



Mesmerized by Truth

By Luis Muñoz Oliveira

They say that Publius Valerius Maximus was a lousy writer—that he was not very bright and paid little attention to the sources he cited. But his book, *Memorable Deeds and Sayings*, a compilation of short stories depicting the lives of virtuous inhabitants of the Roman Empire at around the same time the Christian tradition assigns to the arrival of the Messiah, became a reference book for historians and artists seeking documentation of Roman notions of virtue.

I mention this book because it includes a story that I would like to start this essay with. It is the story of Pero, a girl who would visit her elderly father in jail every day to feed him. Cimon, her father, had gone without food for days because the Romans would stop feeding prisoners condemned to death as the day of their execution drew near. But a dutiful child bringing meals to her father's cell was not what made the story memorable. The memorable part is that Pero, day after day, suckled her father from her own breast. One day, a guard caught her in the act. The news spread. The young woman's act caused so great a commotion that Cimon's judges acquitted and released him.

These acts are examples of the "Roman charity" that was portrayed by countless sculptors, writers and painters, including Rubens, who painted at least two pictures in which Pero appears breastfeeding Cimon. We can also mention Caravaggio, who repeats the story in *The Seven Works of Mercy*. We can even cite writer John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, where, at the end of the novel, Rose of Sharon, who eventually dies giving birth to a child, breastfeeds a man so ill he was unable to eat solids.

Let us consider the two paintings by Rubens. The first, painted in 1612, is called *Roman Charity*, and the second, painted in 1630, is *Cimon and Pero*. One is on display at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg and the other is at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

The two works are markedly different—eighteen years are a long time in the life of an artist. The main differences have to do with the expressions and gestures of the characters and, more specifically, the feelings they evoke. Perhaps the years make us more adept at this sort of thing. In the older painting, Pero embraces her father as if he were a child and holds her breast between two fingers of her right hand, as mothers do when they breastfeed. Cimon, in turn, appears limp, dispirited, weak, defeated. The expression on the face of his daughter is soft and devoted, almost tender. It is a peaceful scene, intimate and unhurried. But in the second painting, aside from the fact that she is embracing her father with the opposite arm,

Pero's head is turned away and she is staring into space almost excitedly. Cimon, instead of being resigned, is actively feeding, hungry, spirited, vehement. It is a scene of avidity where it seems that desires are being satisfied. Outside, to complete the already disconcerting scene, the guards watch spellbound like voyeurs witnessing a sexual act. So we find ourselves viewing a representation that is both erotic and incestuous. Still, I believe that it portrays the notion of Roman charity better than the first painting. Why? Because in the second work Rubens stresses that the act of charity is beyond incest, voyeurism or moral taboos. Thus, he exalts a certain moral disposition that, more than a transgression, is eminently human. This is important if we understand, as Aristotle said, that virtue is a way of acting, not a way of being. Our actions make us human.

Throughout his life, Aristotle gave several definitions of virtue. However, Book VIII of *Politics* is his clearest treatise on the moral disposition I reference here and is intimately connected with art: "Virtue consists in enjoying, loving and hating in a proper way. It is evident that nothing is so worthy of being learned and nothing should be inculcated as much as making correct judgments and enjoying a good moral disposition and honorable actions." And what about the arts? For Aristotle, music and painting—we would add literature, film and many others—can represent the ability to "enjoy, love and hate in the proper way." And this is why they are essential in building a more human morality. But I'm not saying that we should pass judgments—good people, the goodness of the state of nature, bad bourgeoisie—and from there indoctrinate. The idea is to express ethical passions of joy and disgust. Because the right way to act cannot be solely to act according to the dictates of the imperatives of reason; it is to feel in such a way that these passions dispose us to behave in one way or another.

With that in mind, I want to talk about *Hipnostasis*, a video installation by Raymond Pettibon and Yoshua Okón that presents the image of a community of old hippies who live on Venice Beach. The installation has six screens, each of which shows the torso of one of the old men. Occasionally we're offered a pan shot that portrays them all together, sitting or leaning on the rocks of the sea, like sea lions or bearded Tritons. Some even resemble Rubens' portrait of Cimon, sentenced to death and waiting for a daughter to nurse them, not out of hunger—some of them are eating in the video—but out of charity.

At first glance, their tranquility suggests a hopeless melancholy, as if the present no longer offers them anything, as if all past life, or at least their own, was better. The solitude in which they are immersed also brings to mind certain gestures of madness. They seem to be drifters who are tired of wandering, ready to jump into the abyss, there within the confines of the civilized world, to disappear once and for all and end their marginal and misunderstood existence. Still, as we watch them eat, we do not get the sense that they are eating their last meal. They chew quietly, immersed in silence. There is no conversation. They gaze into the distance as if they were witnessing a revelation, hypnotized in the presence of truth.

They are, in fact, closer to a cynical disposition towards happiness than to madness or melancholy. And of course, when I say "cynical," I am referring to the old school of philosophy of which Diogenes ("the Dog") was a great master.

Diogenes, as noted by A.A. Long in his essay on the Socratic influences of the Cynics, believed that happiness was to live according to nature, which means, first, to limit the desires to those that human nature prescribes (food and drink for sustenance, companionship and sex); and, based on this containment of the desires, to use reason to counter all irrational conventions (almost all the trappings of civilization) that arouse false desires.

Regarding Rubens' second *Cimon and Pero* painting, I said that despite its incestuous and erotic mood, it was also a better representation of charity precisely because Pero has to overcome all of these taboos to feed her father and keep him alive, despite the fact that he is so close to being executed. Her act of charity is so great that she is unable to see the benefits it will bring her in the future.

Something similar occurs in the case of *Hipnostasis*. Although it seems to portray a bunch of lunatics who expect nothing of life, in the end we realize that, on the contrary, they are there on the rocks because they are transfixed by the truth.

In that sense, *Hipnostasis* takes us a step further. It shows us that to be happy, humans must abandon everything, and such a determination inspires awe in us. Blinded by the world, we believe what we believe without limits, and that makes us human: the willingness to defend a world by the sea, like Triton, like a myth resting on the beach.

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