

I

He was not tall, unobtrusive, but he held your attention with his feverish silence, his dark cheer, his alternately arrogant and oblique manner – grim, as they said. At least that was how he was seen later in life. None of that appears on the Würzburg ceilings, on the south wall of the Kaisersaal to be precise, in the wedding procession of Frederick Barbarossa, in the portrait Tiepolo left of him, when the model was twenty years old: he is there, so they say, and you can go see him, perched among a hundred princes, a hundred constables and ushers, as many slaves and merchants, porters, putti and animals, gods, merchandise, clouds, the four seasons and the four continents, and two incontestable painters, the ones who assembled the world that way in its exhaustive recension and are nevertheless of the world, Giambattista

Tiepolo himself and Giandomenico Tiepolo, his son. So he is there as well, tradition has it that he is there, and that he is the page who bears the crown of the Holy Empire on a gold-tasseled cushion; you can see his hand under the cushion, his slightly tilted face is looking down toward the ground; his whole bent torso seems to accompany the weight of the crown: tenderly, suavely he gives way under the Empire.

He is fair.

This identification is most appealing, even if it is only a fantasy: this page is a type, not a portrait. Tiepolo took him from Veronese, not from among his young assistants; it is a page, it is the page, it is no one. Almost as dubious a legend has him appearing forty years later, perched high again in the tall windows visited by the wind, among the witnesses of the *Tennis Court Oath* in the sketch done of it by David: he is that ageless, hatted, oblique figure who is showing small children the surging fervor of five hundred sixty raised arms. Before this feverish but calm man, whose face does indeed resemble his, I side more with those who utter the name of Marat. Marat, yes – because that Rousseauesque anecdote, those small children, that pedagogical farce, no, none of that is our man: although he did paint them, because they are objects of this world, he had no children and it is likely that he did not notice them, unless they, too, were his rivals in some way. And I am leaving out, regretfully, the graphite drawing by Georges Gabriel that was long taken for his portrait, where he appears in a hat again, face bulging, fearful, offended, as if caught with his hand in the bag, and which reminds me of a famous engraved self-portrait by Rembrandt; we now know that this is either the cobbler Simon, executioner and buffoon for the young Louis XVII at the Temple, or Léonard Bourdon,

a frantic Sans Culotte from year II who switched camps during Thermidor. The handsome indubitable portrait that Vincent did of him after 1760, so in his mature years, and which belonged to Égalité, erstwhile Orléans, was lost during the Terror. There is no known self-portrait. Between the Holy Empire's page and the raging oblique old man, we possess nothing that resembles him.

A late portrait of him attributed to Vivant Denon is a fake.

And that is all for appearance – for the posterity of appearance. It is little, and it is enough: a young man full of light that old age breaks and debases, a tender face crazed over time to the point that it can be confused with Simon's, one of the most vile beings of those eras rich in monsters. That is him, that extraordinary aging. And to better enjoy Time's farce, or to forget it for a moment, we like to recognize him in the young blond Würzburg boy. In that form we happily establish him in our dreams. He was handsome and insolent, loved, hated, he was one of those ambitious young men who have nothing to lose, who risk all, so enamored of the future that they seem to mirror the future of anyone who encounters them: and the men without futures detest him, and the others, no. A thousand novels were written about him, about the men amazed by him, about the women's taste for him and his taste for them; we know the story of his skirmish with the prince-bishop over a girl, the chase in the great staircase, Tiepolo's laughter above; we can almost hear that supernatural laugh of the magician; we begin to think it is all for him, the blond boy, all these haughty, easy women thrown onto the ceilings: so much so that in the fresco where the page appears, or legend has him appear, we sometimes have the impression (we want to have the impression) that ten steps in front of

him the beautiful Beatrice of Burgundy kneeling beside her master the handsome Barbarossa directly below the cross, the miter, the glove of the prince-bishop who is marrying them, that Beatrice will next turn to him, rise, and with all her fair flesh and blue brocade walk toward him and, overturning the crown, embrace him.

I have that desire, that idea.

I might have many others, on the steps of that monumental stairway deep in the Franconian woods, with its magician on the scaffolding, the magician's son who is learning the magic, and everywhere his young assistants who are running, laughing, whispering, murmuring, mixing the blue, the pink, the gold, climbing ladders, all spirits of the air. And what ideas I might have, too, with those pale wines they were drinking there. Because of course to evoke him, the boy, nothing would be sweeter to me than his first youth, in the Venice of the 1750s that dreams, dances, and dies, and above all in this aery, sylvan Franconia, peopled with fussy princelings and beautiful blonds, this Germanic land of plenty where Tiepolo in his great Mozartian cloak brought him from Venice. But time is pressing me to rejoin the other, the grim, ageless man who resembles the cobbler Simon – so I will not listen to those Germanic sirens; nor the others, the more tuneful, higher, Venetian ones, the siren Venice herself who in 1750 was like that beautiful young girl our grandmothers spoke of, whom they all had known, who was here below like an apparition of new, insatiable joy, who had danced all night, who danced on, and who in the morning, having drunk in one draft a tall glass of cold water, had fallen dead. No, no Venice, no young women, no romance; because all that, youth, fairness, wine of magic, Mozartian cloak, Giambattista Tiepolo

the father with his four continents under the cloak, all those moving, living forms mean nothing more than this, tossed out to end up in a painting that repudiates them, exalts them, bludgeons them, weeps for that devastation and inordinately delights in it, eleven times, through eleven stations of the flesh, eleven stations of wool, silk, felt, eleven forms of men; all that makes sense and is spelled out clearly only in the page of darkness, *The Eleven*.

Since you ask, Sir, let us linger a moment longer on the great staircase. Let us visit this massive heap of marble that seems to fly in the air. Let us visit like the innocents we are. Let us look up. It was all commissioned, an extravagance of Karl Philipp von Greiffenclau, midget autocrat and megalomaniac of the Germanian heartland, a man of culture and follies, and of wisdom in his fashion; because it seems that despite the extravaganzas on the ceilings, with the few coins left him, Karl Philipp was gentle with his people, his serfs – his children, as they were called. And so, the great staircase. It was Neumann who made it, Balthasar Neumann: it is of the legendary stone, which all comes from Carrara, and the idea of Neumann's or of someone else for the statues that rise from the banisters every three steps, that comes from Italy as well. The complete mythology of Italy looks down on you every three steps. It is wide as a boulevard rising toward this sky that Tiepolo paints but that he did not invent: the plan, the mental canvas for it, had been whispered into his ear by two Jesuit scholars, two Germans from Rome. The page who mounts those celestial stairs four at a time comes from France, the irresistible page who will become the painter we know. Can you imagine it, Sir, at that time of gentle living, only so because it is no longer, that is true, but how sweet to gather

our dreams there, to feed them in that Germanic nest, no, hardly Germanic, simply Venetian from beyond. They rush there at the first trumpet blast, our dreams know the way. They scurry like chicks under their mother. They are sure of finding it there, that gentle way of life – or else they believe in it indefatigably. So we want to believe that for a time it existed, and perhaps it actually did, the time when Giambattista Tiepolo of Venice, that is to say a giant, a man of Frederick Barbarossa's stature, but more peace-loving, spent three years of his life (three years of Tiepolo's life, who wouldn't want to see them rolling out of his little dice cup?), three years in the heart of Germania on a ceiling over a stairway, to show, perhaps to demonstrate, how the four continents, the four seasons, the five universal religions, the Holy Trinity that is one God, the Twelve of Olympus, the four races of men, all the women, all the merchandise, all the species, yes: the world, how the world thus hastened forthwith from the four corners of the earth to pay faithful homage to Karl Philipp von Greiffenclau, its overlord, who is painted in the very center where the four directions meet, as if at the unloading dock for universal cargo, the triumphal image offered us in full upon arriving at the top stair – Karl Philipp, overlord of the four directions, prince-bishop elector, grim countenance, thick waist, narrow shoulders, age uncertain, power even more uncertain, dabbler in Latin verse, moneybags wide open and morals a bit lax because, on the Carrara marble stairs under his effigy, he pursued with his cane a French dauber who procured girls for him. How pleasing. How right. How everything is in its place: comical of course, but no more so than this world. And Tiepolo above was laughing, swearing that God is a dog, *Dio cane*, as the Venetians swear, which in this case was a figure of

speech, of course; because what more can be asked of God than that, contracts and celestial quotes between painters of great stature and dwarf princes, the first all colors and mythology, the second all sequins – which, in the heart of Germania, may have been real coins, thalers, or guineas – but the painters, with the required reverence, paying homage to the others, the Lords: princes do not need to be great, they enjoy and do not exert themselves. *Dio cane*. Can you imagine that, Sir? The prince-bishop frolicking below with his cane, arguing, rhyming, raging, doubting, glancing at his painted image to reassure himself, the little Frenchman who will grow to the stature of Frederick Barbarossa himself one day, who has not yet, who for the moment plays tricks on the prince, all the young assistants with their pots of pinks and blues, running up and down ladders, among them Domenico Tiepolo who is twenty years old, who is learning the magic, who will earn his fortune and merit in the magic, Lorenzo Tiepolo, his little brother, who is fourteen years old, who is learning the magic, who will never master either its straight or winding paths, who will earn his fortune in boats, and last perhaps the great Mozartian cloak thrown over a statue of Neumann, covering it like a midnight blue hood – and Tiepolo above, not for an instant judging any of that as we have grown used to judging it, not ruling on the inadequacies of men to their roles, on fortune and merit, on chance and truth, whatever, but painting – can you hold all that at once before your mind's eye? The magician laboring in the service of great magic, do we dare hold that before our mind's eye? The joy, the ease, the adequacy of the body to itself, of the mind to the mind? Tiepolo painting *a fresco*, when the moment comes, in the instant when the plaster sets, without regret, straight through without

touching up, even-tempered, adequate to himself from head to toe, exalting in the irreversible instant, standing at the highest point of the scaffolding, which is moving, and perhaps even lying face up on the rough planks of what is called a flying scaffold, a light basket suspended by ropes, the maestro's little boat, pitching and swaying but sure, his nose against the ceiling, cramps in his arms, the blue dripping and running over his mouth as he endlessly makes the same lateral gesture to get rid of this blue that falls drop by drop from his chin onto his neck, can you see that? And the page who is observing and taking note of it all – can you see him? Can you see that Tiepolo has a tender spot for him – well, if Tiepolo had time for such things?

There was much to solicit tenderness.

Because he was hardly out from under his mother's skirts – if at all. He was still permeated with them, with their softness, their fabric: as if woven from the stitches of her skirts. They gave him coherence, will and certainty, a taste for women and for himself, they made him this fair, dreamy body that we see on the ceiling in the figure of the page, and which certainly is a type derived from Veronese, not a portrait, not his portrait, but which I am sure he resembled just the same. He is at the height of happiness, up there, on the unchanging ceiling: he is in his mother's skirts. He lowers his head. And of course it is not the ground he is looking at, but tumbling at his feet the three lengths of Beatrice of Burgundy's skirts, the Tiepolonian torrent, the train of broken, swollen blue, alive like blue flesh, the flesh of ice, a great fish, the passing of an angel, a magic mirror. Yes, he was made of the weave of those skirts; and when it began to unravel, everything followed, beauty, will, and confidence, the taste for women, this world: he became the other, the twin brother of Simon the cobbler.

For men unravel too: and if men were made of cloth that did not unravel, we could not tell stories, could we?

Alright, I can see that despite my impatience to jump to the end, to begin with the ending, to let this story of *The Eleven* stand solely on the indubitable existence of *The Eleven*, I can see that before coming to the point, I, too, am going to have to summarize that story so often told – since it concerns the very man of whom I speak.