

GIAN MARCO VISCONTI

Tales of the grey man

FOREWORD

THE AGGRAVATING CIRCUMSTANCES OF COLOUR

Do you remember Murphy, the main character in Samuel Beckett's novel of the same name? He is a man who loves himself with an 'intellectual love', in fact he represents a case of exemplary solipsism. His inner self is torn between body and spirit and his escape from the world lies in the precise spot in which the body, his body, forces him to relate to the perception of external things. To this 'prototype of a person undergoing a crisis' the problem of classifying the field of vision becomes an annihilating experience: not just sight but all the senses gradually deteriorate, the outside world is a larva and the self undergoes a radical metamorphosis that dissolves ideas and will. With a choice between light and darkness, passing through the intermediate degree of half-light, Murphy remains hidden in the dark. The shade of half-light is still worrying because it forces him to choose, and therefore to live. And life is the big problem, the heart of a crisis that is not merely personal. To the *grey man* in these short stories by Gian Marco Visconti, the place of anonymity lies exactly in that intermediary degree where extremes and all the shades they would provide are not allowed. But this is not to be the only difference, although Beckett's influence plays its part, since this is a book with a precise concept of poetics. Not only: all those figures of 'absolute middleness' that belong to the so-called 'crisis literature' of the nineteenth and twentieth century lie at the root of this idea. Famous if not particularly fashionable predecessors of the *grey man* are certain classic figures in the writings of the Russians, Viennese and French – from Chekhov to Sologub, Musil to Broch, or Camus. This sort of character has been absent on the literary scene for at least fifty years, and it has never been particularly popular in Italian narrative. He is a literary character reduced even in style by

the various minimalisms that have in the meantime set a trend. The basic essence and sociological reasons that characterise him have remained the same, with different aggravating circumstances: the increasing and prevailing predominance of technology and global means, social anonymity, destructuring of the mind, morality crises and the inability to live.

But while between Raymond Carver, let's say, and Beckett there is a clear difference of expression in the decision whether to represent the contemporary world or not, the *grey man*, who already as a historical forerunner implied a harsh criticism of bourgeois society, has taken a great step forward since his origins. Considering his birth to be in the decadent period, we now find his ways more neutral, his voice more monotonous, his emotional drive less reasonable, and his reasoning more stylised. A good century of technical detail and officious linguistic bureaucracy has not passed in vain. Our anonymous character pays for that kind of mass chat where the vivisection of moods and behaviour take place with the muffled and relentless precision of medical records, or the banality of clichés, especially in the media. Instead the essence of the character has always been unequivocally tragic. The *man in grey* is the son of Gregor Samsa, Pavlov, Oblomov, of Gestalt, Murphy and Chicikov. He represents the death certificate, if not quite the autopsy, the legal deed of a full metamorphoses of Kafka's emblematic insect.

It is true that the character in these stories is a sole figure, and he belongs in kind and structure to the category of immortals, like Perelà and other fable-like inhabitants who live outside time. You only have to project him onto the background of ordinary language to get an idea of the level of objectivity to which everything that once represented the boundless domain of the human is subjected. It is here that Gian Marco Visconti's writing goes beyond the imitative obsession for description to suggest what lies behind every stratagem and every illness. Through impressions and references the book brings to light what the greyness had eclipsed. In order to read, we have to

break a veil of steam and reconstruct absent desires, nostalgias, fears, hopes, the awakening of feelings, gift of ourselves and of meaning, vivacity and chromatism in depicting the world. Precisely what has in the meantime become hopelessly twisted, what no exterminating angel and no transcendence can redeem, and what no writing can alone hope to recreate. Objectivism, then, as loss and alienation. A sole *non-colour* dominates the book; grey, rather than the man who is its prop, is the real '*dramatis persona*'. In the carefully measured episodes of these tales grey gauges each thing, overturning the proud humanistic philosophical tradition. Here it is not one of the colours, but an emptiness, a dominant mood in the absence of any other colour. No expressions name other shades, as if the dictionary were suddenly without words to describe the colours of the rainbow.

What is more, in the classification of chrominance, the indicator of the brilliancy of colours, yellow, as we know, comes first – '*metal de gloire*' as Apollinaire would have said – while grey is a residual and never primary element. Clearly, here, the situation tends to abolish rather than overturn reality. Removing the shadows, as occurs in the inanimate landscape of this book, means eradicating at the source the light that generates it. Here a new interpretation starts, one of a world without nuances or polyphonic zones – despite, or thanks, to the absence of any source of energy. It is the abstractness of a landscape that has piled up mountains of chromatic waste, rolling the pop '*imagérie*' of the industrial universe in some isolated and obviously grey dump. Not by chance did Don DeLillo in 'Underworld' describe with a certain amount of sadism the gesture of those artists who repaint a car cemetery. In other words, in the synchrony of our time, the backdrops of *the grey man* by Gian Marco Visconti are increasingly artificial and hyper-realistic landscapes from which he shrinks after he is annihilated by them. His greyness is a clear metaphor and the umpteenth denouncement of the world of technology, while the post-apocalyptic dimension implied is, instead, new. New is this greyness, which at its most intense becomes lost in

reverie, private, and by induction reties the broken thread of humanity it implies and from which it comes. The event, within the limits of the term, is itself residual. It supposes the existence of a bygone age of fables, a time when life was tinged with enigmas, imagination, reminiscence and adventure, and when it mirrored and was reciprocally meaningful to man, who was its lord. Eight stories, each of which develop only minimally, where a beginning enlivened by a few small adventurous moves is followed by an increasingly mineral sedimentation of thought, and a progressive stillness.

The book should be read with the seriousness with which we listen to childhood fables, the only stories that are always true and always enhanced by repetition, despite the fear this sometimes arouses. There is catharsis, the experts say, in that frisson of fear the fairy tale awakens. *The grey man* is no exception, his tragic condition is caused by a trauma that originates from ancestral, historic profundity. Real terror is never present in current language, however it is structured. There's little to joke about these days and Gian Marco Visconti is not a writer to play with the comic. His is another area, where the story has deeply ploughed our conscience and what lies beneath it. Nowadays we laugh at everything apart from the real taboos, the unmentionable.

Just a century ago and completely naturally we could have asked ourselves, paraphrasing Palazzeschi's 'Code of Perelà': 'A grey man round here? Away with him'! – and muse brightly over the vices and incongruities of our time. No, today even the poetics of the avant-garde should be taken seriously and translated. There the oxymoron could proliferate freely in the nonsense, and the imagery of 'a void full of things', for example, today suddenly becomes a mirror of the real world. Nonsense writing, a tradition that until the end of the Sixties was part of the new, now becomes legible as an incongruous logic that cannot be taken for granted.

The moral of the tale of the *grey man*, if there is one, cannot be summarised. It needs to be experienced in the reading, with the intrepid souls of those who do not fear the principle of reality. It is an adult's tale, it is true, but it is also

the shortest way to rest the case whereby the child that is not dormant within us can conclude, against the flattery of today's courtiers, that even the king is grey, and that the irreparable has no winners. It remains true that the events in this book infringe on the outer limits of the fairy tale, because there is no awakening, there is no exit from the nightmare that can take us back to the comfort of consciousness. We cannot put this book down with the sigh of relief of those who think it was only a dream. Here we are not talking of one of those wild eccentrics who live in the land where the author was born and lived. To be honest, even *the grey man* could live in the sea of stolen behaviour and consciousness that inhabit the absurd, although not in harmony, along with the 'nutcases' of Cavazzoni and Fellini. We must not forget that even Murphy, once he has abandoned his favourite rocking chair, ends up as a nurse in a 'lunatic asylum'.

And we know that lunatics and madmen have always belonged to the realm of the sacred. The only, decisive, difference between them and *the grey man* is that he is not mad at all.

(CARLO ALBERTO SITTA, January 2004)

To my father

To my mother

*to Mariangela and Elisa
shores of light*

The grey man

Prologue

The grey man had existed and recalled himself for a long time, from time immemorial. He was perhaps one of the last examples of a breed of man whose existence was persistently declared.

Hard to see, solitary and sensitive, one of the various and uncommon qualities that distinguished him was a profound love for all that was grey. He knew that this colour might appear sad and uncertain but he had always chosen it as a meeting place between extremes, as a last chance for an infinite number of shades and glances.

Black and white, prisoners of their intensity, were forced always to be the same, while the shades of grey that linked them together offered unlimited degrees of tone.

This is why with grey he was able to give a name to everything in the visible that was invisible, and it was the only colour he felt could be worn by echoes, mirages and likenesses, or that could restore a voice to what no longer had a voice...

This man, whose visibility and texture were little more than that of steam lived with few others like him in the last old quarter that had survived within a vast and powerful city, too distant from him and his world to be desirable.

A metropolis that was the repository of a modern and asphyxiating knowledge that had erased doubts and uncertainties and any remaining shady areas for ever.