

LINO MANNOCCI

CARTOLINE A OLIO

ON THE SEASHORE OF ENDLESS WORLDS:
The treated postcards of Lino Mannocci

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I

A celebrated photograph of Giacomo Puccini has him sitting proudly in a swank new automobile outside the legendary Caffè Margherita on the esplanade at Viareggio. I wouldn't be surprised if they sell a postcard of it at Torre del Lago, his home (now a museum) where each summer open air operas are performed by the lakeside. The card would no doubt have frilly art nouveau borders and suitable period lettering. I know the image from Lino Mannocci's living room in his summer retreat at Montigiano, a Tuscan hilltop hamlet midway between Lucca (Puccini's birthplace) and Viareggio (Mannocci's). The photo is perched on the mantelpiece like a family memento, or votive image.

The Caffè Margherita puts in an appearance in one of his treated postcards, amidst a whole block of defiantly ornate buildings, including the arched, balconied, and colonnaded Bagno Balena, once an exclusive beach club. One thing that is slightly atypical of this composition, comparing it to other Mannocci postcards, is the proportion of the original retained, and the homogeneity of that part within the reconfiguration. Even so, a loose, calligraphic scribble of pinky grey splayed across the façade binds the appropriated photographic element to its new painterly environment, as does the sandy ground which encroaches into the buildings' space, obscuring the table and chairs under the awninged terrace and obliterating most of the customers in the process. These scrubbing-out devices reduce the intrusiveness of modern dress and the jarringly inelegant, ubiquitous plastic chairs, as if to restore the buildings to their former glory. But Mannocci's nostalgia is never historically specific. Isolated landmarks of his native town are transported in time, but not to some heritage-conscious quantifiable moment - the town's heyday at the turn of the century, say, or the years of the artist's own childhood and adolescence. On the contrary, Mannocci's ethereal mists conjure a zone beyond the reaches of real time.

To return to the Margherita: the middle-aged lady with her back to the viewer, hand on hip and a beach bag nonchalantly slouched over an exposed shoulder, gazes

squarely at the buildings. No doubt Mannocci has robbed her of companions, a distracted husband or irksome children perhaps. Her dramatic isolation, accentuated by the sharp focus of her bronzed back, glossy against the matt paint surrounding her, lends her pose new meaning now that she is placed in so pivotal a relationship to the pointed domes of the Margherita and the decorative orbs of the Balena.

Rudely snatched from the bosom of her family, it may not be altogether fanciful to cast her in the improbable role of surrogate Puccini. The city's first citizen - with or without his *auto* - is the absent presence of this image.

Another illustrious Viareggian honoured in Mannocci's postcards is the painter Lorenzo Viani. It is to him that popular though unsubstantiated legend attributes the striking war memorial in the Piazza Garibaldi. This heroic, defiantly forward-thrusting group is a natural target for Mannocci. For his first series of treated postcards, dating from 1979, he deliberately chose one of the most clichéd tourist images of London, Piccadilly Circus; Gilbert's Eros, liberated from his plinth, merrily shoots his arrows while tourists, stranded and isolated, stare every which way, oblivious to the young god's amorous antics. Mannocci's surrealism was at its most blatant in these pieces; now he seems less excited by outrageous juxtapositions and ready to explore a gentler kind of whimsicality. He does not debase his humor with a punchline. The fallen warrior stands proud against tumultuous seas and skies, but their relocation has none of the subversion of Eros's. If anything, Viani's figures are more forlorn and incongruous in their real setting, with children eating ice-creams and the traffic whizzing by, cruelly indifferent to the noble sentiments they strain to arouse.

Viareggio's Eros is the Madonnina perched somewhat gormlessly on an inelegant concrete plinth above the masts crowding il porticciolo, the marina. Mannocci transforms her frankly phallic base into a somewhat mammary hillock, obliterating all the boats save one mastless vessel in the bottom right of the composition. In the original this boat moves gracefully through the placid waters otherwise only disturbed by anglers sitting on the boulders shored against the jetty. Mannocci deletes the red hull and pilot of this craft and tosses it around on choppy waves.

II

Other artists have been seduced by the postcard, but to whatever extent Mannocci acknowledges forebears among the ranks of Dada, surrealism, pop and post-modernism, his best paintings on postcards actually have little to do with iconoclasm or appropriation. He is not over-exercised by a high-low dichotomy. Although the viewer is quite entitled to draw on the obvious signifiers of the postcard-communication, nostalgia, vacation, the "wish you were here" banality of the compressed message - these pictures are not loaded with conceptual connotations. Once our eye adjusts to what Mannocci is doing, the mundane

function of paint as the means of obliteration recedes and we can enter empathetically into the space of the picture as we would with paintings on such conventional, neutral supports as canvas or board. If there is any intrusion, it is not of the paint onto postcard, but of postcard into paint; even though we can see that actually it happened the other way around, we relate to the given, underneath elements as collaged-in to his picture surfaces. Subtlety of texture and delicacy of tone take the same priority as in his other pictures so that his treated postcards, despite their uniquely twentieth-century medium and strategy, do a better job of evoking old masters than fellow postcards artists.

Two of Mannocci's special heroes among the classical pantheon are Claude and Corot, both foreigners in Italy whose idealised, poetic visions of landscape elicited cravings from a class of tourist who would not have made do with postcards even if they had been invented. In Italy Lino Mannocci is neither a foreigner nor a tourist, but as a summer-time returning native he must negotiate his own displacements of time and mood. He has a keen eye for postcards of a particular vintage, no doubt from around when he moved to London, which he voraciously buys up. It can only be speculated how in responding to technical peculiarities (lurid fuzziness of reproduction quality, for instance) and the intrinsic naffness of a lot of his source material he balances intuitive formal considerations and nostalgic presentiments of mind.

Mannocci's postcards also share with Claude and Corot a tendency, in the words of Reynolds, to "correct Nature by herself". Where Claude renders the given more poetic with mythic incident, and late Corot by imposing his characteristic misty blurr, Mannocci corrects much more literally, imposing upon the modern nature of the printed postcard his own highly personal painterly marks.

Mannocci is an artist who makes works which are 'poetic' without enduring the limitations of a literary art; who appropriates without losing his creative engagement with the language of paint; who elicits humour without mortgaging himself to wit. So many contemporary artists who work with found objects and a conceptual agenda fall foul of Coleridge's classic distinction between fancy and imagination, where fancy "has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites". When fancy is also described as "no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space" we may think, momentarily, of Mannocci, but his manipulation of materials - whether found, applied, or psychic - transports him, and the viewer with him, to the transcendent domain of imagination.

III

Mannocci's repeated, obsessive depiction of the sea is not sufficiently accounted for by the biographical fact of his growing up in, and missing, the coastal town of Viareggio. Sometimes, as in the treated postcard, *Bambini al mare* (1996) the sea forms itself into a strange mountainous shape hardly to be seen on the Italian riviera, even through the eyes of a child. In *Firenze* (1993) the sea laps at the feet of Hercules and David, guardians of the Palazzo Vecchio, something beyond their worst Flood-of-'66 nightmares.

The English psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott recounts being intrigued since adolescence by a line of Rabindranath Tagore:

On the seashore of endless worlds,
children play

At first he could not account for its meaning (or its hold upon his imagination). Then,

"When I first became a Freudian I *knew* what it meant. The sea and the shore represented endless intercourse between man and woman, and the child emerged from this union to have a brief moment before becoming in turn adult or parent. Then, as a student of unconscious symbolism, I *knew* (one always *knows*) that the sea is the mother, and onto the seashore the child is born... Then I began to see that this employs a sophisticated concept of the parent-infant relationship and that there could be an unsophisticated infantile point of view, a different one from that of the mother or the observer, and that this infant's viewpoint could be profitably examined. For a long time my mind remained in a state of not-knowing, this state crystallizing into my formulation of the transitional phenomena."*

This coming upon a concept through a state of not-knowing is deeply suggestive of the process of art appreciation, at least for art which, like Lino Mannocci's, refuses to allow itself to be pinned down in linguistic narrative terms - or indeed reductive psychological symbols - but occupies its own space, generating its own meanings.

The child's "transitional object" is the blanket or teddy bear from which he is inseparable. It is "transitional" because the child half believes it an extension of himself, half accepts it as something found outside of himself - in the "real" world with which he is beginning to come to terms. The object is like a souvenir of those first "moments of illusion" when fantasy and external reality miraculously coincided: the child wanted his mother's breast, and hey presto, it appeared. Such "moments of illusion" are all very well and good, but cannot be relied upon. That is why the child needs a special "transitional" object, and conditions within which to play and create, to refer back to, and work through again, those precious, original

“moments”. Winnicott’s revolutionary contention was that, even as adults, we need this “third area”, autonomous of both inner experience of the psyche and the actual “real” environment. Play, creativity, culture, spirituality are all transitional phenomena, belonging to this third area.

A Mannonci postcard is found “out there” in the real world, but then taken back to the studio, to be reworked in the imagination of the painter. Within the image, objects are isolated, relations reconfigured, symbols transformed. Tension between the glossy, real, found photo underneath and matt, textured, painterly intervention above is allowed to dissolve. The inner world of the painter is imposed on something preordained, neutral, banal, readily available, although these pictures are not of course so neutral and banal to the painter, for they relate vividly to personal memories. Images can support repeated explorations: there are many examples of multiple treatments of the same postcard. Just as in other media, he returns to the ghost of another image when working in monotype, or recycles old etching plates, or repeats with minute variation the whole composition of a previous oil painting, so, even more literally, and meaningfully, his postcards take him back to old sites.

*D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (1971) quoted from the Penguin Edition, 1980, pages 112-113.