

Fragmentary Presences. Portraits of Carlo Gesualdo

*Ideal and dearly beloved voices
of those who are dead, or of those
who are lost to us like the dead.*

*Sometimes they speak to us in our dreams;
sometimes in thought the mind hears them.*

*And for a moment with their echo other echoes
return from the first poetry of our lives -
like music that extinguishes the far-off night.*

Constantine Cavafy, *Voices*¹

He died.

The prince died.

Prince Carlo Gesualdo da Venosa died.

The ultimate deathbed chord of this biography resounded on 8 September 1613.

The funeral ceremonies had been celebrated, the body laid to rest in a grave, the book of life is closed.

Evoking already at the very onset, and in such a demonstrative manner, the conventionalised metaphor of the book of life shut for always – and announced by repeating the word: “died” thrice – I would like to draw attention not so much to the simple and obvious (?) fact of the biological end as to clearly and firmly accentuate a frustrating circumstance, namely, that contrary to all appearances in the eyes of the living the cognitive situation connected with recreating and naming the “truth” about the finally ended existence of the prince of Venosa does not change for the better. Despite the fact that this book of life has been already granted a last chapter and that it has a definite epilogue that cannot be corrected, the meaning of the biography still refuses to arrange itself into a legible pattern.

Carlo Gesualdo disappeared irretrievably and will no longer answer any of the questions of interest to us. Nor will he resolve the doubts intriguing us. The fact that his voice became silent for always in a mental and cultural situation so distant from ours multiplies problems even more. We are left only with traces of his life,

traces of various cognitive significance that have to be now subjected to laborious interpretations. Let us, therefore, ask: who really died on that day, month and year? Who was the person described in a seventeenth-century dictionary as: *Nobilissimus Carolus Gesualdus, Princeps Venusinus, nostrae tempestatis Musicorum ac Melopaeorum, princeps*? Who was Carlo Gesualdo?

This disturbing mystery of identity is the topic of the following text.

Voices from the past

The concept of a facial composite belongs, as we know, to the dictionary of criminal studies. In situations of particular threat the police draftsman, basing himself on the testimonies of eyewitnesses, executes a portrait of the felon in accordance with certain accepted routines. Such a drawing, often a painstaking attempt at the coordination and synchronisation of assorted, at times contradictory observations now pieced together is to become a reliable likeness of the perpetrator pursued by the law. It is intended to be his recognisable portrait. The end effect is thus a resultant of the percipience and memory of the witnesses and the talent and skills of the draftsman. Arrest warrants containing the portrait are dispatched in pursuit of the living (although sometimes in the course of the search they become the dead), making it possible – in both cases – to verify this type of collective work. We can, therefore, assess the degree of the proximity between the depiction and the designate, between the likeness and the person whom it was supposed to represent. In other words, the value of this cognitive method can be easily verified by means of a simple comparison.

This is an uncomplicated model situation. Real problems appear when the construction of such a portrait from memory – regardless whether comprehended literally (visually) or figuratively (rhetorically) – involves a person from the past who, in addition, lived several hundred years ago. Then the degree of complications relating to its execution suddenly grows and the possibilities of verification leave, euphemistically speaking, much to desire. How can we reach the truth about a person from the distant past? Which historical testimonies should we trust, and why? In what manner will our suppositions become legitimate? Finally, how and, predominantly, is it at all possible to achieve a facial composite of an historical figure? At this point it appears appropriate to recollect the concept of a facial composite. It is difficult to resist the impression that in the case of a reconstruction of a biography from the past the work conducted by an historian resembles that of a detective, while interpretations unambiguously bring to mind a trial based on circumstantial evidence. Only by following traces left behind by memory can we come close to solving the mystery of identity.

Apparently, it is precisely this sort of difficulty tackled by historians-detectives – both nominal ² and self-proclaimed – who had tried or still attempt to “draw” a portrait of Prince Carlo Gesualdo of Venosa from a perspective of 400 years. In this case, the detective metaphor assumes all the traits of literalness. Keep in mind: the goal is to create a convincing and adequate facial composite of a composer and ... murderer. Now for a closer look at several contemporary procedures of rendering his likeness indelible.

One of the most fascinating “research” hypotheses intent on revealing the mystery of the life of Carlo Gesualdo is the television documentary by Werner Herzog: *Death for Five Voices* (1995).³ From the very first scenes Herzog convinces us that he is acting in the manner of a genuine documentarian. We are thus offered numerous photographs from “visiting the site of crime” and of places connected with Gesualdo’s life, competent musicologists provide a specialist commentary to his musical *oeuvre*, and professional singers perform his madrigals (*Il Complesso Barocco* under Alan Curtis, *The Gesualdo Consort* under Gerald Place). Everything falls into place according to the well-tested scenario for a documentary film about an artist: some material about his life and a presentation of his works – enough not to bore the viewer and shown preferably interchangeably so that this compilation might generate a pattern as legible as possible and offer a convincing portrait of the artist resurrected thanks to the director’s knowledge, intuition and skill.

Basically, this is the scheme applied by Herzog. He would have not been himself, however, if had he not, apart from resolving the mystery of Gesualdo, added a few new puzzles. Nothing is unambiguous and the film lacks straight lines. It is time, therefore, to follow in detail the manner in which Herzog construed a portrait of Gesualdo and arrived at the truth.

In *Death for Five Voices* the lead parts are actually played by voices. This does not, however, as the title may suggest, involve madrigals for five voices composed by Gesualdo or the voices of singers heard upon several occasions in the film. From the viewpoint of a reconstruction of life events the foremost factor are the voices of a number of characters building the protagonist’s facial composite, the intriguing and memorable polyphony of Herzog’s document. Let us for a moment disturb the chronology of the film so as to present two sequences of voices composing two versions of Gesualdo, two portraits: the first reconstructs the life of the composer, and the other concentrates on his music. Kaleidoscopic narration contains several significant figures creating a rather picturesque group of experts bringing us closer to the meanders of the life of the prince of musicians.

In view of the fact that Gesualdo’s greatest passion was music it does not come as a surprise that

Herzog chose his witnesses from among professionals. The chief narrator of the film story about Gesualdo is Gerald Place, a musicologist, expert on the prince’s music, and conductor of *The Gesualdo Consort*, who recalls and relates in the manner of an encyclopaedic archivist assorted basic facts from the composer’s biography.

Musicologist I: *As musicians working at the end of the twentieth century we can’t help but recognise Gesualdo as a kind of a musical visionary. Looking back there seems to be a whole gap between the end of Gesualdo’s life and Wagner and that kind of late nineteenth-century Romantic writing. There is really nothing in between and it seems very strange to us. This amazing music comes out of an awfully amazing life story. And it was this life story, the biography that first led musicians to look at Gesualdo at all. And had his life not been so extraordinary (my emphasis – M.C.) perhaps we may not even now be bothering to look at his music. Philip Heseltine, an English scholar better known by his pseudonym of Peter Warlock, became so involved with Gesualdo, he edited a lot of his music. It was he that first saw it as a kind of prefiguration of Wagner. He got so involved that he actually thought he was Gesualdo and became so deranged he committed suicide. So Gesualdo has all sorts of influences now across the centuries. He was born in 1560 or 1561, we think, and his elder brother died when he was 19 so Gesualdo himself became prince of Venosa. And this was the point when he was already writing a lot of music and already become involved as a composer. And perhaps his duties as prince formed a conflict with his interest as an amateur musician. The fact that he was an amateur musician is very significant because he was able to do things for himself. He didn’t have to please a patron, he could follow whatever line musically he wanted. 1586 saw his marriage to Maria d’Avalos, who was one of the most beautiful women of her time. In fact it’s been suggested that she was the model for Leonardo’s *Giaconda*. By the time Gesualdo married her she’d already been widowed twice. ... The source describes her husband’s death as an excess of conjugal bliss ... Soon after a son was born to Gesualdo and Donna Maria, and then things took a nasty turn. An uncle of Gesualdo’s, who was a cardinal in fact, started making advances to Donna Maria. And he discovered that in fact somebody else was interested in her - Fabrizio Carafa, the most noble, eligible duke of his generation. Naturally, the uncle was exceedingly jealous and went straight to Gesualdo and told him all the details. Gesualdo’s reaction was to plan a murder.*

In turn, the statements made by Alan Curtis (Musicologist II) mainly contain the motif of Gesualdo’s brilliance and originality:

It’s not a coincidence that the same music critics who call Gesualdo’s music incompetent and the work of an amateur are themselves usually incompetent amateurs.... It is the great composers of our century who have recognised the great genius of Gesualdo, above all, perhaps, Stravin-

sky who admired Gesualdo's music so much that he even made two pilgrimages to Gesualdo, to the village, to see the castle.

In this posthumous debate an opinion is also expressed by an Historian, who confirms Gesualdo's genius and extraordinary life with foremost emphasis on the irremovable presence of biographical motifs in his oeuvre (especially from a later period):

In this castle Carlo Gesualdo spent the last 16 years of his life in total solitude and hideous torment, torn from within, pursued by furies and demons. He was an artist of the highest rank. He had a touch of genius anticipating an artistic movement, which did not develop until the beginning of our own century, namely, Expressionism. In madrigals, his favourite art form, he expressed his innermost being, his entire inner world steeped in delusion and madness. **He seemed persecuted by furies and demons** (my emphasis – D. C.). Gesualdo died here. There are two versions of his death. According to the first he died of asthma. According to the second, however, his death was caused by excessive torture. He maintained a staff of about twenty servants whose task it was to subject him to continuous whippings. The injuries, which he suffered from these painful flagellations caused infections that finally led to his death. We don't know that [he was a masochist] for certain. According to some stories I heard he was. I do know that one of his servants had to spend every night with him in bed ... allegedly to keep him warm.

Musicologist I also underlines the enormous suffering of the composer in the last years of his life. Interestingly, in doing so he uses the same expression as the historian: *After the murder things settled down again. There was no trial; it was deemed a justified act. And this began an intensive period of musical activity for Gesualdo. All the music that's come down to us was after the murder. ... We know very little about the last 16 years of his life. He became a recluse in his castle, deep in melancholy, **haunted by demons** (my emphasis - D. C.), racked by remorse and self-accusation. In 1611 his last book of madrigals, his sixth book was published and then in 1613 he died.*

There also appears a Worker employed at the castle, whom the camera finds busy in the ruins of Gesualdo Castle. Gap-toothed, he invites the viewer inside by citing a refrain from Dante (*Lasciate ogni speranza...*) and unconsciously (?) assumes the role of Charon guiding us in one of the infernal circles: *Abandon hope all ye who enter here. I work here alone. Nobody else wants to work here. There's a curse weighing down on this castle. A mad woman from the asylum in Venosa haunts this place now. Elsewhere: Come along, let me show you what he did after he killed his wife ... The whole valley once looked like this. Everything was green covered with woods, and he cut everything down. He was afflicted with the most horrible insanity ... All by himself, without any help from anybody. It took him] about two or three months, for sure.*

The remarks about the prince's insanity are confirmed and commented on by the erudite Musicologist I. Life astonishingly becomes combined with literature, as if events from the life of Gesualdo prefigured an episode from a Shakespearean tragedy: *Gesualdo had to flee immediately ... and we hear that he started to cut down the forest. It sounds like something out of Macbeth. As if the forest was some kind of a threat to him. And worse, he had to kill or killed his second child because he was convinced that it was the product of this illicit union.*

And vice versa. Now the musicologist's laconic statement devoid of details is supplemented by the castle Worker: *They say Gesualdo decided to let his second child die because he suspected it wasn't his child. He told his servants to put the little boy on a swing hanging from a balcony [he points] ... back there. They had to keep the child swinging violently for three days and three nights. He brought in choirs, which had to sing there [points again], in the background, on either side of the arch. They kept on singing until the child was dead. ... A madrigal about the beauty of death.*

The worker's statement is confirmed by a Piper wandering around the ruined chambers without any obvious purpose. Asked about his presence in the castle he answers with fear, if not slight madness in his eyes: *I come here once a week to play music here into these holes and cracks. Because there is an evil spirit haunting this place. The spirit is Gesualdo's.*

The motif of the haunted, cursed place becomes even more intensive after the appearance of the earlier announced Mad Woman of Venosa caught unawares by the camera when, carrying a portable tape recorder, she hides in the abandoned castle interiors: *I am the reincarnation of Maria d'Avalos, Gesualdo's wife. I belong to this place. My room is up there and our kitchens are down here ... He composed it [the music] shortly before he committed the murders. He refused to speak. He just dropped dark hints. The last time he spoke to me about ten days before the murder. And he said: death alone can kill. He didn't say a word after that. He just sang eerie songs. (...) I live in heaven, but you can find me with a helicopter if you fly around the big chandelier in the La Scala opera house in Milan. In the second row right by the pillar there is a box all clad in red damask. That's where I live.*

In an extremely expressive and, at the same time, enormously funny scene in a kitchen we come across yet another piece of evidence. Two Cooks - husband and wife - talk about Gesualdo's wedding and accentuate, understandably, the culinary motif. The conversation recalls a typical quarrel of a married couple in which the function, quite literally, of *advocatus diaboli* is assumed by the wife interfering into the story recounted by the master cook:

He: *Gesualdo worked miracles for this wedding.*

She: *Who is this Gesualdo, anyway – a devil?*

He: No, he could afford it. And beyond that, he was very demanding. He was very rich. 125 courses for a 1000.

She: He was a devil, this Gesualdo, a devil incarnate! (...)

He: One of the courses was quail (...). There were as many as twenty baby goats grilled, just imagine (...) As it turns out, Gesualdo was cuckolded (...).

This demonic motif is present and expanded in a statement made by the warden of a certain Neapolitan palace. In response to questions he answers from a glassed-in control room: *He lived on the ground floor [he points]. It was here the double murder of the wife and her lover took place. That night was very chaotic. All sorts of things happened. On these stairs a monk even raped the corpse of Gesualdo's wife. It had been done over there. As we know Gesualdo was a demon and an alchemist. However, he was certainly highly intelligent ... He experimented on human bodies as well. The victims' skeletons are still on exhibit in San Severo's chapel just around the corner...*

The Archivist confirms the alchemical interests of the composer from Venosa. Assuming the pose of a serious museum expert he presents the museum exhibits on show: *One of them will certainly interest you. This disk here in the display case. It comes from the personal possessions of Prince Carlo Gesualdo. This is confirmed by a document I would like to show you. It is a letter to his alchemist personally signed by Gesualdo and offering him a large sum of money, an enormous amount in those days, to enlist his aid in deciphering all these mysterious signs. The prince had spent sleepless nights trying to unravel these strange symbols. In the course of this activity he became lost in a labyrinth of conjectures and hypotheses. He almost lost his reason in the process but he never came to a conclusion.*

This litany of in extenso cited opinions calls for critical commentary.

First, consider the sort of film we are watching. It certainly – and this is our first reaction – is not a feature movie. If the latter is to denote a film referring to fictional characters and telling about events first conceived by the author of the scenario then Herzog's film is certainly a document, which, regardless of assorted classifications, deals in one way or another with reality existing outside the screen. At the same time, it does not always reflect, imitate or copy (whatever these verbs are supposed to mean) faithfully. Nonetheless, it refers to a reality that existed in the past and whose existence is indisputable. Reasoning in this way we accept that there really did live a Carlo Gesualdo and a Maria d'Avalos, that their tragedy is not literary fiction but historical reality confirmed by documents, and that the prince's music was not composed *post factum* nor is it a hallucination. We agree that the film,

despite the fact that, for obvious reasons, it does not show actual persons, is not a reference to a world of fiction. It does, however, contain certain signals that compel us to not so much doubt the purely documentary record (assuming that this "purity" is not a figment of the imagination) as to subject the identification to certain retouching.

Take the scene at the castle with the auburn-haired mad woman. Initially, this sequence contains a discernible documentary record, and authenticity is underscored by means of a hand-held camera if it were not for the fact that a moment later the glance of an expert recognises that the part of the insane woman is played by the celebrated Italian singer Milva. In other words, the scene is not, as could be assumed, a direct record "of reality" but pure creation by the director (naturally, performed by an actor). If this is the case then our caution has been stirred to such a degree that we may deliberate whether other scenes (for instance, the one with the piper or the psychiatrist) had not been created by applying the same method. Obviously, this is not a charge levelled against Herzog but solely an attempt at additionally defining his strategy. Documentarians are familiar with the expression "staged documentary", which means that not all scenes reflect existing reality, "the sort that truly exists", but some have been evoked by the intervention of the director.

Hence the question: what is the sense of such fictionalisation of a documentary? Why would a director introduce an obviously created scene into the actual (at the topographic and musical level) scenery of the film? In other words: what is the purpose of the masquerade involving the mad woman, mentioned here by way of example? Apparently, the only sensible answer is that this is one of the film's intentionally applied rhetorical strategies.⁴ Herzog introduced the scene to enhance the effect of persuasion or, more precisely, to win the viewer over to his vision of the lead protagonist.

Who is Herzog's Gesualdo? Note at the onset that he strangely resembles other characters from this director's film catalogue. What did Herzog accentuate in the first place? The predominant emphasis is on Gesualdo's total and radical otherness, distinctness *vis à vis* the surrounding world of the period, etymologically comprehended eccentricity and exoticism. Herzog discovered a trait probably best expressed by the German term: *unheimlichkeit*, the uncanny. Suffice to recall that such a characteristic could be easily applied in the case of many other earlier fictional characters filmed by Herzog: Fitzcarraldo, Aguirre, Woyzeck, Kaspar Hauser... The overall impression suggests that his whole filmography gravitates towards a single type of protagonists, especially those who transgress the frame of normalcy, i.e. that, which is domesticated and native, who decidedly, albeit for different rea-

sons, transcend the framework of the so-called normal world and, finally, whose biography has “branded” them. Herzog examines them with the passion of a true botanist studying a new specimen in his herbarium and attempting to describe its original features. Or to put it differently: he observes with interest and tries to understand the rules of this “strange” life and those that support a model of existence totally at odds with the universal one; in this case: artist and murderer!

If this identification is apt then one can go on to say that Herzog’s film rhetoric underlines in the Gesualdo character predominantly the motif of insanity. This is the purpose served by conspicuous remarks referring to his “real” biography and by all scenes, regardless whether staged or not, that are to render this recognition more profound and accentuated. I have in mind, by way of example, the above-mentioned scene with the insane female singer and the genuinely funny (sic!) fragment about new ways (horse-riding) of treating mental illnesses. The same purpose is served by the cited statements about the killing of a child, cutting down trees in a whole valley, or flagellation on the verge of deviation. In the film Herzog suggested distinctly that almost everything that is connected with Gesualdo is part of a range of madness and that many people – even years later – who had contact with him, were interested in him or wrote about him became stamped by the irremovable stigmata of insanity.

To this opinion we must add the extremely definite motif of Gesualdo’s demonism.⁵ It comes to the fore in the farcical scene with the cooks and the street theatre enacted (here still in the buffo convention) in the locality of Gesualdo, the recurring refrain about the persecution of the prince in the closing years of his life by “demons and furies”, and tales about his anatomical experiments and alchemical quests. With unconcealed predilection Herzog enjoys a motif straight out of a Gothic tale, together with abandoned and haunted castle ruins and the palace of Prince d’Avalos filmed in such a way as to grant it the features of a haunted residence familiar from Romantic horror stories.

Both motifs are the whole time counterpointed by declarations made by musicologists stressing Gesualdo’s pioneering achievements and insufficiently appreciated musical genius, but the rhetorical construction of the film is such that it accentuates first and foremost the two mentioned elements of his likeness as if Gesualdo’s demonism and insanity were the object of knowledge while his musical genius had to be believed (unless his works were heard first). It could be said that the “dark” side of the portrait is shown directly, while the “light” one possesses only a declarative status.

Yet another obvious feature of the film: notice that Herzog built Gesualdo’s portrait out of numerous opinions. This is a truly polyphonic documentary construc-

tion and there would be nothing surprising in it were it not for the fact that all voices are arranged upon the same level and that the author openly legitimizes the cognitive status of assorted languages. Suffice to notice that the reconstruction of the lead character attaches importance to routine historical and musicological discourse although the vernacular, the language of the legend or folk apocrypha is just as essential. Each, Herzog seems it be saying, contains a certain particle of truth about the protagonist. Naturally, in such an attempt at revealing the truth about the film character the director resorted to a strategy familiar to the cinema. A paradigmatic example of its application is Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane*, and a parody remake can be found in Woody Allen’s *Zelig*. Recall that the employed cognitive method consisted of reaching the “core of the truth” by constructing a biography out of assorted points of view and, more precisely, the multiplication of numerous perspectives, their contrast and confrontation and, as a consequence, the creation of a photographic “multiple portrait”. But this is not to say – and the case of *Citizen Kane* leaves no doubt!⁶ – that we have attained a situation in which a multi-voice portrait ideally overlaps the portrayed person.

In the case of Herzog this film obviousness has its not so evident side. Note that in both mentioned films the persons interrogated in order to determine the truth about the protagonist (it makes no difference that he is fictional) knew him personally, kept him company, talked with him, in a word: dealt with him in one way or another. Meanwhile, in Herzog’s documentary film the worker, the keeper or the cook – whose opinions resemble somewhat, naturally *toutes proportions gardées*, a classical chorus commenting on the fate of the tragic hero – talk about Gesualdo, born more than 400 years ago, almost as if he had been their acquaintance or at least someone whom they knew well. The time chasm between them vanishes in an amazingly easy manner! After hearing several statements we are willing to almost believe that the story took place “yesterday” or at least during the lifetime of the interlocutors. The past has been included into the present right in front of our eyes. Gesualdo appears to be “lifelike” and his story proves to be palpably present while we, the spectators, are drawn into the range of its direct impact.

Ultimately, the portrait of Carlo Gesualdo executed by Herzog is a resultant of assorted voices (including those that sing) and poetics. This is an openly hybrid and non-cohesive likeness. Apparently, Herzog reports rather than explains. He assumes the position more of an understanding listener than an exegete. If I am right he is more interested in the life of the artist than the *oeuvre*. Nevertheless, the selection of voices and their exposition, the arrangement of the accents and the configuration in the film narration are not an



innocuous venture. All elements belong undoubtedly to the domain of persuasion. To put it still differently: Herzog does not film reality but his perception of it. His portrait of Gesualdo betrays the distinctive “hand-writing” of its author.

The film strategy adopted by Herzog is also unclear and inconsistent. On the one hand, it seems that he is moved by the biography of his protagonist - otherwise, why would he even embark upon it? – and tries to understand the motifs of his activity, to reach the prince’s “heart of darkness” while multiplying assorted voices and interpretations. He acts in the manner of a scientist who gathers “documents” (biographical and musicological) and perhaps also an anthropologist who places his trust in the power of collective imagination, the apocryphal legendary stories repeated years later. On the other hand, Herzog includes openly fictional episodes subjectivising the narration and placing it on the side of “make belief”; more, in several places the very way in which he films betrays an ironic approach. This time the director seems to have been amusing himself (and the audience) with stories about the strange life of Gesualdo, brimming with bizarre scenes, and with contemporary memory about him. In those fragments the tragedy and burden of Gesualdo’s life

and art vanish in the unbearable lightness of staged episodes, and the whole presented story turns out to be material for a play that could appear at best as part of the Grand Guignol repertoire. If we were to forget for an instant that we are dealing with a documentary then Herzog’s film, a genuine “short film about killing”, could be regarded as belonging to the thriller genre or as a crime story with elements of the macabre.

Within this context the two last scenes appear to be emblematic. In the first, the musicologist Alan Curtis formulates sentences intended as a summary of the story about the musician and the murderer:

There is still much risk taking and I think that’s one of the clues to Gesualdo. Performers must also take risks and be dangerous and then the beauty of this wild music comes forth. Magnificent, powerful words that cannot be treated otherwise than seriously. Only a moment later, in the closing scene, a young man playing the part of a character from a colourful historical spectacle uses a cell phone while facing the audience: *The Gesualdo film will be finished any moment now anyway.* This is a clear-cut meta-textual message, somewhat akin to the director winking at us. Herzog seems to be saying: “Don’t treat all this seriously, that what you have seen has just as much in common with historical truth as a masquerade enacted in front of your eyes, a special

occasion for dressing up in an historical costume". He also appears to be following the recommendation in Vladimir Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, a fascinating story in which the narrator - just as Herzog - tries to recreate out of numerous sources of information a biography of his half-brother, a recently deceased man of letters: keep in mind that whatever people say the story is actually composed of three strata. First, the storyteller shapes the message, which is then distorted by the listener in his own manner, while the dead protagonist conceals the truth from both of them.⁷ The irony of the title of Nabokov's book is obvious: the real life of Sebastian Knight is inaccessible for cognitive operations. Here, "real" means "false" and we can find out but a little about the writer's "real life" since he evades us the whole time - an excellent use of the ambiguity of the English word: *knight* - in the manner of a chess-piece.

We cannot exclude that Herzog's documentary is ultimately a confession to having been defeated, a declaration that a credible portrait of an historical figure is a cognitive chimera. This is, however, only a supposition. Just as there is probably no satisfactory answer to the question whether the above-mentioned inconsistency was an intentional premise on the part of the director or whether it comprises a certain "added value" in the film.

The mystery of identity

Madrygal żalobny, a story by Gustaw Herling-Grudziński, delves into the same topic as Herzog's film - the mystery of the life and music of Carlo Gesualdo. True, the medium is different - word, narration, literary fiction - but the main problem remains the same. A comparison of Herling's story with Herzog's documentary film - apart from the obviously identical lead character - could be extremely interesting and instructive for two reasons. First, the story originated in a diary kept by the author and not only does the fragment cited *in extenso* blend with the narration but the latter too is stylised to bring to mind a documentary record: the narrator unambiguously bears a resemblance to the author, a trick that - often applied by the "late" Herling - is to stress the para-documentary character of the story. Secondly, he noted with undisguised disgust in parentheses added years later and now already an integral component of the story: *Werner Herzog recently made the film: Gesualdo - Death for Five Voices, not very successful, with the exception of the music*.⁸

The tale about the composer from Venosa is part of a rather extraordinary love story. To put as concisely as possible: while in Naples the narrator made the acquaintance of a young music student named Anna Fiedotova, the daughter of a Russian father and a Polish mother. They share not only enchantment but predominantly a passion for the music and

person of Carlo Gesualdo. A motif of importance for the narration structure: Anna returns together with her dying father to St. Petersburg and from that moment her conversations with the narrator about the prince of musicians assume the form of correspondence. Understandably, Anna is more interested in Gesualdo's music, while the narrator - in the tragedy of Gesualdo's life, whose critical point is the murder of his wife.

The diary inserted into the story echoes the story of the murder of Maria d'Avalos committed by Gesualdo, known already from the filmed commentaries of musicologists, but now the accents are arranged differently. Herling distinctly emphasised moderation and tried to emulate the passionless style of a chronicle. Nor does he shock the reader with bluntness and construed his record in such a manner as to produce the impression that he was registering only facts. Here are fragments of the same albeit not the same story: *Carlo Gesualdo originated from an upstanding Neapolitan family, whose princely tile was connected with estates and castles in the region of Venosa, along the boundary between Apulia and Lucania (...) He married Maria d'Avalos of an equally honoured Neapolitan family. He was Maria's third husband. She had rapidly expedited the two previous spouses to the netherworld, having won the cognomen of "man-eater". Maria was considered to be the most beautiful woman in Naples and an embodiment of sensuality. The prince of Venosa was her senior and had two passions: music and the chase. Chroniclers of the period stressed the former, and in their opinion he made a mistake marrying such a fine-looking and temperamental woman since he was capable of only a single passion: Music (...) Occasionally, he did not venture into the marital bedroom for long stretches of time, and Maria - lonely and ablaze with anger - listened to the sound of instruments and the words of songs coming from the "workshop". He treated her as a tool for satisfying his rare "caprices" and for sexual distraction. Maria d'Avalos was considered the most beautiful woman in Naples, and the handsomest man was Fabrizio Carafa, "archangel" and the duke of Andria. Their affair instantly turned into passion devoid of all restraint (...). This went on for as long as the prince, immersed in his madrigals, lived with his eyes closed. He opened them in 1590. On 16 October he feigned a hunting expedition and several hours after departure returned to the palace at midnight. Together with his secretary and three servants the prince burst into Maria's bedchamber. It follows from the evidence of witnesses that after the lovers were murdered by the prince and his entourage, the cuckolded husband returned from the threshold to the bedroom and crying out: "Non credo essere morta"! (I do not believe she is dead!) cut the corpse of his unfaithful wife with a short sword from groin to neck. Chronicles mention double frenzy: that of a betrayed husband who inflicts torment on the corpse of his wife and that of the two lovers,*

who on that night knew what awaited them and prepared for death in "an embrace of love".⁹

Herling tried to reconstruct the historical circumstances of the crime, accentuated Gesualdo's noble birth, and did not neglect to remark on his craving for music and the absence of passion for his wife, mentioning the exceptional cruelty of the crime, present also in the story told by Herzog, as an important detail. Here, Herling referred to chroniclers and witnesses but nowhere, neither in the diary nor in the story, did he cite the sources of his knowledge. According to the author, the historical, *ergo* authentic character of the confessions is to be testified by their language: non-literary, maintained in the style of a report, a purely chronicle-like statement. Facts, as it is said in similar situations, are to "speak for themselves".

The first important signal of the character's conception suggested in the story is the text of a brochure purchased in a Neapolitan antique shop and entitled: *La verita sul principe assassino*, issued several years after the prince's death and signed with a pseudonym. Here is a fragment cited by the author: *It is said that I loved music more than I did Maria; and that this became the cause of the tragedy. I refute with all the force of my pained (addolorato) heart. I have never loved anyone in my life as I did Maria from the very first meeting. Now I am not only the murderer of my wife and her lover. I am a widower doomed to the existence (may it be as brief as possible) of a living corpse. All that was my innermost self had died on 16 October 1590 (the day of the slaying). May God, beseeched by St. Charles Borromeo, take pity on the tormented soul of man who (I admit) wavered whether the terrible price of marital infidelity is not worth paying to save a woman beloved above all.*¹⁰ The fact that this apocryphal text is cited already at the beginning of the story is rather symptomatic and indicates the trend of the literary construction of Gesualdo's portrait. It shows that the narrator (author?)¹¹ openly rejected the objectivistic stand and resigned from meticulously weighing various assessments and arguments. On the contrary, he clearly betrays a willingness to defend Gesualdo and seeks circumstances justifying the crime. The ensuing exchange of letters accentuates this motif even stronger - the correspondence contains a highly emotional dispute about Gesualdo's true likeness.

The main problem in the polemic conducted *via* correspondence is the mystery of the murder and even more so: the perpetrator's special virulence - his return to the bedroom and the abuse of his wife's body. There emerge assorted explanations of this fact. Anna cites the renowned psychologist Litayev and proposes the following summary: *We cannot exclude that Carlo Gesualdo was as if killing himself, committing suicide driven by despair while torturing the dying or already dead wife with such passion and cruelty. Such cases, or similar ones,*

*occur rarely (...) in the tangled labyrinths of the human psyche: they can be described as "suicide via murder".*¹²

This sort of explication was totally repudiated by another psychological authority, Professor Marconi of Naples, whose expert opinion was cited in a letter sent by the narrator to St. Petersburg. The scholar replied: *I regard as absurd the notion of suicide in the form of murder, of killing oneself via another, murdered person. When Anna was still residing in Naples she came here sometimes and together we listened to music (...) and I always advised her to cease pursuing psychological quests and to limit herself to analysing the work. An artist is above all his work, and it is deceptive to sift through his biography. The truth is in the madrigals and not in the murder of her and her lover. I don't doubt that Carlo Gesualdo changed rather radically after this bloody incident because I am certain that the transformations left an imprint upon his oeuvre; it is there that they should be sought.*¹³

This reflection, expressed here with rare clarity and determination, claims that becoming acquainted with the nature of an artist possesses decisive and unquestionable primacy in the dispute: biography or *oeuvre*, life or works. This conviction will be later confirmed not only in the opinion of a cited (authentic) musical authority¹⁴, but also in a conceit that is the author's invention and according to which in the last years of his life Gesualdo composed the final madrigal: *Blessed Desired Death*, as if leaving his musical testament to the next generation. The thesis is clear-cut: upon a basis not subjected to rational analysis the artist is within his work that, in turn, is his true likeness in which the memory about him becomes petrified.

While preparing inventories aimed at facilitating the execution of a likeness of Carlo Gesualdo it is simply impossible to bypass the sole extant portrait of the prince, mentioned in the story and kept at the Capuchin monastery in Gesualdo. This painting appears in Herzog's film, first in fragments and then as a whole, although without any additional commentaries. Meanwhile, in Herling's story it fulfils a cognitively important function: *Carlo Gesualdo had the church and the adjoining monastery built in 1592. Sixteen years after his death they were expanded upon the request of a nephew of Pope Gregory XV, who married a niece of the Prince of Musicians. The painting is indeed a "pearl" for which a church "shell" was created. It is known as Il pardon di Carlo Gesualdo, and we know that the Prince of Musicians commissioned it from a Florentine (and rather average) painter named Balducci, but we cannot tell when it was commissioned and when the artist executed it just as it remains unknown who "forgave" whom. The title indicates that it was Carlo Gesualdo who "forgave" his unfaithful wife and her lover. But certain details of the painting indicate that it is he who asks for "forgiveness" for slaying the lovers. Quite possibly, the madrigalist intended the painting to be ambiguous. Let us not forget that his*

first madrigal, composed when he was a young man, was entitled: *Delicta nostra ne reminiscaris, Domine* /Remember not, Lord, our sins (offenses).¹⁵

Interestingly, according to the suggestion made by the narrator it is not the word but the music and the image that become the most credible witnesses of the biography. Both – and this is worth stressing – remain outside and above the word, as if Herling was saying: listen closely to Gesualdo's music and enter into this curious and inimitable world of sounds; listen to don Carlo's madrigals, especially the later ones, and look at the ambiguous likeness of the tormented prince – perhaps the truth about him hides beyond verbal constructions in the substance of sound and painterly form.

From the viewpoint of its structure *Madrygal żalobny* is composed – similarly as Herzog's film – of several heterogeneous elements. This "building block" construction demonstrates distinctive features of the absence of linearity.¹⁶ We are dealing with the aforementioned fragment of a diary or a fictional old print, accompanied by elements of a chronicle, an essay, a fragment of an authentic scientific dissertation, an ecphrasis of Gesualdo's portrait and, at the end, a quasi-reportage with a scene of listening to the prince's music played on a portable CD player (borrowed from the scene with the mad woman of Venosa?). In contrast to Herzog's document, however, it is obvious that assorted elements are much better composed into the story and create a well-devised whole. The similarity of the two narrations is embedded in one basic fact: both apply in their cognitive strategies a combination of "truth" and "make-belief". Although the point of departure is composed of historical sources the two portraits rather ostentatiously introduce an admixture of fiction into the factographic material.

We should ask now: what sort of "truth" about Carlo Gesualdo did Herling defend? It follows quite clearly from the story that the prince's nature manifests itself not in the repulsive murder but in his music, the madrigals. Naturally, the author recorded the event described by chroniclers but did not discuss it in detail, and it is obvious that he did not perceive it as the prime issue of Gesualdo's story. The accents are arranged entirely differently. First and foremost, the narrator defends the thesis that contrary to facts and common sense the prince was uninterruptedly in love with his wife. In conversations with Włodzimierz Bolecki, Herling, already without resorting to the mask of a narrator declares outright: *The prince of Venosa was a very wealthy person (...) If he were concerned with money he could have married someone else, and thus the marriage to Maria d'Avalos must have been determined by profound love for her. The problem with describing his life consists of the fact that he was not only an aristocrat but also an artist; I found this just as captivating – an artist*

*and his private life. (...) I was attracted to the interpretation, expressed in the story by Anna F., that Gesualdo loved his wife very much and regretted his terrible deed but was forced to commit it by the customs of his epoch. This means that Gesualdo was a slave of the honour code of the period – he could not refuse to slay an unfaithful wife because he would have become a universally despised laughing-stock. The honour code is also associated with the fact that after killing his wife Gesualdo expected that the relatives of Maria's lover would take revenge since he had done so with the hands of his servants and not personally.*¹⁷

At this point there appears with great clarity the fundamental question of the principles of constructing a facial composite. How to produce a living, multi-sided and nuanced biography of a historical character? And in particular: how to construct a biography of an eminent person towering above his epoch so that it would not be schematic or succumb to standards binding in popular biographical literature. In his excellent comments on biographies Yuri Lotman indicated the numerous difficulties and traps awaiting the biographer. One of them is simplification: *A biographer as a rule selects a single line (presumably: dominating) and then describes it. The portrait gains expression and is cleansed of all contradictions but becomes schematic.*¹⁸ Apparently, Herling's hostility, not formulated outright, towards the "life" part of the Herzog documentary film comes from exactly such a conviction about the simplified and sensational character of the film story, the exaggerated emphasis on the scandalous dimension of the story about the prince of Venosa.

Nothing comes for free. The method of a contextual explanation of Gesualdo's deeds accepted by Herling is also not as innocent as it might appear and falls into a different trap awaiting the biographer and mentioned by Lotman who emphasized: *He who wishes to understand the life of an outstanding person faces a much more complex task. An interesting personality is not passive in reaction to the mass-scale psychology of its time. (...) The attitude of such a personality towards the psychological norms of the epoch resembles that of a poet towards grammar - norms originating from the outside are freely selected and creatively transposed. The historian is assisted by his habit of working with a literary text. And correctly so, since the life of Leonardo da Vinci, Pushkin, Blok or Mayakowski followed a course determined by laws governing creativity, resembling the labour of a sculptor working with a slab of granite – the resistance put up by the material is overcome by the force of creativity and obstacles change into art.*¹⁹ In other words, it is true that in this case a fragment is an element of a wider configuration, but such is its nature that even the most conscientious reconstruction of the whole cannot fully explain its idiomatic ontology. Taking into account Gesualdo's uniqueness can references to the context of the epoch

in order to “explain” the prince’s behaviour suffice as ultimate elucidation? The suggestion made by Lotman compels us to question such a solution.

Apart from the fact that the author of *Madrygal żalobny* pointed out the historical context as essential for understanding the crime committed by Gesualdo it is possible to discern something else in this obsessive motif of love: the mysterious radiation of a myth. Note: both in the story and his commentary Herling brought to life – albeit rather unintentionally – certain elements of the Orpheus myth, placing his protagonist within a mythical perspective and at the same time extremely perversely reinterpreting the myth. Recall how in the classical version the great musician and singer descends to the underworld in order to leave it with his dead wife – his love is supposed to shatter the gates of death. In the story, Gesualdo – Orpheus à rebours, so to speak – first murders his wife and then over a span of years, in an act of penitence and in the fashion of Orpheus, tries with his music, every note and line of the lyrics to restore her to life, to regain and extricate her from the land of silence. The words of the madrigals are greatly evocative: *Ardo per te, mio bene* (I burn for you, my love), *Cor mio, deh, non piangete* (My heart, ah, do not weep)... The unpredictable and frenzied chromatic of his music penetrates the boundary between life and death in an attempt at somehow infiltrating this wailing wall.

This is not the end. Herling provided an interesting commentary to Herzog’s film, but *Madrygal żalobny* also has an intriguing literary supplement. A rather little known story by the German author Wolfgang Hildesheimer with the enigmatic title: *Tynset* is a surprising commentary to Herling’s portrait of Gesualdo. Here, the figure of Carlo Gesualdo – whom the text describes significantly as the only murderer of his kind²⁰ – appears twice, each time unexpectedly, rather mysteriously, and without any earlier announcements. In this multi-strata text, subtly written in the form of an inner monologue, the narrator, suffering from insomnia, settles the accounts of his life. This kaleidoscope structure is a collage devoid of narrative cohesion – a variation on the theme of death. The peculiar locality of those fragmented reflections, conducted in a hallucinatory and unreal rhythm, is the narrator’s “white state”²¹, his bed. In Hildesheimer’s literary composition, built upon the basis of distinctly musical principles and with meticulously calculated returns of significant motifs, the titular *Tynset* (the name of a small Norwegian town) plays a special role. On the realistic level it is the desired and never realised destination of the narrator’s journey, while on the level of the metaphor it proves to be a cryptonym of the murkiness of the world, the impossibility of taking a look “behind the curtain”. It is another name of a metaphysically comprehended puzzle.²² As I have mentioned, the

prince of Venosa appears in the story twice. The first fragment is a detailed depiction of the murder scene, intentionally omitted by Herling. This is an attempt at a return to the past, a verbal depiction of the horror of a tragedy that took place at the time. The second fragment is a successive – and totally different than Herling’s – literary attempt at recreating the final moments in the life of the composer:

Here I lie, on a cold November night, on a bed on which murder had been committed on another November night - on this bed on which ten years after the murder the perpetrator laid having returned to the crime scene and the bed of the crime, unthreatened with an inquiry and protected by his rank, on the bed on which lies the murderer, Don Carlo Gesualdo, prince of Venosa, in the last years of his life, restless, rejecting slumber, indifferent to matters of life, suffering, variants of love, and even his sin, discouraged, without solace, half-glancing at God, on this bed, on which lies the murderer, Don Carlo Gesualdo, on his last nights, whose thoughts turn to God while desiring forgiveness, on which lies the murderer Carlo on his last night, impatiently and futilely awaiting a single word from his Creator -

- I am not saying that the Creator should say that word, no, this is not what I am saying -

- on this bed on which lies the divine Gesualdo in his last hour, already absent, a stranger to this world, to everything, also his Creator, all alone, he lies in his last hour and the black, restless eyes in his El Grecoesque face are not dimmed but deeply penetrate space (...)

Don Gesualdo lies and listens, and behind him lies his lute, although not in the gently dimmed harmony of a Dutch still life but angry, with sudden outbursts of animosity, cast aside after the last dissonance and wounded, perforated, upside down, with the keyboard at the bottom, the chessboard of his aroused and dangerous fingers, those seismographs of his cruelty, the servant of his unpredictable will and caprices, *while in another chamber, which no one had entered for years, lies yet another long unused instrument of his wild and senseless hunts - his crossbow, with a loosened bowstring, deep in the ground, next to Gesu Nuovo, lie two skeletons arranged in a straight line, for long free of the suffering of bodily desires and now alike, that of his first nymphomaniac wife and her last love, a nephew of one of the popes,*

somewhere along the route of an escape to the east, a dagger, the murder weapon, becomes covered with rust, and thus everything has found its place and is finally and fittingly laid to rest,

he lies, these are already his last minutes and his eyes become glued to that skull beneath the wooden baldachin, the skull, which I cannot see because, bereft of colour, it has vanished,

he sees the skull and a will-o'-the-wisp, which does not exist because it is inside him -

he lies and suddenly laughs, once again grows silent and listens,

but no longer to his compositions, his voices, a soprano, a falsetto, a tenor and a bass, which he frequently sang since no one else was capable of doing so, but he no longer hears himself and his voice,

he does not hear the already fading breath, whisper, acute delight, sforzato, sudden elevation to an ecstasy that produces numbness, to a place where beauty becomes insufferable, where death and love blend into a single fulfilment and are linked, and where the unexpected becomes an inconceivable event,

he no longer listens to the chords, modulation, harmony and enharmonic of the bold, unrestrained and incorrect transitions from a flat minor to C major, he no longer makes his way anywhere or slides along chromatic steps

o morire –

o mor-i-i-re-

- morire, yes, this is where he is, but he does not listen to death, love, God, or his Crux Benedicta, he does not hear those disembodied voices –

he lies and listens to other things, lies in the anticipation that he will hear something unfamiliar, but does not, he hears nothing, he lies with his head on the very same spot where my head is, listening in the void, looking into the void, he dies immortal, incomprehensible, great, an admirable puzzle, a murderer, inter mortuos liber, here, on this wintertime bed on which I now lie on a cold November night.²³

Yet another poignant, immensely intensive and imposing Apocrypha describing the last moments in the life of Carlo Gesualdo. In this case, the element of fiction has been stressed outright ostentatiously. After all, this literary scene is not based on documents nor does it try to “prove” its historical assignment – it is a pure game of the imagination. And yet it deals with something of importance, something that one would like to describe paradoxically as “real”. In the light of attempts recently undertaken in historiography and consisting of bringing “poetry” and “prose” together, and in view of endeavours at annulling the rigid division into the “fictional” and the “historical”²⁴ this remark could be more than an attractive paradox.

The cited works are involved in a curious dialogue. The texts talk with each other, supplement each other, and cast a light on each other. Objects familiar from Herzog’s film, a powerful and gloomy piece of furniture in the palace of Prince d’Avalos, the site of pleasure and crime, and two ghastly skeletons from the San Severo chapel are motifs that recur, albeit in a different setting, in the Hildesheimer narration. Recall: a moment before death Herling’s protagonist composes his last madrigal, but in Tynset Gesualdo rejects music and earthly sounds while unsuccessfully straining to hear music from the other world.

In the Hildesheimer text Gesualdo – similarly to the mysterious name: Tynset – is portrayed, so to speak, entirely within a puzzle, an unsolvable tangle of ambivalence. His antonymous descriptions multiplied in the story are, after all, symptomatic: the “murderer” mentioned upon several occasions has a strong counterpoint in “the divine Gesualdo”, “immortal”, “great”, “admirable creature”. Herling unintentionally continued the Orpheus motif, but Hildesheimer clearly referred to the Biblical motif of Cain, the first murderer, his incomprehensible deed and even more inexplicable gesture of divine protection already after the crime had been perpetrated. Damned and divine. The divine murderer. This literary portrait – close in this respect to Herling’s story – not only observes contradictions but is based on them, as if suggesting that the “true” Gesualdo either is – must be! – a jumble of those contradictions or does not exist. If we cleanse his biography of all those contrary elements whose arrangement into a cohesive whole poses such a difficult task, then our portrait will change into a caricature operating with a very limited repertoire of means. In the earlier cited article Lotman accentuated that a good biography is capable of disclosing the necessity of assorted, mutually tied lines of life. In an ideal portrait those lines permeate each other. *One shines through the other, inspiration through the mounds of life circumstances, light through smoke. A portrait in the sfumato style.*²⁵ The literary vision of Gesualdo from the Hildesheimer novel – a portrait of the prince of Venosa drawn with barely several lines – appears to be an ideal realisation of those recommendations.

In a similar spirit Hugo von Hofmannsthal in his brief but penetrating sketch about Oscar Wilde, possibly the best ever written on the topic, described the ambivalent nature of a biographical portrait. Hofmannsthal traced the mystery of the writer’s double by evading all schemes aiming at unambiguity. At the same time, he firmly stressed that Wilde’s “true” image does not emerge from accentuating only a single side of the biography. On the contrary, the at least partial solution of the mystery of identity consists of understanding that the truth of life is embedded in mutual permeation, convolutions, the imposition of assorted and sometimes totally contrary and, it would seem, mutually excluding motifs, and that, threatened with distortion, it has to be the truth of the entity of experience:

We must not make life more banal than it is, nor turn our eyes away so as not to behold this band when for once it can be seen on a brow.

We must not degrade life by tearing character and fate asunder and separating his misfortune from his fortune. We must not pigeonhole everything. Everything is everywhere. There are tragic elements in superficial things and trivial in the tragic. There is something suffocatingly sinister in

what we call pleasure. There is something lyrical about the dress of a whore and something commonplace about the emotions of a lyric poet. Everything dwells simultaneously in man. He is full of poisons that rage against one another. There are certain islands where inhabitants pierce the bodies of their dead relatives with poisoned arrows, to make sure they they are dead. This is an ingenious way of expressing metaphorically a profound thought and of paying homage to the profundity of Nature without much ado. For in the truth the slowly killing poisons and the elixir of gently smouldering bliss all lie side by side in our living body. No one thing can be excluded, none considered too insignificant to become a very great power. Seen from the viewpoint of life, there is not one thing extraneous to the Whole. Everything is everywhere. Everything partakes of the dance of life.

In the words of Jalal-ud-din-Rumi, "He who knows the power of the dance of life fears not death. For he knows that love kills."²⁶

The most profound sense of all attempts at building the image of a character from the past, work on creating his portrait, is well described by the Polish word: *wywoływanie* (invoking) together with its interesting semantic, both when the issue at stake is the commonplace *wywoływanie po imieniu* (calling by name) or the more complicated *wywoływanie fotografii* (developing a photograph), but also when one considers the suspicious practice of *wywoływania duchów* (calling up ghosts). After all, each of those phraseological collocations, although in a different manner, mentions the process of distinguishing someone from the anonymous mass, a gesture that differentiates but also, more extensively, brings to life. What else is a portrait if not an attempt at capturing – painting, taking photographs, filming – someone's uniqueness, at recording in an image or a word the single, inimitable stigmata of personality, that differentiating sign, that property described by Duns Scouts as *haecceitas*, a quality distinguishing each of us from the common human denominator.

The portrait constructions recalled here are three attempts at materialising the spirit. Their "veracity" and "adequacy" are not the question of some sort of a comparison to so-called historical truth because in this instance - so to speak - the evidence is missing. Their ultimate sense is thus supplemented by the spectator/reader. Actually, we are the matter of those works. Now all rests on us. Those portraits can only nurture our imagination. The portrait of Carlo Gesualdo depends only on us. After all, each one of us decides which of the presented hypotheses - the crime macabresque, the tragic melodrama or the empathic soliloquy – appears to be more convincing. It is we who ultimately decide whether the prince of Venosa is to be remembered or forgotten²⁷, and whether in

our eyes he deserves to be eternally damned or will be redeemed.

Nothing can be precisely analysed, named and understood. Experience is indifferent to argumentation. Regardless into which narration we place our trust the existence of a "dark spot" in biographical cognition remains a fact. To believe that even the most all-sided biography leaves no mysteries is, according to Hermione Lee, the excellent biographer of Virginia Woolf, to become the victim of the most seductive and false myth of the biography.²⁸

To be continued

In one of his most recent interviews Bernardo Bertolucci admitted to the journalist that for some time he had been cherishing a dream: he would like to abandon modern themes, which absorbed his attention in the latest productions, and focus on the past. The lead character would be an historical figure; the director would like a time machine to transfer him to the sixteenth century. *I am fascinated by Gesualdo da Venosa, a Neapolitan composer, author of madrigals and sacral music. Igor Stravinsky called him the precursor of twentieth-century music. De Venosa married one of the most beautiful women of his time, but he was much too fond of music and Maria was much too fond of sex. She had a lover and Gesualdo's family urged him to kill her. I would like to tell the story of this man in love with a woman, music and the very notion of love.*²⁹

A successive film about the prince of Venosa, another biographical construction, a successive facial composite, and yet another anthropological study told in the language of film. Regardless how we would assess upon the basis of such a laconic announcement the value of this project (one may deliberate whether the drama of Gesualdo can be reduced to two simple formulas: *he was much too fond of music* and *she was much too fond of sex*) one thing is certain: the story of the prince, musician and murderer unexpectedly goes on. More: it seems to have become increasingly intensive. The prince still possesses a strange force of attraction. As we can see, a successive chapter of this story is ahead of us.

This is truly amazing – so many years after his death Carlo Gesualdo is doing quite well.

He lives on.

Endnotes

¹ C. Cavafy, *Głosy*, in : C. Cavafy, *Wiersze zebrane*, transl. and prep. Z. Kubiak, Warszawa 1992, p. 8.

² Among more important writings see: C. Gray, P. Heseltine, *Carlo Gesualdo. Prince of Venosa. Musician and Murderer*, London 1926; G. Watkins, *Gesualdo: The Man and His Music*, introduction: I. Stravinsky, Oxford 1973; A. Vaccaro, *Carlo Gesualdo, principe di Venosa: l'uomo e i tempi*, no place of publication 1998.

- ³ Awarded two important prizes: *Prix Italia* (1996) and *Best Television Film Award* (1997).
- ⁴ On various meanings of the term "rhetoric" and in particular its film applications cf. M. Przyłipiak, *Film dokumentalny jako gatunek retoryczny*, "Kwartalnik Filmowy" no. 23:1998, pp. 5-20.
- ⁵ To this motif we should add the reflections of Cecil Gray, who upon the basis of suggestions made by Thomas de Quincey in his celebrated essay: *On Murder Considered as One of the Fine Arts* (Polish translation in: T. De Quincey, *Wyznania angielskiego opiumisty*, transl. M. Bielewicz, Warszawa 2002, pp. 330-418) outlined a meticulous parallel between Gesualdo's precise and painstakingly conceived music and the just as carefully planned murder of Maria d'Avalos, cf. C. Gary, P. Heseltine, *Carlo Gesualdo. Prince of Venosa. Musician and Murderer*, London 1926, pp. 63-74 (the chapter: *Carlo Gesualdo considered as a murderer* is by Gray, while comments by Heseltine, mentioned by Place, concern the prince's music). Interestingly, this trace appears also in the recently composed musical entitled *Gesualdo* (authors: B. Fernandina, S. Breese), in which Gesualdo is described as the "dark prince" or "prince of darkness". A description of the spectacle and fragments of the music are available on: *Official Website for Gesualdo – A New Musical.htm*. The rather curious and bombastic score does not evoke Gesualdo's sophisticated compositions but confirms his astonishing presence in pop culture.
- ⁶ Suffice to recall the emblematic scene ending the film. The fence around Xanadu Castle features a sign with the inscription: *No trespassing*, which apart from the literal meaning possesses also a metaphorical one and is, for all practical purposes, a categorical declaration: no entry into someone's innermost core!
- ⁷ V. Nabokov, *Prawdziwe życie Sebastiana Knighta*, transl. M. Kłobukowski, Warszawa 1992, pp. 45-46.
- ⁸ G. Herling-Grudziński, *Madrygał żalobny*, in: *Don Ildebrando i inne opowiadania*, Warszawa 2000, p. 112.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 114-117.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 123-124.
- ¹¹ This wavering indicated by a question mark is not accidental. In many of his stories Herling intentionally confused tracks and imposed upon the biography of the protagonist/narrator his own life story. Such an approach was aptly noticed by Ewa Bieńkowska: *I always had the impression that Herling's stories are more personal than the records in his Dziennik. This is intimacy transposed into fictional narration, but translucent and obvious in the most important tangles of history. (...) In the stories the writer attaches increasing prominence to the fact that he is experiencing the deceit of a double portrait, the night-time listening to Gesualdo ...*, E. Bieńkowska, *Pisarz i los. O twórczości Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego*, Warszawa 2002, pp. 130-131.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 125-126.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 127.
- ¹⁴ The acclaimed Italian musicologist Massimo Mila, author of, i.a. *Breve storia della musica*, the source of the fragment about Gesualdo's music cited in the story.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 133-134.
- ¹⁶ Attention was drawn to this feature of the construction of Herling's numerous stories by A. Morawiec in: *Poetyka opowiadań Gustawa Herlinga-Grudzińskiego*, Kraków 2000, pp. 122-123.
- ¹⁷ G. Herling-Grudziński, W. Bolecki, *Rozmowy w Neapolu*, Warszawa 2000, p. 182.
- ¹⁸ Y. Lotman, *Biografiya – zhivoye listso*, "Noviy Mir" no. 2:1985, quoted after a note signed by H. C. and entitled: *Jurij Lotman o biografistyce*, "Literatura na świecie" no. 11:1985, p. 352.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 352; another biographistic trap mentioned by Lotman, who described it as the sin of a "cheap belles lettres approach", is realised in an almost model-like way by *Madrygał. Powieść o Gesualdzie da Venosa*, a story by the Hungarian author Laszlo Passuth (Warszawa 1981). This copious (almost 600 pages!), horribly boring story about the prince's life, built almost entirely out of conventional elements and brimming with hundreds of less or more necessary details from the epoch, proves the aptness of Lotman's successive comment: *If the expressiveness of the historical background is greater than that with which the main protagonist of the biography was depicted then the narration compels the reader to conclude that the object of the biography is interesting solely as the son of his age, a representative of something: an epoch, a milieu, an estate*, op. cit., p. 350.
- ²⁰ W. Hildesheimer, *Tynset*, transl. A. Roslan, S. Lichański, Warszawa 1973, p. 159; in the medley of characters populating Hildesheimer's novel we come across Cain (a brief theological dissertation deals with his crime) and the Ghost of Hamlet's father, but also "real" German war criminals from the *Endlösung* era. An interpretation of *Tynset* maintains that this is one of the most shocking literary records of the Holocaust and in particular the memory trauma associated with it, cf. M. Cosgrove, *Traumatic Memory in Wolfgang Hildesheimer's Tynset*, a paper presented at the Conference of University Teachers of German in Great Britain and Ireland, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 8-10 Sept. 2003; summary available on the Internet page of the conference.
- ²¹ Hildesheimer, op. cit., p. 141.
- ²² Following the example of Giorgio Colli I comprehend the concept of the puzzle in the Early Greek manner: an a-logical being, a dialectical tangle of contradictions, a reality enrooted in an inconceivable divine sphere, cf. G. Colli, *Narodziny filozofii*, transl. S. Kasprzysiak, Kraków 1991, pp. 52-60.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 141-143.
- ²⁴ See the particularly instructive reflections by Hayden White, *Poetyka pisarstwa historycznego*, transl. various authors, Kraków 2000, p. 105.
- ²⁵ Lotman, op. cit., p. 353.
- ²⁶ H. von Hofmannstahl, *Sebastian Melmoth*, transl. P. Hertz, "Zeszyty Literackie" no. 53:1996, p. 65.
- ²⁷ From the viewpoint of the purely musicological dimension of Gesualdo's works nothing seems to indicate that they are to be forgotten. See: numerous papers read at the *La musica del Principe. Studi e prospettive per Carlo Gesualdo* conference held in Venosa on 17-2003 and the Music Conservatory of Potenza.
- ²⁸ H. Lee, *Biomitografowie, czyli życiorysy Virginii Woolf*, transl. J. Mikos, "Literatura na świecie" no. 7-8:1999, p. 349.
- ²⁹ *Kino sprzeciwia się czasowi. Z Bernardo Bertoluccim rozmawia B. Hollender*, "Rzeczpospolita" no. 26:2004 ("Plus Minus" supplement, 31 April).