

Historical *Minutiae*: On Statues and Broken Mirrors.

by Olivia Guaraldo

(Translation by Valentina Moro)

If you ever happened to be in London walking on Whitehall, the long avenue that connects Trafalgar Square and Westminster, you must have noticed the numerous statues dedicated to illustrious figures of the British Empire. Many glorious statesmen and soldiers stand there fiercely on massive marble pedestals or huge bronze horses. There are also two famous cenotaphs: one dedicated to the soldiers dead during the World War I and the other to the “women of World War II”.

If you go all the way down on Whitehall, in a hidden corner on the left, usually ignored by touristic tours, you can see the statue erected to Emmeline Pankhurst, who fought for the women’s right to vote. It is located in a lush garden, always surrounded by graceful bunches of flowers that somebody regularly leaves there – we can imagine a devoted middle-aged woman who wants to keep the memory of the Suffragists’ battles alive.

Indeed, Emmeline is there, all alone, hidden and isolated from the splendour of the Whitehall statues of Lords, Field Marshals, Admirals. While they elaborated war strategies, Emmeline’s supporters obstinately faced hunger and cold weather, as they demonstrated in front of the Parliament claiming a right that the Lords in Westminster refused to grant.

How many people know Emmeline Pankhurst and her fellow suffragists today? Only recently, a good movie by Sarah Gravron has made available to the general public the story of these women who fought for the right to be visible and for a good life, while facing violence, oppression, and injustice.

How would Emmeline Pankhurst be fairly commemorated, if no one brought flowers to her monument? While the Admirals and Field Marshals stand in a monumental grandeur that is self-evident because of the urban sequence of their statues – a visible statement of power – Emmeline’s statue is all alone in her garden, as a harmless middle-aged woman.

The urban disposition of statues is an eloquent demonstration of power that today appears even more disturbing, inasmuch as it seems to be stating that the “collective memory” is what it is, we have to deal with it, it concerns only the “distinguished men”. Moreover, the urban disposition of the statues displays not only a visible statement of power, but also the entire destiny of a civilization.

Virginia Woolf once wrote that “women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man twice its natural size” and then added that without those glasses men would not have produced their civilization. There would not have been Czars, Kaisers, Supermen or Children of Destiny. Women’s enlarging function has revealed “essential to all violent and heroic action. This is why Napoleon and Mussolini both insist so emphatically upon the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge.” This explains the essential dependence of men upon women, and this also explains, continues Woolf, why men become unquiet when they are criticized by a woman. “If she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking glass shrinks, his fitness for life is diminished.”

If women understand what undermines them – a mirror that twists reality – everything changes.

For more than a century – at least since Emmeline started her struggle – women have been aware of it, and, in order to let everybody else become aware of it, they have chosen various forms of protest and activism, both in a theoretical and practical way. In the Seventies, without its great feminist mass movement, the Italian society would have never accomplished the significant legal, social, and political transformations that lead to a partial – and certainly not yet accomplished – smash of the diffused paternalistic and conservative mentality.

For what concerns the gender-related issues, as it happens with race, history does not end, the past is always part of the present and therefore it can be reinterpreted as long as new subjects – who used to be considered invisible or irrelevant – start to speak and ask for recognition, providing their own reading of events.

What is happening now in the United States after George Floyd’s death is way more than a protest against police violence and even more than a critique of the inequality between white and black people. This conflict has a major symbolical meaning, as it concerns the memory of an entire nation, which still has at its core the wound of slavery. However, I will not address here neither the topic of race nor that of colonialism, which has been drastically removed, especially in Italy, from our “collective memory”. Many people more qualified than me are tackling it. My intent is to highlight something else in relation to those protests and the debate on the symbols. Let us go back to Whitehall and focus on the statues.

Such a global debate concerning the historical memory, its symbolic meaning, and the political struggle that aims to change it, in Italy has emerged with the localism that usually

characterizes our country. Indeed, a huge discussion arose about the recent soiling of the statue erected to Indro Montanelli, a personage whose fame is *very* local. Immediately after the deed, many commentators highlighted his achievements as a journalist and a historian, harshly criticizing the petition to remove the statue as a form of backlash.

Although Montanelli is certainly not Dante nor Garibaldi, he has been compared to distinguished historical figures, sometimes with ludicrous results. The purpose is always the same – to draw attention away from the reason why his memory is considered problematic.

In 1936 Montanelli volunteered as a soldier in the Italian fascist invasion of Ethiopia and while there he bought a young girl (12 years old) from her father, according to the “local customs”. She served as a “wife” during Montanelli’s stay in Ethiopia, a young sexual and domestic servant, if not a slave.

Many people remark that the fact happened in a “distant time” and, thus, that we should all “historicize” and “contextualize”. But later on in his life Montanelli recounted it multiple times, up until his old age, with indulgence, paternalism, and even nostalgia. He used to talk about it in front of journalists and large audiences, stating that Fatima (or Destà, as he named the young girl), was “a docile little animal”, “smelled like a goat” but still “worked for his purposes”. He added that he was not doing anything wrong, because “in Africa a 12-year-old girl is already a woman” – noticeably, many Italian men still use the same arguments when they hang out on the beaches of Varadero or Pukhet.

While comparing Montanelli to many historical figures whose monuments they claim to defend, those who counter the petition to remove his statue remark that history is full of injustices – so why should one bother about *madamato*. This Italian term designates the habit, for the Italian colonizers, to marry ‘temporarily’ native women in the colonies. Montanelli’s supporters often recur to this term not only to try to legitimize this practice, but also to nobilitate it, since the term *madamato* allows them to imagine these “docile animals” as if they were happy salonnières, - *madames*, just with a darker skin – living in a Venetian palace with Veronica Franco, or enjoying a fancy dinner with, let’s say, Madame de Stael.

One should see things in their historical dimension, they argue, and consider the much worst things that happened; if we are so obsessed with purity, they insist, then we should submit to the rule of politically correct and smash down all the historically significant symbols – maybe even Pasolini’s statue (have we ever had one?).

This argument is a generalization that violently weakens, even neutralizes as a lesser evil the real problem, namely, the abuse of women's bodies, which is a trans-historical and trans-cultural phenomenon. A lesser evil, just as small as Destà's body was, the twelve-years-old girl sold to the Italian man that afterwards became a famous journalist. Today, the statue of this man (which, I must say, is less impressive than the ones in Whitehall) stands there, in its self-evident grandeur; it portrays Montanelli, equipped with a typewriter, while thinking about something relevant and memorable. His magnificence contrasts with the smallness (from a physical and historical perspective) of the young girl he bought, used and abused.

What did Virginia Woolf say? The looking glass makes things look bigger; in so doing, it twists reality. However, if we break the mirror – if women refuse to be men's magnifying glass any longer – reality surfaces again and we start to have the “freedom to see things in themselves”. In other words, patriarchy twists reality, preventing us from seeing it. Once women understood this trick and started to disclose it to the world, after realising how fundamental their own role was – and keeps being – in that distortion, a new world has been revealed. It is not a question of moralism, nor does it respond to any anxiety for purity and iconoclasm; rather, it is a matter of dimensions, proportions, and mirrors finally broken.