

Giuseppe Conte, *L'impero e l'incanto*, Milano: Rizzoli, 1995.

Conte's text opens with a *Prologo*, in which the narrator receives a tape containing a narrative. This is a variation of the well-known technique which uses the discovery of a manuscript as a pretext for setting in motion the primary narrative. The narrator of the framed narrative is one Adamo da Genova, a Roman official from the early Christian era. A follower of the Emperor Julian, he idolizes Mercury, and is fascinated by magic; from his family, he learnt tolerance, "la diffidenza nei confronti di ogni fanatismo" (21). Fanaticism, he asserts, is most common amongst the early Christians, from whom he also differs in that they "provavano una specie di panico mortale davanti a una statua di Venere nuda", while he is simply indifferent to the pleasures of the sexual flesh.

In 363 A.D., Adamo is appointed as Prefect, and charged with managing the public libraries in Burdigala. During the voyage, he anticipates learning more about the pagan rites and the magic practised in the forests along the Adriatic coast, yet he never reaches his destination. The ship is wrecked in a storm. After various peregrinations, Adamo is rescued by the magician Bifar, who takes him to live among his people, "ai piedi delle Montagne della Luna di Ghiaccio, in mezzo al Bosco delle Comete" (86). There, he encounters the enigmatic Azénor, who does not belong to Bifar's people, and for the first time, becomes intensely fascinated by a woman, even though "non mi sembra poi così femminile come quelle che incontravo a Genova, e dalle quali in fondo fuggivo" (91).

Azénor binds him in a spell he cannot explain, and baffles him by fleeing "sempre prima che venga buio, senza mai permettermi di seguirla, senza mai dirmi dove va" (120). Who is she? The riddle is solved when Adamo finds a doe in Bifar's home, and looking into its eyes, realizes that it is Azénor: a woman during the day, she becomes a doe when night falls. Thereafter, he is able to enjoy her company as often as possible, without attempting to penetrate the mystery of her double identity, feeling like "uno che rinuncia a capire e governare quello che gli succede e si rimette a quello che gli succede; si abbandona all'evidenza, all'idea ...che tutto quello che è deve essere" (140). Having been indifferent towards the "merely" feminine all his life, Adamo is captivated by this magical creature. Their relationship is presented as innocent, almost unusual. Azénor resembles the "Figlie dell'Acqua", of

whom Bifar recounts that “loro hanno forme di donna, la notte, mentre durante il giorno prendono l’aspetto di pesci argentati” (136), and who also belongs to “un mondo alla rovescia, delle leggi sovvertite” (ibid).

The adversary of the enchanted world, of the “Bosco delle Comete” and its people is a certain Malarico, “un goto convertito al cristianesimo e passato al servizio dell’Impero” (142), who attacked the people of the forest for the first time two years before Adamo’s arrival. When Malarico attacks again, the people of the *Bosco* are forced to flee, and their world is effectively destroyed. Prevented from joining his friends, Adamo reaches the altar of Time at a magical moment: “l’alba dell’equinozio di primavera, quando sull’altare del Tempo in un istante si concentrano secoli” (189), like “Ronan il Viaggiatore”, for whom, according to Bifar, “si sono condensati secoli e secoli, il Tempo era passato intorno a lui, ma non per lui, quello che per la sua coscienza, la sua esperienza, il suo corpo era stato un solo istante, fuori di lui era stato incalcolabilmente di più” (129). Adamo is projected outside linear time, and becomes a citizen of the 20th century, is confronted by the “magic” of the modern world, “Il carro che si muove da solo” and all the rest, which he does not attempt to understand, though not because he is captivated by its fascination, as in the case of Azénor.

Of the “Bosco delle Comete” and its people, not a trace remains. This, Adamo says, is why he offered his story to the narrator: “Se tu la racconti a tua volta, qualcosa si salverà” (192). Perhaps this is what Conte’s *favola* offers the reader, apart from its purely narrative interest: it reminds him that, beyond the Empire of disillusionment, of technology, of the destruction of the environment (including deforestation), an alternative world existed and exists as possibility.

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