar Barca, who was born two centuries before Jesus. Hannibal lived during a period of great tensions in the Mediterranean, when Rome was exercising its power over all the Western world. He earned his place in history as an outstanding strategist after crossing the Pyrenees and the Alps with an army that included elephants. After the victories of Trebbia, Trasimeno and Cannae, he occupied most of Italy. After a series of defeats against the Romans and a betrayal, he committed suicide. In the modern world, he has often been compared to military geni such as Napoleon or Wellington.

Why would a young Italian artist choose a character like Hannibal – an African, since Carthage is in Tunisia – to trace his epic deeds, more than two millennia after their occurrence? How could this legendary figure serve the intent of a young European, a graduate of a Milanese art school? The answer lies in Marco Colombaioni's biography. Even though we should pause for a moment on the painful day the young artist left us, I think it is important to spend some time on the articulation of this drama. To summarise what happened, there is only one phrase that comes to my mind: a gift of the self. In this self-giving, we can perceive the anger and the revolt of a being for whom any injustice is unbearable. In this attitude – which is not heroic, as it has been argued here and there, but simply humanist – lies a strong will to dismiss fatality and to believe, instead, that human beings are responsible for their fate and choices.

It is with this aim in mind that, in the words of Lévi-Strauss, he got down to working out an anti-history. A story that, contrary to the maxim, does not correspond to that of the winners. Endeavouring to depict Hannibal's saga – a soldier who preferred suicide to a life of submission – Colombaioni questions the very notion of 'the winner'. The West, which, according to Jean-Paul Sartre's

Black Orpheus, has elevated his thought to the level of absolute truth, has for centuries refused to tolerate contradictions. This attitude is reflected in Hegel's words, when, in 1830, he stated that Africa is an ahistorical continent. This desire to confine the continent to the outskirts of humanity betrays a clearly-articulated process of ideological domination. By choosing a Carthaginians who made the absolute power of the Roman Empire shake, the artist summons legendary figures such as Menelik, the Ethiopian emperor who defeated the Italian army; the Haitian Toussaint L'Ouverture, who successfully opposed the Napoleonic armies; or, even closer to us, Nelson Mandela, who managed to put an end to the iniquity of the apartheid regime. Thus, one should see in the choice of Hannibal a metaphorical character containing within himself many other figures.

In Colombaioni's treatment of the topic – intentionally imbued with a realism that might be described as romantic – there are a number of symbolic axes that are worth dwelling upon at greater length: the arrogant figure of the hunter before his trophy, which depicts the pathetic pride displayed by man – in this case a European man who takes pleasure in the power of his rifle gun and in the right of life and death over all life that it gives him; the image portraying a negro and two Roman soldiers, bound by an unlikely friendship born out of the sudden irruption of an elephant in their field of vision; and, finally, the elephant itself. The elephant is the materialisation of the anti-history I was referring to before. This is the staging of the fundamental contradiction at the heart of a world that believes itself to be the master of all things. The brute force of the animal, as opposed to the sophisticated Roman constructions; the contrast between this behemoth, king of Indian and African savannah, and the snow-capped Alps; the eruption of *wildness* into the heart of *civilization*. With these constant oppositions, with these clearly-expressed *mise en abîme*, Colombaioni prompts us to look with a purified eye at misconceptions and false evidences, what the black-American writer James Baldwin called the evidence of things not seen. This is the Hegelian paradox of the master and the slave displayed before our eyes. Even if the story illustrated by the artist seems very distant from us, its echo powerfully resonates with a contemporary world where reflections on alterity are

still to be done.

Finally, it might be interesting to note that the first exhibition dedicated to this work is held in a natural history museum: the neutrality of this space – a space *a priori* deprived of ideology, since the history it deals with is not that of wars and conquests – allows us to better see and understand.

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