

THE PAINTER WHO FELL INTO SPACE

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When coming up to his fortieth birthday, Flavio de Marco began to lose his marbles. Only a few people realized this and nobody really understood why. They tended to play things down. Someone mentioned a fleeting neurosis. Someone else spoke about him being mentally bugged up due to a change in his body's metabolism as he came up to the turning point of being forty. And of course there were those who took it out on him and, misunderstanding his by-now mood changes, called him a turd or an egoist. When I heard gossip like that I was overcome and was doubled up with laughter. But I couldn't lie to myself. I was seriously worried: I knew the danger my friend was running.

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What was up with Flavio de Marco? What had led this man, saturnine by nature, to be even more distant, disconnected, somewhere else? I won't beat around the bush: Flavio had begun to see things that weren't there and be nostalgic for places where, it seemed, he had never been. This isn't something that happens from one day to the next. The damage had been done and was all due to him. After years of dozing, an inborn ailment of his imagination had been aroused and was compromising his ganglions for representation, with the effect of changing his way of seeing, hearing, and thinking. Given that in any case, it is disturbing to label such a woolly phenomenon as an ailment, due to the dictionary's distinction between what is healthy and what is not, I suggest the following formulas: a grain of infinity, a thorn of the absolute, and a particle of a star.

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Grain-, thorn-, star-ailment: one noun is worth another as long as we remember that the organic upheaval that made Flavio de Marco a badly functioning biological unity would never have come about had this lunatic person been wholly human.

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Flavio was not dismayed. He was not aware of what was happening: it was like finding you had a bump on the head the day after a binge. Since he was a child he had had a relationship with his vaguely cosmic side, and this was crucial for what Flavio was to become: an artist, in particular a painter. Over time he had learned how to manage the repercussions that this potentially destabilising relationship had on his daily life. He had created a system of life and of painting with a certain solidity. A system that, sadly for him, had begun to freeze up with frightening regularity. The painter was in line for one of those neuronal crashes from which you come out with your mind crippled and your paintbrushes broken.

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Flavio had begun to ask himself questions, with no possibility of an answer, about the planet he was born and grew up on. But it was a fact that the earth, the blue planet or opaque atom or whatever you want to call it, had begun to be too small for him. He felt in a

trap down here, and his need to get closer to the remote regions he imagined became overpowering. The thorn of the absolute pricked his synapses, and his thoughts were fogged up by a myriad of tiny crashes of the nerve-endings of his eyes. His mood was obviously affected by it. Unhappy with himself and with others, and with his affability torn to shreds, Flavio began to destroy his paintings, spoil his friendships, drink grumpily and publically, and hurl abuse at a mediocrity that was in no way golden but that governed the world. This was when a particle was transformed into a space shuttle.

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Just like that: the particle of a star was transformed into a space shuttle equipped for art's interplanetary journeys. Considering who we are talking about, this bizarre phenomenon happened in the only way it could: through that interaction on canvas of paintbrushes paint spray acids fingerprints secretions that, for our love of condensation, we call painting. It was painting that revealed to Flavio the doors of the solar system. It was the bewitchment of painting that allowed him to measure himself against that alien yet familiar time-space, to the point of distilling it in pictures where fluorescent flashes of Venus were formed, the reddish interior of Mars, and Jupiter's melted-ice-cream consistency, a cream and hazelnut ice-cream.

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In just the time it took to take off, Flavio was already at the heart of a galactic mission. His exploration of the first four planets nearest to Earth created no problems and led to some fascinating discoveries and some surprising results. From the very first, the exterminating violence of Mars - and the variegated amalgams of Jupiter, above all - seemed to be a formal climax such as to make him consider his pictures a formidable pictorial answer to Olivier Messiaen's musical colour harmonies and to the cinematic ones of Stan Brakhage. However, there was no time to enjoy these and other discoveries. Having finished his adventure on Jupiter, the major planet of our system and thought to be a failed star due to its resemblance to the sun, his mission came to a standstill. The irreparable was about to happen.

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For now we see through a glass, darkly, wrote Paul of Tarsus in the first century AD. At the beginning of the third millennium, Flavio de Marco painted the world as seen through a grey screen, the screen of a computer. In his pictures screens represent the diaphragm that flattens human vision in this age of digital reproducibility. A screen is a presence that deploys and delimits, that activates and disturbs a kind of painting that is suspended between abstraction and figuration, making it the synthetic space for a critical dialogue, not to say a short circuit between technology and landscape, communication, and vision. A screen is a visual filter and the dialectic driving force of Flavio de Marco's painting. Or, rather, this is how it had been for the past twenty years of his art.

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During the Jupiter-Saturn part of the journey, and having cleaned up the Great Red Dust Storm, the quintessential tempest of the solar system that had raged for some three hundred years, Flavio was assailed by terrible doubts about the sense of his mission and, inevitably, about the course his painting was taking. He had put screens to the test of

space and, at first, they had held up. The Mercurian Venusian Martian Jupiterian landscapes were surmounted by toolbars which stayed there to remind us that we are seeing what we see from the other side of the earth's interface. But up there, light years away from men and their hardware and software, Flavio believed that those toolbars were no longer tools. He felt, in general, that screens, fathomed pictorially, had used up, or were about to use up, their function as a container and window. He felt, in other words, that for him they were bullshit.

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There is no need for a crystal ball to foresee that in Flavio de Marco's place, your average arse-licking, calculating or market-following painter would have pretended that nothing had happened, and he would have saved what could be saved. Pragmatically, he would have completed what he had begun by developing or varying the more fruitful intuitions about marks and tones. In other words: he would have accepted the logic of series but avoided brazen repetitions. If his talent could have helped him, this cunning alter ego of Flavio would have continued with a dignified work though without jeopardising his own trademark, and everyone would have lived happily ever after.

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To rely on craft or take a gamble? This was the crossroads Flavio was at, and one of these roads was to establish a before and an after in the artist's life. To continue his mission with or without screens? To preserve them and play dumb, or else free himself from them by undermining the *forma mentis* of a research that was proverbially rigorous? And above all: was he ready for such a huge risk or not, and as punishment wouldn't he risk being sucked back into the Pandora's box that he would open by removing the screens? There is no denying it: this was a fine dilemma. Flavio was convinced he would risk his skin. And this skin was his more than twenty-years history as a painter, his credibility as an artist.

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But there was also a third option worthy of consideration, a way of escape if you like: to call off the mission and to return home in order to lick his wounds and think in peace and quiet, far from spatial and worldly influences. And if, to be precise, Flavio had a place that answered his idea of home, that place was Stella, an artificial lake that he himself had planned and constructed, an island floating who knows where between the Aegean Sea and what was supercelestial. The road back home would without a doubt be rough. If Flavio had taken it, if he had chosen to turn round and play for time, I certainly would not have blamed him and would have invoked some rhetoric about a bravery that verged on self-defence and self-harm. But anyway, this wasn't how things went. And I am ready to bet about one thing: if a shortcut had presented itself, then it flickered and disappeared with the speed of a falling star.

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Here was the day of reckoning. Flavio could have strung along gallery dealers and collectors, critics and busybodies, but not himself. To continue to move around inside a screen from then on would have meant finding refuge in a safe zone. In light of this awareness, such a move would have fractured Flavio's self-respect as an artist and, therefore, as a man, due to an intellectual honesty so intransigent as to make him at times

aggravating. Flavio did not arrive at such a drastic awareness simply by reasoning: he could not of necessity, in other words because of painting. Like any painter we respect, his mind acted as one with his hand and the rhythm of his eyes: only by painting can he understand. And yet Flavio's paintings in recent years had matured so much in terms of inspiration and temperament as to ache simply from contact with the cold prisons of computer graphics and, increasingly unruly, they had in complete autonomy undertaken a silent revolt against screens.

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Now Flavio's mind was clear. He knew that there was a loophole that could open up a horizon of possibilities not previously attempted in his art and, therefore, in his life. He knew that, in order to raise the level of the game, this implied a change of perspective. Flavio had to stop hesitating and launch himself into the unknown without a net, even at the cost of squandering his artistic recognisability, of losing his artistic identity. He was quite clear about this: he had to reorganise his mission and navigate through open space by sight, distanced from the rules he had given himself, distanced from the codes he had formulated, even distanced from the painter he had been. Distanced from the screen.

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Once the space shuttle had landed it was necessary to detach the booster rocket that had propelled it, now that it no longer had a use. The detachment of the rocket was not done at once but gradually, by steps. The name of the rocket that, on 20 July 1969, launched Apollo II was Saturn V.

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While he was returning from Saturn's magnetosphere, worn down by interior tensions but quite resolute, though he did not yet know how things would turn out, Flavio found a lysergic cyclone awaiting him. While spinning in those gaseous spirals, he had various hallucinations that, perhaps, it might be better to call visitations. Among Saturn's bilious mists, there came into view some physiognomies that the painter had no difficulty in recognising. They were his venerated colleagues Leon Battista Alberti, Tiziano Vecellio, Gustave Courbet, Claude Monet, Paul Gauguin, Kazimir Severinovič Malevič, and Giorgio Morandi. What was this honour due to? Why were they revealing themselves now, at the height of his personal crisis, just a breath away from disaster? No, they were not there to judge him, as Flavio thought at first. On the contrary, they were stretching out a hand to him and offered themselves as models: his first models in flesh and blood.

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The dying, or perhaps only sleepy, Courbet was the first to greet our astral castaway among the hallucinogenic flatulence of Saturn, and he was the first to be painted. By portraying the artist of the *Origine du monde* Flavio made his first portrait of a self-portrait. Here the brilliance of the ochre and orange that saturated Saturn's habitat as well as illuminating the dead deer immortalised by Gustave, imbued the body of the painter delicately lying on the raw canvas, placidly radiating. Flavio had transformed Courbet's body into a human torch. A torch around which buzzed a lost cursor. A desolate buzz, like a fly that vainly resists the beauty of a flame. The flame it is destined to die in.

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Flavio de Marco is a visual artist, of course, but also a writer and, some five years before this inner and outer space odyssey, he wrote an essay about *Solaris*, in which the novel by Stanislaw Lem dialogued with the film adaptation by Andrej Tarkovskij and with the loving needs of the painter. The essay reached the following conclusion: it is necessary to distance oneself from reality in order to penetrate it even more deeply. A conclusion that was all about Flavio; it was like a prophesy that was now being fulfilled. It was on the planet Uranus that X-Hour struck and the artist felt himself ready to deal with reality at first hand, without mediations, as had never been the case in the past. To tear it open if necessary. To inseminate it with the gametes of painting.

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Every artist must redo everything from scratch, said Proust the novelist in defiance of Sainte-Beuve the critic. Tradition has been reset. It was his close encounter with the ancient and modern masters that induced Flavio to start from scratch, like the men of Lascaux in the face of bison. To start from zero meant giving a pictorial form to his own vital space by finding the right tools, the humble or refined objects of everyday life, the reality that was closest to him: pots of paint, half-squeezed tubes, the upraised screen of his computer, his work table, the bottles of his supply of alcohol, a skateboard and a skull, a vase of flowers shedding their petals, the view of the glass door, fragments of paintings by him and by others. Things that, once painted, spark off a new life. Life really is ironic: Flavio had had to end up on Uranus, at the edge of the solar system, only in order to discover his own studio and, with visionary trust, to break the ice of reality.

- 1

The mysterious and legendary Chinese sage Hong Zicheng wrote that, by knowing how to reveal what is taking place under our eyes, we will have in our hands the heroic gestures of millennia. But Flavio's mission was not yet over: a planet and a subject were still missing before a genuine baptism of reality could take place. Flavio thought of Alberti oxidised, of Titian in furs, of a vulnerable Courbet, and all the other headlamps that had blinded him in his car. These had not limited themselves to being models, it was now evident. These self-portraits were, more than anything else, an example to follow. Flavio had to portray himself, and that was that. It would not have been the first time: he had already painted himself as a Martian, in a painting hung at the start of a recent exhibition in Lecce, his hometown, a show titled "Autobiografia" and one overflowing with planetary influences. Now, though, it was a question of doing something different: to paint a self-portrait as a being that was only part-human.

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On Neptune's equator, among gusts of methane and fragments of screens, Flavio grappled with the task of representing himself in relation to his own imagination. Of this pictorial parthenogenesis there remain paintings that are replicants of a man who cannot be separated from the artist. What kind of artist? The paintings themselves give us the answers with no half measures. The artist as a forty-year-old adolescent, still faithful to his youthful inspiration: Lucio Fontana. The artist as the inventor of drinks that he serves to someone gazing at a Martini cocktail, his favourite and a classic. The artist as a music-lover whose close attention can be attracted only by the libidinous organ announcing the

entry of Robert Schuman and Ornette Coleman. The artist in an Acapulco shirt and Persol shades like the arrogant centaur undertaking a kind of painting that has Braque and Matisse as its protective deities, someone ready to roar away on his Kawasaki 650. With audacity and candour, Flavio has tried to imbue these self-portraits with the quintessence of his own feeling about painting and life and, in his attempt, he has shortened the distance between his dream of painting and the wild heart of life.

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The last time we met, Flavio was still in the orbit of Neptune. Visibly under pressure, he was trying to bring to an end his final planetary efforts and, in order to distract himself, he was planning a short trip to Nereid to decompress. I don't know where the artist is at the moment or whether or not he wants to return to earth. The "after" is never easy, as we know. I foresee that, having passed the initial sense of freedom and euphoria, the void left by the lack of certain sidereal forces will swallow up Flavio like a black hole. Don't worry: this is the syndrome of artist-astronauts. What is unpredictable, above all for him, is what direction his painting will now take after the regenerative break that the artist has allowed it. One thing though is certain: Flavio has broken through the cul-de-sac in which he risked being blocked and, by shuffling the cards of this world and the others, he has opened an endless field of action and vision.

Pós-escrito brasileiro

Dear Flavio,

We can discuss the deepest arguments only by way of the dead: this was what you wrote to me in a message on 25 November last, as a comment on the bolañano pastiche I had dedicated to you. But the northeast seafont is drenched by violent gusts of tropical rain, and the preparations for carnival are in full swing, so I am answering you only now through the lively voices of some of our dear dead friends. There is no need for comments or for beating around the bush. Take these thoughts for what they are worth: torches balsam hides stones and slings, pincers and crowbars, the breasts of women and the nostrils of beheaded bulls, illuminations. They will be of use to you. You have opened a door that cannot be closed. You have been audacious, and I have witnessed this. The eye witness of a battle with no holds barred. For three days I saw you rage and exhaust yourself, I saw you fight with paints and trust in gestures, like a punch-drunk boxer who closes his eyes and lets rip a hook, in the hope that it might be the final punch while knowing that it is not. I have seen you aim high and get to work with your palette-knife, to overload surfaces and torture figures, lose yourself and find yourself and lose yourself again among your brushstrokes. For three nights I didn't sleep, encircled as I was by your pictures filling the walls, piled on the floor: completed pictures and those that were abandoned, pictures suspended between life and death. My dreams were deflected and steered by your current visions and by the exaltation of fresh paint. When I woke up I watched you start the battle again like a sleepwalker, like someone wounded in a war, like a novice, like a blind beggar, like a mouse that spits blood as it tries to extract itself from the trap that bites into it, like someone possessed. You unknotted your tie and bound it round your forehead, ready for the crash, for the kamikaze of painting. I saw you damned. I saw you blessed: when the painting was a success, when the image was born, you were Neil Armstrong on the moon and the transfigured Christ too. You were audacious, but you will have to pay the price. You have gone beyond the point of no return and have arrived at a reality that is nothing other than a slender screen that veils the intimate nature of things. Reality is a hymen to

be torn in order to find the G-spot, or a sunspot, or the vase of Venus or whatever you like in your search for truth as you wander among the stars. You will pay for your audacity with chilliness and nightmares. You will be the object of the eyes of some bastard who looks at you menacingly: they are your own eyes. The night is harrowing. The artist is flayed. May your hand always have the urgency of those about to die.

I

“Neither tragic actor nor whore.” (Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations*, 180 AD).

II

“The city was in a festive mood. But I was amazed when I went into the Greek’s studio and saw the windows shut so tightly that you could hardly distinguish the objects or the Greek himself, sitting in an easy chair and neither working nor sleeping. He refused to come outside with me because the daylight disturbed his inner light.” (the miniaturist painter Giulio Clovio in a letter, with reference to the Roma period of DomínikosTheotokópoulos, known as El Greco, November 1570).

III

“One halted step is a separation of ten thousand mountains.” (Hong Zicheng, *Discourses on Vegetable Roots*, circa 1610).

IV

“Genuinely great men are perhaps, and I believe this without a doubt, those who conserved, at the age when intelligence has all its powers, a part of that violence of impressions that is the characteristic of youth.” (Eugène Delacroix, *Diary*, 9 October 1849).

V

“... it is enough for me to call on genuine artists as well as those women who received at birth a spark of the sacred flame with which they would like to illuminate themselves in all their being.” (Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, 1863).

VI

“Life is storm – let storm!” (Herman Melville, *John Marr*, 1866).

VII

“Creative acts come, not from a knowledge of their laws, but from an obscure and incomprehensible power, one that we do not strengthen by illuminating it.” (Marcel Proust, *Chardin and Rembrandt*, 1895).

VIII

“...I saw first through a screen, that is through the art of the past, and then slowly I began to see without this screen, and the known has now become the unknown, the absolute unknown.” (Alberto Giacometti in an interview with Pierre Schneider, 1961).

IX

“I dedicate my person to the storm of Beethoven. To the neutral colour-vibrations of Bach. To Chopin who drenches my bones.” (Clarice Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, 1977).

X

“... I hope he continues with his controlled gamble, of which he has given a convincing proof that, as Wittgenstein has written, ‘one cannot search for a new system from the point of view of the old one’. It might well be, and this is my hope, that his interpretation of painting leads him to wed an analytical knowledge of things to a deep understanding of emotions.” (Giovanni Maria Accame, *Flavio de Marco*, 1999).

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