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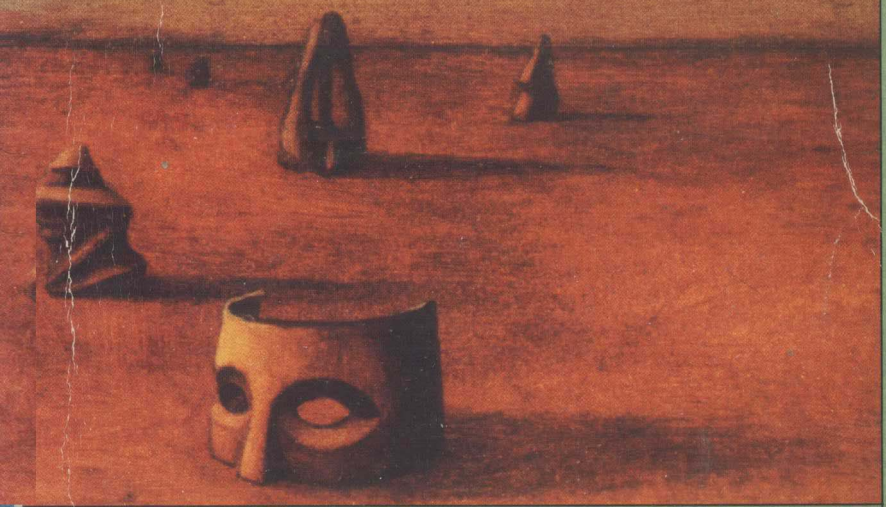
WORDS IN COMMOTION AND OTHER STORIES



TOMMASO LANDOLFI

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY ITALO CALVINO

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY KATHRINE JASON

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For my mother and father

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K.J.

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INTRODUCTION
PRECISION AND CHANCE

The idea behind this collection is to offer the reading public a new encounter with Landolfi. He had that great gift for capturing the reader's attention and inspiring his awe (he inherited a taste for the "shocking" story from the masters of "black romanticism"; but it was his own acumen, panache and incomparable wealth of verbal resources that made for his highly affective writing). Yet his reputation for being an impractical and peculiar character gave credence to the conviction—which still holds true today—that his writing is only for "a select few." This selection offers an opportunity to reconsider his work—inasmuch as "an introduction" to Landolfi can represent the various aspects of this extraordinarily idiosyncratic author.

In a work like Tommaso Landolfi's, the first rule of the game established between reader and writer is that sooner or later a surprise will come: and that surprise will never be pleasant or soothing, but will have the effect of a fingernail scraping glass, or of a hair-raising, irritating caress, or an association of ideas that one would wish to expel from his mind as quickly as possible. It is no surprise that Landolfi's closest literary forebears, Barbey d'Aurevilly and Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, title their story collections *The Diabolical Women* and *Cruel Stories.*

But Landolfi's game is even more complex. Starting with a

simple but nearly always wicked, obsessive or lurid idea, an elaborate story takes shape, related by a voice that usually appears to be an ironic counterpoint of another voice (just as a great actor has to alter his own diction ever so slightly to define a character); or it may pretend to be, say, a parody of another piece of writing (not by any particular writer but by an imaginary author whom everyone has the illusion of having once read) which, in fact, is ultimately immediate, spontaneous and faithful only to itself. In the verbal spectacle that unfolds, theatrical effects are precisely paced, but they can also turn into the most fickle fancies imaginable.

This is the kind of story Landolfi writes when he wants to employ his inventive versatility and his fixed ideas to construct some precise mechanism, or to set up a calculated strategy. But on other occasions, many other occasions, another mood prompts Landolfi to strip the act of writing of any pretense of constructing a complete, easily accessible and enduring story and instead he substitutes a careless gesture, a shrug or grimace, like someone who knows that the creative process is a waste, insubstantial and meaningless.

The extent to which Landolfi adopts this attitude is proved by this statement (in *Bière de pécheur*):[1] "Could I ever really write at random and without design, thus glimpsing the chaos, the disorder in my own depths?"

"At random": the same phrase becomes an existential program in the story "Mano rubato": "Living at Random" is then the title story (in *A caso* [1975]). But this insistence, which could be seen as some kind of aspiration toward automatic writing in literature and as an apology for the "gratuitous act" in life (thus validating the surrealist tag others inevitably labeled him with), takes on another dimension in the above-mentioned story. Here he shows the impossibility not only of a random murder but also of a

[1]The titles of books or stories that are available only in Italian editions will not be translated in this introduction unless translation is needed to provide clarification.

narrative developed outside of some logical framework.

Actually, chance was a god to which Landolfi showed feverish devotion even though he was constantly led to doubt its existence and power. If an absolute determinism dominates the world, chance is rendered impossible and we are condemned to our fates, without any hope of escape. This hypothesis of the nonexistence of chance is explored in the June 24, 1958, entry in his diary *Rien va:*

"It's difficult to believe that a chance happening (which is always and nevertheless an event) could be casual and it is certainly difficult to take chance seriously. Something that happens is not necessarily casual—we should be able to confirm this beyond a shadow of a doubt, although it is not so easy and it may be impossible to demonstrate such a fact. But somebody invented chance and everyone believes in and accepts it: even those who attempt to refute it as an ordering or disordering principle of the universe are thus implicitly admitting to its existence every minute of the day."

And the passage concludes thus: "The truth is that the spirit must lie in chains, regardless of who forged them."

That this problematical relationship with chance was so essential for him should come as no surprise, considering his great passion for gambling. After observing him on various occasions at the roulette table (he spent a good part of his last years at San Remo, and I knew that I had to go to the casino to see him), I had the impression that he was not a good player for the very reason that he played "at random" without any strategy or design (or at least it seemed so to me), instead of following one of those forced patterns or systems with which shrewd gamblers attempt to capture and trap the shapeless fluidity of chance.

It is likely that I was the one who understood nothing. What could I know of the imperatives and illuminations which move a gambler by vocation (or damnation?). I, whose only rule would be minimal risk were I to gamble. Perhaps in his passionate relationship with chance, which was both a courtship and challenge, he alternated between strategies too sophisticated to ever

be revealed to anybody else and a "rapture" of dissipation in a maelstrom where all losses lead back to the loss of oneself, which is the only possible victory. Perhaps chance was the only way for him to test nonchance. And since nonchance par excellence is the most absolute thing, in other words, death itself, chance as well as nonchance are two names for death, the one fixed meaning in life.

In fact, when I saw him manipulating the chips on the green felt (and reflected on the words "at random," which kept going through my head like a motto), I came up with a comparison between Landolfi the player and Landolfi the writer. For, in both, there was the use of a rigorously determined form or formula which might stave off chaos and contain it, on one hand; and on the other hand, a gesture of supreme nonchalance which scorns any work or any value because the only basis for any action or discussion lies in the equation chance-chaos-nothingness-death; and the only possible stance toward that is ironic and desperate contemplation.

But another possible link between gambling and literature—what part need and what part the unknown play in both—has already been explored by Landolfi himself. In the story "La dea cieca e veggente," a poet drawing upon words at random ends up writing *The Infinite* and wonders (like that Borges character who considers himself author of Don Quixote) if this is really his own work or Leopardi's. Seeing that he has been lucky in stumbling upon highly improbable combinations, the poet decides to test his gifts in a game of roulette; the results are disastrous and he loses everything. The game of chance refuses the order which poetry can attain, being an impersonal system or preserving—thanks to its internal mechanisms or probable combinations—the secret oneness of the individual.

Governed as they are by necessity and chance, man's actions always disappoint his demand that they influence events to suit his will. For this reason, Landolfi's relationship to literature, as to existence itself, is always twofold: It is the gesture of someone

who commits himself wholly to what he does, and at the same time throws it all away. This also explains the interior split between his dedication to formal precision and the indifferent detachment with which he abandoned his completed work to its own fate. After throwing himself into his work and enjoying it, he lost interest in the completed book to such an extent that he didn't even bother to correct the proofs. He once told friends about opening a recently published book and discovering an error that rendered an entire dialogue incomprehensible; this would have made me bang my head against the wall, but he laughed as though it were of no concern to him.[2]

In making a selection of Landolfi's works and sifting through the collections published over the course of forty years—some ten volumes containing pieces of varying character and value—one naturally tends to favor the real stories (that is, the more finished compositions, the attempts at virtuosity inspired by a desire for perfection) over those pages which arose from passing moods and whims, especially when his intention was to provoke or disillusion. But one soon realizes that a truly representative selection must take both moods into account, for if the pieces more lacking in form were discarded, one would rightly have to discard the excessively "well-done" and refined pieces as well. That is why I have not included some of Landolfi's most critically praised stories like "La muta" [The Mute Girl];[3] likewise, none of the three works in his volume *Tre racconti,* which I would categorize as narratives of more ample breadth (long stories or novellas, among which my favorite is *Racconto d'autunno*), can be included insofar as one must take them or leave them as books in themselves.

The "real Landolfi" whom I hope this volume will represent is one who prefers to leave something unresolved in the work, a

[2]In the misprint that Calvino refers to here "Francesismo!" was changed to "Franceschino!," thereby changing the word "Gallicism" into the name "Frankie."

[3]"The Mute Girl" appears in a translation by Raymond Rosenthal in *Cancerqueen and Other Stories* (The Dial Press, 1971).

margin of shadow and risk: the Landolfi who squanders the stakes that he puts on the table and then swiftly withdraws them with the horrified gesture of a gambler.

A gambler—nearly always in first person and sometimes in the third—is the most frequent character in his stories and meditations, the backdrops most often cities that house casinos; above all, the city which for me was associated with my family's roots and with all my memories of youth and childhood, and which for him was associated not only with the devouring passion of his whole life but also with the role of husband and father which he took on late in life. Very different memories link us to the same streets, to the same seasonal colors and landscapes. For example, the story of his first trip to San Remo as a young man (although I can't find this among his writings, some of the stories he told aloud are etched in my mind in the shape and style of the printed page) concerns his arrival in a train; leaving his suitcase hurriedly at the hotel, he ran to the casino where the hours of the afternoon, evening and night were spent breathlessly at roulette or chemin de fer until the croupiers shut down—I think it was five in the morning—and the last tireless players, still fantasizing a comeback, were forced to quit. Then he returned to his hotel, which was right across from the casino ("L'Europa e Pace," I think); sleepless, he gazed out into the dawn light and across to the windows of the room he'd just left. The windows had been opened to air out the smoke-filled rooms and he saw the cleaning women bustling about vacuuming and polishing the tables; he prodded them on mentally so that he could resume his position as soon as possible. And counting the hours that would separate him from the next game, he didn't take his eyes off the place.

In real life, I never knew the alternate mask that Landolfi's "I" narrator wears in the stories (more frequently in the earlier than in the later work, regardless of the fact that the ancestral home in Pico amid the olive groves of Ciociaria remained a stable point in his life until the very end): the character of the noble peasant who grows old as a bachelor and "son" in an environment

that intensifies all his lunatic obsessions. But here we enter an area where grotesque transformation predominates over autobiography and is expressed with a cruel and painful scowl if not with sadism and impotence. (This mask in all its particulars has already taken shape in that first story which established him, "Maria Giuseppa," dated 1929; and then the "Vera storia di Maria Giuseppa" [The Real Story of Maria Giuseppa] or confession twenty-five years later, which was an act of reparation and mercy upon the real Maria Giuseppa's "coeur simple.")

And there's yet another Landolfi, the hardworking and competent literary scholar and the gracious and precise literary translator, scribe of thousands of pages whose only signature is a characteristic grace (as opposed to the Landolfi in pursuit of the most meager rewards, which, according to him, dominated his every thought and intention). This is a character we rarely meet in the stories (though sometimes we come across him in the travel stories, suggesting that movement was the real necessity in his sedentary existence), but he lives on in his friends' memories, mostly friends from his decisive prewar period in Florence.

Landolfi's relationship to himself, if one traces it throughout his writing, reveals an egotism of the most complex and contradictory nature. One moves from the narrative theater where he rages against himself and the world, to a direct and open autobiographical vein where moderation and control reveal the suffering. And tracing this same continuum of psychological constancy, we begin with his memories of boarding school at Prato and end with one of the last sketches published in the *Corriere della Sera*, "Porcellina di terra," which has never before appeared in book form.

At this point I will not delve into the question of how much of his internal torment was real and how much of it was theatrical: the simple fact that he wanted to entertain his readers or himself by parading his suffering "I" redeems his stance, whether it is egocentric or all an impersonal game. Likewise, it would be pointless to establish whether the obsessions and phantoms of his

sexual imagination are purely fictional or correspond to some pulse in his unconscious: in his exhibitionism he seems to leave himself open to psychological interpretation (and thus, using the story "A Woman's Breast" as a point of departure, [the critic Elio] Sanguinetti traces a constant sexual phobia, or more precisely a fear of the female sex, throughout his work; at the same time, the absence of interior censure weakens such an interpretation since it would suggest that the real unconscious lies elsewhere).

Any exploration of what Landolfi really *says* has yet to be made. Because while he claims to have "nothing to say," he always follows the thread of the discussion at hand. Eventually his philosophy will be unraveled from the knot of questions without answers, contradictions, proclamations and provocations surrounding him. If our intention here is simply to pass on the pleasure of reading Landolfi superficially, that is because it is the first necessary step. And it is also only superficially that we are pointing out his taste for fake "treatises," fake "conferences" and fake "moral works," though not without noting that at some point we might establish that they were "fake" only to a certain degree; that there is a thread linking Leopardi and Landolfi, a similarity between the two rural villages where they lived and the two paternal dwellings, between their youths spent laboring over paper, and their invectives against human destinies. (As for the dialogues, which Landolfi writes frequently, especially recently, I must say that I like them the least of all his writing. If I can trust my own superficial reading, they seem written in a much less successful vein. In any case, any exploration must begin from the diaries *Rien va* and *Des mois*, which I didn't feel I could include in the selection since, once again, they are complete in themselves.)

It is too easy to say that what Landolfi writes is always a mask of emptiness, of nothingness, of death. One cannot forget that this mask is nevertheless a whole concrete world, full of meanings. A world made up of words, naturally. But of words which are significant precisely for their richness, precision and coherence.

Take an emblematic text like "La passeggiata."[4] The sentences are constructed from incomprehensible nouns and verbs, much like Lewis Carroll's experimental "Jabberwocky," in which words from an invented lexicon have make-believe meanings. If it were the same thing, there would be no new amusement or gratification. However, if the reader only takes the trouble to consult a good old Italian-language dictionary (Landolfi used the Zingarelli), he would find all the words there. "La passeggiata" is a text with complete meaning; the author simply set up a rule to use as many obsolete words as possible. (He himself couldn't resist the temptation to reveal this secret in a later volume, thus poking fun at those who had not caught on.) So Landolfi the "mystifier" becomes the "demystifier" par excellence: he gives meanings back to words which have lost them (and instead of leaving the common reader in the wrong, he takes the trouble to patiently explain what he has done).

But Landolfi's inquiry into language had begun long before this. The title story in his first book (*Dialogo dei massimi sistemi*, 1937) [Dialogue of the Greater Systems] contains a discussion of the aesthetic value of poetry written in an invented language that only the author (and maybe not even he) can understand. I don't think it is mere hyperbolic irony that the story and volume were decorated with such an illustrious title:[5] It is as though Landolfi wanted to point out that beyond the text's paradoxical humor (and beyond the satire, which clearly arises from the then-predominant philosophy of Croce), the problem that concerns him is one of language as a collective convention and historical inheritance, and of the individual and mutable word. And this is the first document which reflects a concern—a concern no less serious

[4]Landolfi refers, if somewhat satirically, to his story "La passeggiata" and the stir it created among critics in "Personaphilologicaldramatic Conference with Implications," included here.

[5]"Dialogue of the Greater Systems," the "illustrious title" that Calvino refers to, is borrowed from Galileo's principal treatise *Dialogue of the Two Chief Systems of the World.*

or rigorous for its acrobatic tone—which will appear in all of Landolfi's work right up to "Parole in agitazione" [Words in Commotion], that crystalline little fable from his last book (*Unpaniere di chiocciole*, 1968) abut the "signifier" and the "signified."

I can't account for the sources of his knowledge; certainly, one couldn't say that linguistics (much less DeSaussure's structuralism) were the order of the day in European literary culture when he was educated. And I would doubt that he gave it serious thought even later when linguistics became a "pilot discipline." And yet, everything he writes about it seems to have such scientific "exactitude" (in terminology and concept) that it could be used as a text in the most up-to-date university seminars.

From Landolfi's stories and diaries, I think one can extrapolate a linguistic theorization whose basic assumptions are innate mental structures (see his reflections on his child's first attempts at speaking in *Des mois*), the arbitrariness of linguistic symbols, and most importantly, the nonarbitrariness of language as a system, a historical creation and cultural stratification (Ibid., pp. 9–10, from which I have taken the following quotation):

"The delightful attempts of those who seek new languages and are necessarily forced back into some ancient system of relationships which cannot be avoided! Ancient, and I would even say innate. I challenge anyone to invent a truly new game (of substance not style), or else a new relationship with reality (or unreality): all the possible results seem to fall inevitably into one set category or another, and there are a finite number of them, *ab aeterno*."

The poet's individual and unpredictable work is only possible because he has at his disposal a language which has rules with established uses, a language which functions independently of him. Landolfi's reasoning always revolves around this point (in conversations as well). I remember the first time I talked to him twenty-five years ago, he somehow ended up discussing language and dialects, and he refuted my argument that we could have a

literary Italian with its roots outside of the Tuscan dialect.

In any case, it isn't the avant-garde's innovative thrust which prompts Landolfi's acrobatics. On the contrary, he is a conservative writer in that particular (and even metaphysical) sense that the gambler cannot but be conservative because the immutability of the rules guarantees that chance will not be abolished with every throw of the dice.

His most faithful critic and companion (up through the Florentine years), Carlo Bo, has written many times that Landolfi was the first writer since D'Annunzio who could do whatever he wanted with the pen. At first the comparison between the two names astonished me: even if both came out of the mold of the nineteenth-century dandy (like Huysmans' des Esseintes), D'Annunzio had gone in the direction of the erotic-euphoric, while Landolfi tended toward self-irony and depression. Indeed, their personalities, their literary presences, their relationships to the world were diametrically opposed. But reconsidering it, I realized the real common element between them was something else. It could be said of each of them (and of them only) that they wrote in the presence of the entire Italian language, past and present, and that they made use of it with a competent and knowing pen, as if they could draw abundantly and derive continuous pleasure from an inexhaustible patrimony.

Certainly, one must consider Landolfi's first-rate translations, and not from a language "everyone knows," but from Russian (which remains a language for specialists in Italian literary culture, and surely this is not the case in Italy alone: The only famous precedent I can remember is Mérimée, who translated Pushkin's stories). One must finally speak of his particular pleasure of bringing distant and complex accents to life in a voice tuned to the Italian key, and with the clarity and the shadows of his Gogol, the breathless speech of his Leskov, the precious falsetto tones of his Hofmannsthal (*Il cavaliere della rosa*, to mention one of his other languages).

But this relationship to one dimension of European literature,

without which Landolfi would not be Landolfi, must remind us of his dominant passion for Italian literature. This fact is little documented in his writings (even when he wrote literary criticism on a regular basis for Pannunzio's *Il Mondo*, he was concerned only with foreign writers). But he betrayed himself in conversation: he was enthused by discussions of Manzoni or Foscolo, or by pointing out linguistic usage and vocabulary in the classics; and even when he spoke of his contemporaries, though he appeared rather disinterested in the present, it was their language that drew his attention. (If he ever saw any literary merit in me, it was because in one of my stories I used the word "pesceduovo," which is the correct Italian word for omelet.)

This love of his for vocabulary, it must be noted, never became an overly precious or songlike exaltation. Here I will quote [the critic] Giacomo Debenedetti:

"It happens that in reading Landolfi one comes across words that are actually too beautiful, too right to be real, but indeed they can be found in real dictionaries where they are waiting for someone to find them. In fact, he employs them without batting an eyelash: the sentence isn't overjoyed by them, it doesn't consider itself any better for them, for they seem to arise from the normal memory-bank from which we draw everyday words. A baroque stylist or a decadent would have searched them out too, but to bring them forth in the voice's highest register. Landolfi levels them with the lovely timbre of his bass baritone."

The question of words which are not immediately comprehensible but which have meaning is being reexamined today in an essay by Giorgio Agamben on "glossolalia" (in this sense "speaking in glossary," that is, "with words foreign to present usage") whose point of departure is Pascoli. (The essay is an introduction to an edition of *Il fanciullino* by Giovanni Pascoli, Feltrinelli, 1982.) Could Agamben's theory of "dead words" as "the death of language in the voice" be applied to Landolfi as well? It seems to me that all language, including "dead words," is a part of life for Landolfi, but precisely because death is only steps away and