

Francesco Arcangeli

*Vasco Bendini*, catalogue of the exhibition, galleria del Milione, Milan, 11-25 January 1958, "Bollettino", n.s., 30; reprinted with variations in Bendini, catalogue of the exhibition, galleria L'Attico, Rome, February-March 1958

"But the rising sun turned it into mere dark vapour, a doubtful, massive shadow trembling in the hot glare". Joseph Conrad It was not until around the age of thirty that Bendini found a path that was decisively his own. He had been a painter for some time, but with long pauses caused by the war or harsh practical necessities, and possibly also by his own disposition and the fact that at times life itself seemed to him a sufficient spiritual adventure. For some years now Bendini has arrived at a pictorial quality that appears to me first-rate; but it is also clear to me (from the work and not only because I have known him at length), that before being a painter, he is a poet, in the meditated and suffered sense of the term. This is the primary reason why, even for his recent painting which is so conscious of the latest directions of western art, the cultural references are only legitimate if brought to bear on a personal nucleus which has already been clearly prefigured for some time. His attempts to nourish his spiritual fame, to give body to his religious intentions, materialized in the severe approaches of a solitary man to poetry and to painting. Solitude made his encounters almost casual; occasions into which he poured an almost boundless dedication. To sum up the young Bendini, we could say that at a certain moment he felt Italian "metaphysics" pursuing him. Not metaphysics in the literal and academic sense of illustrious poetics, but in the broader sense of a yearning towards universals and eternal, not straitened in the contingency of the technical product which is, also, a work of art. He was interested in Guidi and Sironi, apparently in their formal culture, but in reality in their aspiration to infuse it with another light or a grandiose drama. Soon enough, however, Bendini began to feel himself imprisoned by these forms, and anyone who is alive shakes the bars of the cell. Towards 1950 he struggled with Masaccio in what was almost a final, and naturally unhappy, clash with an Italian tradition preached for decades and now interrogated at its most illustrious source. But immediately afterwards, almost as if life were no longer possible except in an unrestrainedly romantic liberation, he filled up large pages with pastel storms and floods, whirlwinds that I can only just recall, black agitated spirals that collapse in avalanche upon themselves. Nothing remains of them: yet the abandonment to

that highly isolated and almost absurd anarchy was, albeit fairly uncontrolled in the medium, of an absolute earnestness. (It was in those same years that Vedova, unfortunately hampered by a geometrical style, generously hurled his *Esplosioni* (Explosions,), *Aspirazioni* (Aspirations,) and *Scontri* (Clashes, into a fray apparently without a future.

After this parenthesis of an almost apocalyptic bearing, in 1952 Bendini appears to approach other cultural precedents. However, no sooner had he discovered Picasso or Matisse (a fount not so very different, in terms of meaning, from that of Guidi or Sironi), no sooner had he sighted the most secret Morandi, but these cues were immediately dissipated, echoing just perceptibly within a new candour. As it turned out, I actually presented his work at the show in Florence in June 1953 and, to be precise, it was not so much that his painting met with incomprehension, but that it was practically impossible for there to be a full awareness of his novelty. Since some of those works, inevitably, also open this show, I want to call up the inventory, drafted at the time, of some of the themes which inhabited this highly personal limbo of his: "Still lifes where the objects breathe like flashes, but feeble, slowed, spacious; a few shapes of faces, almost dazed veronica's veils, where the shaft of a nose, the orbit of a forehead, appear to hint at a grand and solitary architectural rhythm, or a slightly staring eye weeps shadows: languid and wind-filled sails, injured on the blue of stormy waters...". But even earlier, or at most at the same time, Bendini painted several decidedly abstract temperas, which still have nothing to do with the forms of abstractism then known, not in Italy as a whole, but in a city which was fairly secluded in cultural terms such as Bologna. Cultural immaturity meant that I didn't grasp their entire significance, which was only apparently abstract: there was in fact a too earnest persistence of the human presence, mediated in forms candidly fluctuating between consciousness and vision, and delightfully, exquisitely emotive. Bendini was, for the first time, mysteriously free. His interior aspiration no longer forced him into paths that were alien to him, but by now coincided with the recollection, or the dream, of the natural. At times everything was distanced to the point of introducing him directly into a personal world where they are no more than larvae, impressions, semblances. In France, "Tachisme" had just begun to be spoken of (the name emerged in 1951), and dating to precisely the same time, with the backing of a culture quite differently continuous and potent, was the mutation of Tal-Coat. The same period witnessed the emergence of Sam Francis.

Bendini didn't know anything about all this. He was on his own. In the ancient and beautiful but harsh Bologna, he couldn't even get hold of canvases, and had to content himself with tempera on paper. Guidi had already given, and Morandi was now a retrieval to be made in secret; possibly only Mandelli was less distant in harping certain of his personal, fragile figures, albeit always sensibly sheathed within a shudder of truth. Bendini, instead, shapes his dreams directly, only just permeating them with sensible substance. A homegrown "Tachiste", through faint marks, glimmers, vagrant layers and sensitive walls he set up a collected dialogue between world and consciousness, shading at times into monologue, into ineradicable and individual presence. His works, apparently so a historical, so out of the blue, are instead one of the truly personal chapters of a new vision and, dialectically, of the antiformalist revolt that had by now, in 1957, diverged into a thousand streams. In Italy too, people began to come to terms (alas, at times confounding and deceiving) with a history of no more than fifteen years. With Bendini the deceit was useless, because the documents, and the independence of the documents, are even now available. It's also important to immediately stress that in him there is substantially no trace of that technicism, and that cultural dialectic sterilized in its mechanism, with which too many modern (or perhaps better, only modernist) artists turn events over and over. But in them the art, as Dante says, is «...like a very sick woman/who finds no rest upon her soft bed/but tosses and turns to escape her pain». For Bendini, a certain manner of execution signifies the conquest of a world, the true liberation of an aspiration; thus it is not evasive of the real, but as an inevitable presence of temperament and dream, activates the real.

A few months after Bendini's solitary Florentine show, Morlotti displayed a series of landscapes, right here in these rooms of the "Milione", generating the explosion of the "naturalistic" question. It is the image of a nature, no longer seen, but where there is an almost bodily and painful "participation" (Testori's definition) in its germination, birth and growth. The question of sex, beyond the obsessive and gelid poetics of Surrealism, is substantiated in nature, becomes human without losing anguish. But in my opinion, and in view of my own precedent and subsequent rumination, which could strike from Wiligelmo up to Monet, the issue had and has to be geared to a range of facts that it would be pointless to recall here, since they are still in progress. Nature, in any case, appeared as new and "ultimate"; "Autre" might now come more easily. It was inevitable, even though risky, to refer to a "Lombard" situation which startled many; the concept was immediately more or less

deliberately misunderstood, and particularly by those who didn't know or couldn't imagine what "Lombardy" is and has been. It failed to be understood that the things that were naturally ageing were other: in the first place the myth of the superman and an Olympian and aesthetic concept of art. Modern man does not make art into divinity and museum, which is a site of conservation and repose useful only for better re-immersing it into our vital attrition. In any case there need be no regret for having taken part in an Italian effort to stay alive, since this effort will endure, or for having taken part in it from the provinces, which when truly so, effectively represent a test site removed from overly short-lived dialectics, and taken right through to the ultimate investigation of ourselves and of things. In this sense Bendini is provincial, and for this too was not unwillingly involved in the "naturalistic" question, even if - in its essential formulations - it did not coincide with his most intimate constitution. Already between '53 and '54 he had felicitously compared his dreams to a breath of nature, and even if between '54 and '55 he frequently came to choose images of vegetation even too lush for his most personal soul, he did not fail to make them glisten with that secret sense of vision, that controversy of his between the opposites of dream and matter, which is both contrast and the background of the dream. From the immersion within a vision of landscape Bendini was able at times to extract singular works: Springs swollen with breezes, almost timeless, medianic evocations of Autumn, remote Winters, with sparse traces of life within a boundless candour. But it was legitimate that a dissatisfaction would arise within him, not so much with the possibilities that the question in itself offered, but with the poetics which it more showily represented. Bendini had been alone for so long that it was quite understandable that he should briefly entertain the illusion of finding succour in the attractions of a still dominant culture. However, the practice - moreover just touched on, and with his personal chromatic timbres - of an abstract-style post-cubism could not favour the new flowering of that "spiritual" quality of his which had already in 1952-53 made such a highly individual mark. It was, rather, the expansion of the naturalistic question and the new contacts with the practice of the painting of nucleus and of matter, that helped him. If the question was expanded, explored or confounded, this was still achieved through a fairly searing process. What is certain is that in this flow of events Bendini achieved a profound recovery of that truer self of the years '52 and '53. It is obvious that this exhibition, which attempts for the first time to present a more conscious image of his person, should provide a bridge between that earlier and this

more recent period. From a dialogue with the matter of the painting which a few months ago had become almost suffocating, albeit sustained by an insistent and subtle engagement with the execution, the larvae and relics re-emerged, like before, as always in Bendini's truest moments. Certain resonances can be observed, here Wols, there Fautrier, and in certain rare and persisting gratifications even the later Zao-Wou-Ki. But these are names that can be cited without fear of quashing, implicitly, the artist we're talking about. More than ever Bendini lets us hear his mature voice, sets himself in a precise situation. As others struggle for new natural images, unique and possible preface to new real images, in the same way he struggles for new images of the spirit. With an almost medianic precision Bendini has taken up again his own re-evocation. Almost as if rippling it with hidden air, or capturing dazzles and fluorescences, he brings to the surface of the matter - which with the magnetizing attraction of opposites he had enticed into an obscure dialogue - the new image, once again, of a face. But by now increasingly relic, semblance, trace of man, veil-shroud of our anguished condition, the real and highly concrete symbol of our reality, more real than many realisms. Veering within the paste, subtly blundering, directing seas of colour (his old unbridled storms, now verified, no longer absurd), Bendini seeks the new phantasm of our hidden, eroded almost obliterated countenance. We still carry it within us, like the mirror of a conscience which at times appears to us irremediable. The image forms, expands, exhaling in suffocated flashes, sweating in dolorous leprosy. They are the images of a new poetry which we could not call other than Romantic, in a modern existential sense, both companion and thorn in the side of the new "natural" wave, and no less of every abstractly "autre" eventuality, every technicism, every irresponsible vacuity. It is an ineradicable element, religious in the primary and ingenuous sense of the word, within the great dialectic in course. These images, authentic indicators of a spiritual condition, have been paid for by Bendini to the point of sacrifice. This is why, when he faces the canvas, the warning of an unknown light, possibly a hope, blinking slowly within the layers of the matter, begins gradually to shine forth in his room.

(Translation by Lexis, Florence)