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Contents

NICOLA PASQUALICCHIO	
<i>Introduction</i>	3
JAVIER CUESTA GUADAÑO	
<i>Forms of Short Modernist-Symbolist Theatre in Spain</i>	27
DIDIER PLASSARD	
<i>Edward Gordon Craig and the “smallest drama in the world”</i>	51
ELISA MARTINI	
<i>Just Two Cues: Achille Campanile’s Upside-Down Tragedy</i>	65
LAURA PEJA	
<i>Shorter and Shorter: Samuel Beckett’s Challenge to the Theatre</i>	81
MARK TAYLOR-BATTY	
<i>Harold Pinter’s Early Revue Sketches</i>	101
CARLO VARESCHI	
<i>“... worth using twice”?</i> <i>Making a Short Story Long. Tom Stoppard’s Two Early One-Acters</i>	117
ALEXANDRE KOUTCHEVSKY	
<i>Repetition as Zoom Effect. A Mechanism of Short Writing Played at the Level of Words</i>	139
SIMONA BRUNETTI	
<i>Ten Years of Short Theatre. Rome and Its ‘Short’ Festival</i>	165

ELISA MARTINI*

Just Two Cues: Achille Campanile's Upside-down Tragedy

Abstract

A bonfire should “make this false and conventional literary world crash down loudly”, since it cannot gracefully ‘jest’ and ‘laugh’ anymore. This is Achille Campanile’s wish, the same he cultivates in his *Tragedie in due battute* [Tragedies in Two Cues]. These ‘tragedies’ are quick pieces of witticism which materially live in the narrow space of a slip of paper – the physical boundary of Campanile’s ‘tragic’ writing – and whose brevity serves their author’s purpose of meditating on the way of the world by humorously overturning the aulic genre par excellence, that is, tragedy. Campanile “distorts the rule” and consequently ushers in a “silly laughter” conducing to the discovery of a void that discloses, beyond the comic, an authentic human tragedy; it is the tragedy of contemporary bourgeois society, of its inane triviality, confined within its own formal conventions and doomed to a sterile and useless anticipation of Fascist triumphalism. Fascism relished on high-flown magniloquence and on the grandiosity of events and celebrations. Campanile overruled this pretentiousness through the tragi-comic velocities of his two cues which became an alternative voice next to the régime’s officiality. Campanile’s outlook reverses the norm and sparsely sketches out man’s actual reality. Although belonging to a specific historical moment, his “cues” humorously portray the whole humanity that remains unchanged through the centuries, constantly play-acting and periodically in need of a purifying fire lit by a ‘humorist-physician’ in order to dispose of its false and conventional literary and social masks.

Ebbene, quell’incendio, con cui l’Ariosto quasi conclude le mille peripezie dei suoi eroi, che s’è divertito a far muovere pazzamente nel gran poema, quell’incendio gigantesco che divora un regno, è un gran falò, in cui crepita, si consuma e si distrugge tutto un mondo letterario di cartapesta, che crolla con fracasso: il mondo dei falsi eroismi inutili, coi suoi guerrieri di latta, il mondo dei poemi e dei romanzi cavallereschi, che prendevano sul serio la gran bontà dei cavalieri antiqui e che più tardi doveva far impazzire il generoso Hidalgo della Mancia. (Campanile 1933: 612)

[Well, in the fire by which Ariosto almost brought to an end the many adventures of the heroes that he had let loose with gusto in his masterpiece, in that gigantic bonfire a whole kingdom is devoured, an entire literary world made of *papier mâché* is destroyed and consumed, and boisterously

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crashes down: the world of false and useless braveries, of tin soldiers, the world of poems and romances that took seriously the goodly truths of the cavaliers of old and later on were to spark the madness of the generous Hidalgo de la Mancha.]

This is how Achille Campanile concluded his lecture on Ariosto, given on Christmas Day 1928 in the Sala dei Giganti of the Castello Estense at Ferrara. It was a very important occasion, that is, the closing ceremony of the celebrations for the fourth centenary of the poet's death, which had been opened on 6 May of the same year by Ferrarese Italo Balbo¹ and whose proceedings were to be collected in the volume *L'ottava d'oro* [*The Golden Octave*].

On the day consecrated by Christianity to the birth of Jesus, young Campanile – perhaps inadvertently – promoted Ludovico Ariosto as a provocative humourist who shrewdly exposed the empty and ritualized formality of the paper realm of chivalry, presenting it as a pitiless mirror of reality. Indeed, Campanile showed to have perfectly understood the irony hidden in *Orlando Furioso* by consciously paraphrasing a famous passage taken from the first canto (1.22.1-6):

Oh gran bontà de' cavallieri antiqui!
 Eran rivali, eran di fé diversi,
 e si sentian degli aspri colpi iniqui
 per tutta la persona anco dolersi;
 e pur per selve oscure e calli obliqui
 insieme van senza sospetto aversi.

(Ariosto 1992: 1.10)

[Oh! Goodly truth in cavaliers of old! / Rivals they were, to different faith were bred./ Not yet the weary warriors' wounds were cold – / Still smarting from those strokes so fell and dread, / Yet they together ride by waste and wold, / And, unsuspecting, devious dingle thread. (Transl. by William Stuart Rose)]

¹ Politician and aviator Italo Balbo was one of the four Fascist party leaders (the so-called 'Quadrumvirs') who guided the March on Rome that, in 1922, brought Benito Mussolini and Fascism to power. During World War 1, Balbo fought as a volunteer and, after the war, he became dedicated to politics embracing Fascist ideas. This earned him a position as party secretary in native Ferrara (1921, Balbo is also known for the organization of Fascist punitive expedition in the area). From 1926 onwards, he devoted himself to both the air force, undertaking several expeditions, and civil aviation, studying the employment of new technologies. He was appointed Marshal of the Air in 1929 and later on Governor General of Lybia. In the late 1930s, Balbo led a solitary opposition against Mussolini's racial laws and, together with Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano, the Duce's alliance with Hitler. He died on 28 June 1940 in the skies of Tobruk (Lybia), killed by friendly fire. See Berselli 1963.

With extreme lightness and grace, Ariosto drops an ironic comment within his own epic romance and a few lines only manage to enliven indelibly the chivalric world of his poem. Something has changed in this universe of knights and paladins: the strict rules of that system of values are soon to be stripped of their meaning and become empty boxes, just like the words of poets which, on the Moon, appear like burst cicadas. These lines powerfully unveil the inner reality of human society, and allow us to state that Ariosto disclosed, with scanty irony, the secret evolution of human tragedy. Only six lines, then, and it was this brevity – I think – that spurred and intrigued a fine humourist like Campanile, for whom two lines were enough to kindle his 'inner fire'.² In his 1928 lecture on Ariosto, we can spot two cues that anticipate, in disguise, his *Tragedie* [*Tragedies*]. Through the rapid exchange between the Viscount and the Baron, Campanile points out the importance of a good answer:

Una buona risposta è quello che ci vuole per innalzarci di fronte agli avversarii. Sappiate rispondere bene: colui che vi parla resterà impicciolito e voi sarete talmente cresciuti da sentirvi oltremodo sicuri di voi. Sappiate rispondere bene: l'ammirazione delle folle sarà per voi, tutti gli elogi per la vostra saggezza.

Una buona risposta a bruciapelo salva una reputazione e basta a far passare alla storia. Pochi passeranno alla storia per il loro silenzio.

...

Insomma, signori, pochi passeranno alla storia per battute di questo genere.

IL VISCONTE. Signore, che cosa state per fare?

IL BARONE. Visconte, sto per uccidervi, voi e tutti i vostri, devastare le vostre terre, disonorare il vostro nome, incendiare le vostre castella, spargere le vostre ceneri al vento. Che mi rispondete?

IL VISCONTE. (*tace*).

...

È la sua insipienza che lo perde. Se rispondesse bene, forse morrebbe, ma certo gli invisibili *reporter* della storia esalterebbero il suo nome nelle cronache dei secoli. Inoltre il visconte non ha presenza di spirito: ha bisogno di pensare per trovare una risposta, ha il cosiddetto *esprit de l'escalier*. Che muoia, dunque! (Campanile 1933: 608-9)

[A good answer is what it takes to stand tall in the face of adversaries. Be ready to answer back: the person who is talking to you will shrink and you will expand and feel exceptionally self-assured. Be ready to answer back: the admiration of the people will be for you, all the praise for your

² On Campanile's humour, see Cavallini 2000; Maestri 2003; Ryan-Scheutz and Colangelo 2004; and Benzoni 2012.

wisdom. A good answer at point blank will save a reputation and will be enough to let you go down in history. Very few people, if any, went down in history for their silence ... In short, Gentlemen, not many will go down in history for cues like these. // THE VISCOUNT. Lord, what are you going to do? // THE BARON. Viscount, I am going to kill you and all your family, ravage your land, discredit your name, burn your castles, scatter your ashes to the wind. What do you reply? // THE VISCOUNT: (*silence*) ... It is his foolishness that ruins him. If he responded suitably well, maybe he would die all the same, but of course, the invisible reporters of his story would exalt his name in the centuries to come. In addition, the Viscount has no presence of mind: he needs thinking before responding, he has the so-called *esprit de l'escalier*. Let him die, then!].

In these few lines brevity must be extremely sharp in order to come off 'incendiary' and obtain the looked-for effect. Here the comic core is already active and defined, as well as the author's ability to make it effective within a longer text, thanks to that mosaic or *collage* technique that will be a peculiar trait of his composing method. During his lecture, therefore, Campanile comments on Ariosto, but implicitly – yet making sure that a sensitive ear will get it – speaks about himself and his 'minimal' creations which will be collected in a volume significantly entitled *Tragedie in due battute* [*Tragedies in Two Cues*], published only posthumously in 1978.

In the 1920s (the first tragedy was published in the *Corriere Italiano* in 1924), Campanile began writing brief witty texts, consisting in rapid exchanges occupying the space of a slip of paper and configured as actual small theatrical pieces; even though they were not always perceived as such by the public precisely because of their rapidity, Campanile kept working on them for his entire life. A minimum writing time is then expanded so much as to occupy a whole life span, while the same ambivalence can be found in the performative standing of these short pieces, which initially inhabited the space of a slip of paper and ended up being performed first on stage and then on television. The monad of the slip of paper carrying a two-line piece is really "l'elemento modulare minimo" (Anglani 2000: 19) ["the least modular element"] of Campanile's journalistic, literary, and theatrical writings. Achille Campanile's son, Gaetano, wrote:

Chi sa come avrebbe vissuto l'era del computer mio padre, lui che già utilizzava il 'taglia' e 'incolla' quando riordinava i propri lavori. Sì, quando li ordinava, perché quando sedeva alla sua scrivania aveva già tutto scritto. Ovunque si trovasse quando gli veniva un'idea la scriveva utilizzando ciò che aveva a portata di mano: foglietti di carta velina o buste per lettera aperte in tutti i lati, rivoltate e utilizzate all'interno; biglietti del tram e perfino foglietti dove precedentemente aveva disegnato qualche suo personaggio. Così allargava i suoi foglietti sulla scrivania aumentando,

per quanto fosse possibile, la confusione, prendevale lunghe forbici, la coccoina in vasetto col pennellino, e cominciava a tagliare ed incollare, ogni tanto scriveva qualche frase per legare i periodi e faceva alcune aggiunte. Terminato il collage, radunava le carte e chiamava mamma, la dattilografa che ha ispirato *La caduta del ragno*, che trascriveva a macchina” (Campanile 2000: 11).

[Who knows how my father would have coped with the computer age, since he already used the ‘copy and paste’ when he rearranged his own writings. Yes, when he arranged them, because when he sat down he had already written everything. Wherever he was, when he got an idea he wrote it down on anything handy: tissue-paper or envelopes turned inside out, tram tickets or even slips of paper on which he had already drawn some characters. He would spread all his papers on his writing-desk, increasing, if possible, the confusion, take a pair of long scissors, his tin of glue, and a little brush and start cutting and pasting; now and then he would write a sentence when some connection was needed, or would add something. When the collage was done he assembled his papers and called mum, the typist who inspired *La caduta del ragno* (*The fall of the spider*), and she would type them down].³

The slip of paper is the starting point of many ideas which will be later developed by Campanile in books and newspapers,⁴ providing the long term basis of his writing: brevity becomes synonymous with longevity and stability, thus perfectly integrating itself with the game of opposites that constantly permeates Campanile’s work. The anti-climax atmosphere is already perceptible in the oxymoronic title of the collection, *Tragedie in due battute* [*Tragedies in Two Cues*], which suggests how tragedy, the highbrow genre *par excellence* together with melodrama and opera, is going to be utterly reversed (see Maestri 2003: 94). The gravest of theatrical forms is indeed turned upside down in its every aspect, starting from its duration: Aristotle’s canonical five acts are squeezed into comic brevity and a humorous swiftness distorts the features of characters and settings. Let us consider, for instance, the tragedy *Il Principe Pensieroso* [*The Pensive Prince*]:

³ On this see also Maestri 2003: 79.

⁴ “La commedia o tragedia in due battute è, dunque, una divagazione allo stato puro, presentata nei suoi termini essenziali di connessione insieme con gli elementi di ambiente o di azione indispensabile. E appare immediatamente evidente che la commedia o tragedia in due battute, in quanto tale, non è né giornalismo né teatro né narrativa; ma un materiale di costruzione polivalente che può trovare ogni tipo di impiego” (Calendoli 1980: 4434). [“A two-line comedy, or tragedy is therefore, a digression at its purest, reduced to its essential terms and presented with few essential elements regarding action and setting. It is soon obvious that a two-line comedy or tragedy is neither journalism nor theatre, nor narrative, but a multifunctional piece of building material that can be used in many different ways”].

Personaggi:

IL PRINCIPE PENSIEROSO

IL GRAN CIAMBELLANO

[*La scena si svolge nel castello del PRINCIPE PENSIEROSO. Salone antico. Dai finestrini gotici si vede la sterminata e nebbiosa campagna del Nord e l'uggiosa pioggia che malinconicamente i campi lava.*

All'alzarsi del sipario, il PRINCIPE PENSIEROSO, avvolto in un mantello di velluto nero, è seduto nella poltrona a braccioli, sotto un baldacchino dorato e, la fronte appoggiata a una mano, è immerso in riflessioni.

Entra il GRAN CIAMBELLANO, gli fa un profondo inchino e s'accinge a comunicargli cose della più grande importanza.]

GR. CIAM. [*esitando, per tema di disturbare il principe*] Altezza...

PRINC. P. [*risotendosi dalle sue meditazioni: tristemente*] Un metro e sessanta.

[*Sipario*]

(Campanile 2008: 72)

[*Characters: THE PENSIVE PRINCE // THE GREAT CHAMBERLAIN // The scene takes place in the castle of the PENSIVE PRINCE. An old salon. From the Gothic windows you see the immense and misty countryside of the North and the dreary rain sadly washing the fields. When the curtain rises, the PENSIVE PRINCE, wrapped in a black velvet cloak, sits on a chair with armrests, under a golden canopy, his forehead resting on his hand, plunged in deep thoughts.*

The GREAT CHAMBERLAIN enters, bows very low and is about to tell things of the greatest importance. // GR. CIAM. (hesitating for fear of disturbing the prince) Your Highness... // PRINCE. (emerging from his thoughts: sadly) Five foot three. // (Curtain)].

The long stage direction – a device often used by Campanile in order to prepare the ground for the comic effect of his pieces – makes the audience's attention focus on an oppressive and meditative atmosphere worthy of *Hamlet*. Both the scenery and the actor's position on stage evoke the figure of the Danish prince in the minds of the spectators, prompting a feeling of anticipation that will be rapidly and deliberately disappointed. The quick exchange between the Great Chamberlain and the Prince shatters, in fact, the certainties of the public. The misunderstanding over the word "Altezza" (which, in Italian, means both 'highness' and 'height') produces a gap in the tragic dimension of the text: a prosaic reality enters and upsets the scene turning it into a comic sketch. In the printed edition of the *Tragedie, Il Principe Pensieroso* is paired with *L'impiegato pieno di delicatezza* [*The extremely thoughtful clerk*], which reflects a downward spiralling of tragic characters and situations. Real life interferes with the grandness of tragedy; and yet, in their turn, the rules of everyday life will

also be unsettled in the space of two lines. *Formalismo* [*Formality*] is another piece still dealing with the ambiguous use of aristocratic titles:

Personaggi:

IL VECCHIO PRINCIPE

IL NUOVO SERVITORE

[*La scena si svolge nel salone rococò al primo piano del palazzo del VECCHIO PRINCIPE. Tappeti, arazzi alle pareti, mobili dorati, statuine.*

All'alzarsi del sipario il VECCHIO PRINCIPE sta interrogando il NUOVO SERVITORE assunto da poche ore.]

IL VECCHIO PRINCIPE.

[*al NUOVO SERVITORE*]

Com'è il vostro nome?

N. SERVITORE.

Giuseppe.

V. PRINCIPE. [*con severità*]

Non si risponde così nudo e crudo, Giuseppe. Dovete aggiungere sempre: Eccellenza.

N. SERVITORE.

[*vincendo la modestia*]

Va bene: Eccellenza Giuseppe.

[*Sipario*]

(Ibid.: 125)

[*Characters: THE OLD PRINCE // THE NEW SERVANT // The scene takes place in the rococo hall on the first floor of the OLD PRINCE'S palace. Rugs, tapestries on the walls, gilded furniture, figurines. When the curtain rises THE OLD PRINCE is questioning THE NEW SERVANT, who has been employed for just a few hours. // THE OLD PRINCE (to THE NEW SERVANT): What is your name? // N. SERV. Giuseppe // OLD PRIN. (sternly) Do not reply so curtly, Giuseppe. You must always add: Your Excellency. // N. SERV. (overcoming his modesty) Be it so, then: Excellency Giuseppe. // (Curtain)*]

Also in this case, the stage direction prepare the most appropriate background for the reader to receive the alienating effect of the final cue, whose epigrammatic power will also disclose – as is common in Campanile's style – the potentially paradoxical hazard contained in the very title of the tragedy: *Formality*. In the Old Prince's hall time has stopped and everything has crystallized into the encoded stiffness of the past. This formal adherence to etiquette is the sacrificial victim of the New Servant's line. He is, in fact, an alien in the world of the Old Prince and his newcomer's incomprehension of the importance of the title "Eccellenza" ["Eccellency"] exposes the vacuity of a system reduced to a mere ritual, destined to be endlessly reiterated in its sterile and void form. The Old Prince, with his etiquette, is by now confined in the mothballed museum life of his rococo salon and his statuettes.

The systematic repetition of empty formulas is the absolute protagonist of another tragedy: *Situazione senza uscita* [*Inescapable situation*]. The whole

play relies on the stage directions that guide the actors' performance and comically reverse the words of courtesy spoken by Battista, the butler, and the Grand Duke:

Personaggi:

IL GRANDUCA

BATTISTA

[*La scena rappresenta un'anticamera sontuosa.*]

GRAND. [*Entra dalla comune, seguito dal domestico BATTISTA, che è in frac; senza voltarsi, gli consegna con aria stanca il gibus, il bastone, i guanti; poi gli getta il mantello, che BATTISTA, avendo le mani occupate dal gibus, dal bastone e dai guanti, riceve sulle spalle. Il GRANDUCA resta in frac*] Annunziate il Granduca... [*Si volta e vedendo BATTISTA col mantello, il gibus, i guanti e il bastone, gli fa un profondo inchino*] Pardon... Chi debbo annunziare?

BATT. [*Gli consegna guanti, bastone, gibus e mantello*] Annunziate il domestico Battista... Pardon... [*Vedendo il GRANDUCA tornato il GRANDUCA, gli fa un inchino e si fa consegnare nuovamente guanti, bastone, gibus e mantello; così torna ad essere un elegante signore ed il GRANDUCA gli fa un inchino e riceve ancora i capi del vestiario, che passano dall'uno all'altro, fra gl'inchini reciproci, finché, fatta l'ora di chindere il teatro, cala lentamente il Sipario*]

(Ibid.: 173-4)

[Characters: THE GRAND DUKE // BATTISTA // (*The scene is set in a magnificent antechamber*) // GRAND. (*Enters, followed by the butler BATTISTA wearing a tail-coat; without turning around, he gives him wearily the gibus, the stick, and the gloves; then he throws his cloak at him and BATTISTA, having his hands busy with the gibus, the stick, and the gloves, takes it on his shoulders. The GRAND DUKE is now in his tail-coat*) Announce the Grand Duke... (*Turns around and, seeing BATTISTA with the cloak, gibus, gloves and stick, bows very low*) Pardon... Whom should I announce? // BATT. (*Hands him gloves, stick, gibus, and coat*) Announce the butler Battista... Pardon... (*Seeing the GRAND DUKE turned into the GRAND DUKE again, he bows and takes back gloves, stick, gibus, and cloak; thus he turns into an elegant gentleman again and the GRAND DUKE bows and again takes the garments, which the two of them keep exchanging while continuously bowing to each other, until it is time to close the theatre and the Curtain is slowly lowered*)]

The exchange of the cloak and of the other aristocratic accessories between the two characters causes the constant exchange of their identities as well: a mechanism which is to be repeated indefinitely and uninterruptedly. The cloak, the stick, the gibus, and the gloves mark the authentic difference between the lord and the butler; they are both wearing tail-coats, therefore their identities are determined only by unnecessary

and external elements, that is, by mere form. The 'high' characters, who have been the protagonists of tragic theatre from time immemorial, are belittled and stripped of their substance to the point of becoming empty shells: nobility resides in the pieces of clothing and not in the characters who wear them, and thus tragedy becomes inexorably and irreverently comic.

Campanile centres his focus on reality and, in doing so, he exposes the fatuous exteriority of those countless human and social rituals, based on insubstantial appearance and formal vacuity (see Maestri 2003: 85-9). This is clearly exemplified by *Morto che parla* [*Dead Man Talking*] in which one of tragedy's recurring themes, death, is dealt with:

Personaggi:

IL MORTO

I PARENTI E GLI AMICI DEL MORTO

[*La scena rappresenta una camera ardente. Il morto è steso sul letto, fra le candele e i fiori; intorno, i famigliari e gli amici singhiozzano, strillano, si disperano, si danno le pugna nel capo, si strappano i capelli, si torcono le braccia, camminano avanti e indietro imprecando e minacciando di fare qualche pazzia.*]

MORTO [tra sé, intravedendo la scena attraverso lo spiraglio delle palpebre non ben chiuse] Quante esagerazioni! Ma allora che dovrei fare io?

[*Sipario*]

(Ibid.: 180)

[*Characters: THE DEAD MAN // RELATIVES AND FRIENDS OF THE DEAD MAN // [The scene is set in a funeral parlour. The dead man is lying on the bed, among candles and flowers; around him, relatives and friends sob, scream, beat their heads, tear their hair, and wring their hands, walking back and forth, cursing and threatening to do something crazy.] // THE DEAD MAN. [to himself, glimpsing at the scene through half-closed eyelids] What an exaggeration! What should I do then? // (Curtain)*]

This time the Grim Reaper has arrived among common people, not lords and grand dukes, without losing his peculiar tragic status. Once again the stage direction provides a detailed and extremely significant description of the wake. A proper tragic chorus, whose *pathos* is conveyed by a hyperbolic physical expression of pain, stand around the mortuary bed. It is the deceased man himself that cracks this archaic ritual with a single line centred on explosive pragmatism. The formality of the situation is denounced as excessive and empty. It reminds of the sudden gash in Pirandello's paper sky, yet – in this case – the stage is not taken up by the dark dilemmas of Hamlet, but is filled with the sarcastic laugh of comedy. However, what gets distorted here is not Death's tragic aspect but civil society's approach to it. It is worth noticing that the title of the piece

(*Morto che parla* [*Dead Man Talking*]) corresponds to an entry of the *Smorfia*;⁵ the social ritual of death gets reversed by means of a popular reference to betting. It is not Death, then, that is made fun of, but civil society, here observed by one who, like it or not, has directly experienced death.

Campanile dismembers the pomposity of tragedy and turns it into comedy: in the minimum space of two lines, tragic characters and situations are emptied of meaning and reduced to the shadows of a fossilized and phony society. Yet, Campanile does not limit his exploration to aristocrats (topical characters of tragic theatre) or to common people like clerks, customers, or passengers, but he turns his gaze also towards objects, as the two locomotives of the homonymous tragedy: everything is twisted and inverted in just two cues. This comic brevity is subversive of all the rules of everyday life, regardless of class and social status. He “distorts the rule” (“deforma la regola”, Taviani 2002: 11), originating what Pietro Pancrazi styled as Campanile’s “riso scemo” (Pancrazi 1946) [“silly laughter”] and ultimately leading to a vacuum as happens, for example, in *Dramma inconsistente* [*Unsubstantial Drama*]:⁶

Personaggi:

NESSUNO

[*La scena si svolge in nessun luogo.*]

NESSUNO. [*tace.*]

(Campanile 2008: 192)

[Characters: NOBODY // (*The scene is set nowhere.*) // NOBODY (*keeps silent*)].

The protagonist’s name is Nobody and he does not pronounce any cue, therefore drama relies entirely on stage directions. Yet, while readers may have a glimpse at them, the theatrical audience is not prepared to the presence of an actor who remains silent on stage. Here Nothingness rules: an absolute emptiness that nears August Strindberg’s dramatic dissolution and that was to inspire, with its extreme experimentalism, Samuel Beckett’s theatre of absolute silence and, above all, Eugène Ionesco’s *nonsense*.⁷ As Masolino d’Amico pointed out, Ionesco was “anch’egli maestro nel raggiungere la comicità allineando battute di dialogo ineccepibilmente consequenziali le une alle altre, con sfruttamento malizioso e sottile della tendenza della lingua a non esprimere precisamente quello che vorrebbe,

⁵ The *Smorfia* is a popular reference book that establishes a series of correspondences between dreams and the ninety numbers of the game of Lotto; incidentally, dreaming of a *morto che parla* corresponds to number 48.

⁶ On *Dramma inconsistente*, see also Maestri 2003: 95-6.

⁷ On Strindberg and Ionesco, see Taviani 2002: 9-15. For Campanile’s use of *nonsense*, see Maestri 2003: 92-3.

prestandosi quindi a equivoci che sfociano nell'apparente assurdità" (D'Amico 2008: 3-4) ["A master himself in reaching a comic effect by lining up coherent dialogical cues, artfully using the tendency of any language not to say exactly what is meant, and thus creating the misunderstandings that produce an apparent absurdity"]. Still, one wonders what the secret of these tragedies may be. Indeed, these pieces transform into swift comedies which aim at absolute nothingness. According to Campanile's inverted vision, real tragedy is to be found in an empty and futile (bourgeois) society in which idiocy and ignorance are rife and people's lives are restrained by conventions and destined to a hopeless wait. This is all the more tragic because people go about completely unaware of their situation and thus becoming the butt of laughter. His originality derives "[From] his skill to turn inside out everything that is perceived as cliché or as a lexical or behavioural detritus. This technique of 'overturning' implies an apparent acceptance of past traditions and widely accepted attitudes, touches on common habits and facts of life (marriage, death, etc.), and requires an exasperation of tones and modes, while the sudden shift from the norm becomes the first step towards the creation of an estranged parallel universe" (1990: 60).⁸ See also Cirio 1978: "His capacity of inducing laughter is often based upon sudden and nearly imperceptible shifts from a 'normal' (or, at least, abiding with some literary and theatrical stereotypes) universe to a parallel one, above, under or beside the former. That is why, instead of surrealism, we can talk of 'parallel realism'".⁹

What Campanile portrays is a human community whose drama is expressed by the comical upsetting of both tragic dimension and everyday *mediocritas*. Therefore witticism establishes itself as a system in its own right within a society that, precisely in those years, wished to cheer the apotheosis of its grandeur, based on the cult of the leader, on the heroism of 'the new man', and on the "Pindarismo vincente" ["triumphant Pindarism"]. As De Caprio justly foregrounded, "If we accurately examine the peremptory messages issued by the press during Fascism, not only may we detect the limits of that epoch, but also the distance Campanile kept from the then triumphant 'trivial Pindarism'. In opposition to the myth, promoted by Mussolini, of the 'New man', ready to sacrifice himself

⁸ "appunto dalla capacità di rovesciare dall'interno quanto è avvertito come luogo comune, detrito lessicale o comportamentale. Tale tecnica del "ribaltamento" prevede l'apparente accettazione di rituali appartenenti alle tradizioni del passato e di atteggiamenti diffusi e alla moda, coinvolge banali usi quotidiani o altri del privato (il matrimonio, la morte...), pretende l'esplosione dei toni e di modi, mentre lo scarto improvviso della norma costituisce spesso il primo passo per la costruzione di uno straniato universo parallelo.

⁹ "La sua capacità di fare ridere si appoggia spesso sugli scarti improvvisi e quasi impercettibili da un universo 'normale' o per lo meno codificato come tale da certi stereotipi letterario teatrali, a un universo parallelo, sopra, sotto, accanto al primo. Per questo, invece di parlare di surrealismo si può parlare di 'realismo parallelo'"

for the common good, Campanile put on stage third-rate heroes, useless philosophers or common people, turning his texts, albeit in disguise, into a sounding board reverberating and amplifying what people already knew. Campanile turns an estranged look on stardom and makes fun of the columns of popular magazines that taught the rules for an acceptable social behaviour. These illustrated weeklies, cherished by that same urban lower middle class readership portrayed in Beltrame's colour illustrations, provided the backdrop setting for many of Campanile's writings. Yet, shrewder readers were required in order to see through the functional and educational purpose that informed both the easily accessible prose of these periodicals and the effective mass slogans: a new elite was emerging that started to grow weary of the most vulgar aspects of Fascism and considered its loud, 'Starace style' rhetoric as increasingly ridiculous" (1990: 91).¹⁰

During Fascism, as Oreste del Buono has pointed out, "l'umorismo è stato ... uno dei pochi movimenti culturali, inconsapevolmente o consapevolmente, non del tutto arreso alla retorica del regime" (1989: 16-17) ["humour ... has been one of the few cultural movements, either consciously or unconsciously, not to give in to Fascist rhetoric"]. In front of a regime that relished on large and pompous public events, Campanile's tragicomic swiftness voiced a different point of view, alternative to the official one.¹¹ His 'reversals' somehow escaped the prevailing rhetoric and the suffocating pressure of Fascist censorship. In fact, they kept an eye on the satirical pieces published in the newspapers for which Campanile wrote and he himself had to reckon with the situation, to the point that sometimes he even assumed the role of apologist of the regime.

¹⁰ Dal puntuale confronto con i messaggi perentori, elaborati dalla stampa del Ventennio, emergono infatti non solo i limiti di un'epoca, ma soprattutto la distanza che Campanile mantenne da un 'pindarismo banale' in essi vincente. Contro il mito dell'"uomo nuovo", l'eroe che si sacrifica per tutti, invocato da Mussolini, l'umorista mette in scena premiazioni per eroi da strapazzo, rappresenta pensatori inutili o umili gregari, lascia che i suoi testi funzionino come 'cassa di risonanza' e di riproposizione, sotto altre vesti e con segno invertito, di quanto il pubblico sa già. Guarda con occhio straniato al fenomeno del divismo, mentre ironizza sui comportamenti da tenere in società, raccomandati nelle tante rubriche di 'Consigli utili' dei numerosi giornali per famiglia. È infatti l'universo dei settimanali illustrati, cari alla piccola borghesia cittadina proprio quella delle tavole a colori di Beltrame –, a situarsi sullo sfondo delle note di Campanile, ma per un lettore più smaliziato, pronto a rinunciare alle categorie dell'edificante e dell'utile, cui invece si informano e la prosa di divulgazione e, più visibilmente, gli slogan di massa demagogicamente efficaci, sempre più spesso, però ritenuti ridicoli da nuove élites insofferenti del pacchiano fascismo alla Starace".

¹¹ See Calvino 1985: "Il 'Bertoldo' apriva ai giovani 'un altrove' in cui rifugiarsi per sfuggire al linguaggio totalitario e in qualsiasi regime e in qualsiasi epoca l'importante è poter trovare un altrove". ["The (satirical magazine) 'Bertoldo' provided young people with an 'elsewhere', a refuge from totalitarian language and under any regime and during any epoch it is important to have the possibility of finding an 'elsewhere'"].

That is why Campanile's writings may not be considered as militant satire, even though some works show traces of it. Fascism is not the humourist's true target as it actually provides only a historical addition to his authentic objective. In fact, what Campanile truly voiced is, as De Caprio justly remarked, "[t]he ability to point to the playful behaviour of childlike human beings that are too busy taking themselves seriously to notice the ridiculousness of their own choices and myths which coincide with those of a society that wants to appear rational in its enterprises but actually proves muddled and confused, irresponsible and reckless. In order to show its inconsequence, the author revels, with seemingly childish delight, in changing the rules to which his characters-masks obey, thus making visible on a negative backdrop the well-known contradictions of everyday life" (1990: 14).¹²

In this way human tragedy gets off its high horse of grandiloquence and solemnity and embraces the entire society, with its rituals, its stylistic features, its repertoires, its purely formal practices, which are common to any age and social class, to mummified aristocrats as well as ordinary citizens aspiring to fame as, for instance, Campanile's own Gino Cornabò. In the complex scenario of Fascist mass organization and the equally endorsed heroic cult of the individual, Cornabò emerges – in his *Diario* [*Diary*] – as “[a] misfit (yet not a dissident) who, through his grim discontent and unrealistic delusions of grandeur, stresses the vacuity of a communicative system clearly based upon those premises” (Anglani 2000: 22).¹³

Even though Campanile surely took the resonant and all-pervading Fascist propaganda as a starting point, he then extended his scrutiny to a society permanently stuck into a childlike phase, regardless of the government in charge. Within the limited space of two cues, the author reproduced the reality of the civil community and indeed, from a single

¹² “[a] quella capacità di ravvisare i tanti giochi di un’umanità bambina, troppo intenta a prendersi sul serio per vedere il ridicolo delle proprie scelte e dei propri miti, in tutto coincidenti con quelli di una società desiderosa di apparire razionale nei suoi comportamenti, ma nella sostanza arruffona e pasticciona, irresponsabile e istintiva. Per farne risaltare le incongruenze l’autore indulge, con un gusto apparentemente infantile, al gioco di modificare le regole cui i personaggi-maschera si attengono, rendendo finalmente visibile su di uno sfondo negativo le comuni contraddizioni dell’ovvio e del quotidiano.

¹³ “[U]n disadattato (non però un dissidente) capace di far risaltare, con il suo torbido malcontento e la sua velleitaria e frustrata mania di grandezza, la vacuità di un sistema comunicativo basato lucidamente su quei presupposti” Commenting on the hollowness of social conventions, Calendoli wrote: “Per approssimazione, questo mondo si potrebbe chiamare ‘borghese’: di esso Campanile rap-presenta soprattutto ladistorsione provocata da una cieca e irrazionale soggezione a un complesso di convenzioni formali che non corrispondono più ai valori reali della vita, e che provocano risibili ‘contrari’ nell’accezione pirandelliana del termine” (Calendoli 1980: 4440) [“Roughly speaking, we could call this world ‘middle class’. Campanile mainly depicts its blind obedience to a set of rules with no relation to the real values of life, and its ensuing distortions that produce Pirandellian comic ‘opposites’”].

speck of truth we can build a whole portrayal. This monad could fruitfully grow into newspaper articles, novels or dramas as it already contained in itself the irreverent revelation of the futility of social conventions and roles. Campanile's two-line pieces succeeded in humorously representing human beings, who are timelessly playing a part and periodically need some 'Doctor Humourist' to help them get rid of social masks worn-off literary clichés (see Cacopardo 2002: 35). And this is probably what Campanile had in mind when he implicitly promoted himself as a new incendiary Ariosto:

Ebbene, nell'approssimarsi del suo centenario, ricordiamoci dunque di lui, rileggiamo il suo poema immortale, che in fatto di letteratura chiude il Rinascimento e apre la porta dei tempi moderni; e auguriamoci, se non potremo farlo direttamente, che almeno scenda il suo spirito su di noi, il suo spirito che sapeva con tanta grazia scherzare e ridere, e faccia crollare con strepito tutto questo mondo letterario falso e convenzionale, di uomini malati e di sentimenti artificiali: così noi faremo di esso un allegro falò, come quello che, alla fine della gran fatica artistica, sorrise alla fantasia di Ludovico Ariosto. (Campanile 1933: 614)

[Well, now that his centenary is approaching, let us remember him and re-read his immortal poem, which, in literary terms, closed the Renaissance and opened the door to modernity; and let us hope, if we cannot do it ourselves, that at least his spirit, which so gracefully joked and laughed, may descend upon us and noisily demolish this false and conventional literary world of sick men and artificial feelings: we will thereupon make a cheerful bonfire out of it, like the one that, at the end of his great artistic work, smiled at the fancy of Ludovico Ariosto.]

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