

The hand, I thought, on the first Sunday in March of 2011—what is it about the hand? Open, slightly curved, relaxed, hanging from the black sleeve, the fingers loosely beside each other, pale and effeminate, what does the pope's hand do when it's doing nothing? We spectators hear much about this man, whether we want to or not. His faces, his robes, the windows that serve as his stages are shown constantly, every Sunday you can hear him sing, speak, and bless, every day thousands want to be filmed or photographed with him, he is quoted everywhere, his violet smile is sold on post-cards, his power implored, sought, doubted, his role loved, valued, or scorned—but his hands, we know nothing about his hands, what about the hands?

No, I was not surprised to see him so near, a few meters to my right, almost beside me, in the last row of the sanctuary, the elderly gentleman who by general agreement is called the pope. He was dressed unobtrusively, not in the regalia that proclaims his authority, no gold shone, no lilac, no crimson, his head, known the world over, was neither adorned with an imposing miter nor covered with a cap; he looked like a simple parson or bishop in plain clothes, with a black suit and starched white collar. To his right and left sat two priests, whom you might see near him on TV, in similarly neutral, plain attire. Gestures, looks, posture, everything was well rehearsed. The only disconcerting thing was that the three black-clad men were doing nothing and did

not move forward, into the center, where they would have been more broadly visible.

Sitting in the same row with them, the aisle between us, my perspective was not the best. Since I did not want to make a spectacle of myself by gawking, I turned my head to the right as little as possible, peering over only discreetly, and I glimpsed the familiar face only fleetingly, in profile, between the faces of his escorts, six or seven meters away. That is why my eyes turned more toward the hands, toward the left one, mainly, the one closer to me, on his thigh, on his knee, on the backrest, or supporting his head. The right one was completely visible only when the elderly gentleman moved that arm and extended it forward a bit. The hands drew my gaze, and it was the presumed tiredness of old yet still-powerful hands that I began to contemplate. And the inactivity, to which they were perhaps not accustomed, for once not being used for one of the centuries-old rituals of his office and rank, not raised in greeting or to bless, not pressing other hands, inking signatures, turning pages, praying, holding wafers or liturgical vessels. Resting hands, pausing hands, the hands of a so-called infallible, unemployed for these few minutes, they invited me, they provoked me to reflect, they enticed me to discover the secret, if in fact there was a secret, that made them hang so noticeably soft and limp from a stiff body. They asked me riddles.

They seduced me into palm reading from a distance, you would be right to reproach me for that. But what else is a respectable heretic to do if he is afflicted with neither the blindness of the kneeling nor the arrogance of the church hater? What else is there for an archaeologist in premature retirement, who occasionally hires himself out as a tour guide, if, by whatever convoluted combination of coincidences, he has the opportunity

to observe a pope at close range, to savor the anecdotal moment quietly, not knowing whether the encounter will last half a minute, half an hour, or longer?

A study of the hands at a short remove, for me that was nothing more than an occupational habit, cleaning an object with brushes and, from the details, drawing conclusions about the object as a whole, then, with the whole object in view, checking every detail again and again. We're simply an odd mixture, we archaeologists, inquisitive potsherd cleaners, layer and fold interpreters, imaginative and meticulous, Latinists and utopians, as half-educated in history as we are in geology, homebodies, tent sleepers, dust eaters, detectives, and virtuosos of disappointment. We have only leads and details to go on, we have to bring loads of patience to a daily jigsaw puzzle with nothing but missing pieces, three-dimensional riddles that no one has yet solved. So, too, I scrutinized these hands dispassionately and professionally, trying to combine what I saw with what I knew and with what seemed likely in the great Roman mosaic, as some call it, or puzzle, as I call it, or, as one could also say, in the wonderfully disorderly pile of historical fragments, often described, always there to be rediscovered.

The hands aroused my curiosity but not the unusual location in which this encounter took place, which other observers might well have found strange or shocking. What business had the head of the Catholics in a Protestant church in the middle of Rome? I didn't ask myself that question, I could detect no sensation in it because this was not his first visit to this space. It was right here that I had seen him approximately one year earlier, but then it had been with full pontifical splendor, with closed-off streets, police lines, helicopters, ambulances, a limousine, guest lists, ID checks,

bag checks, metal detectors, jam-packed pews, excited whispering, a processional with retinue and thundering organ, crimson or green robes, I forget the color, his standardized and measured smile amid solemn Protestants, shaking hands with children, innumerable cameras, microphones, a gold-lacquered theater chair, pious hopes, a papal sermon from the Lutheran pulpit, and tact on all sides.

It was a diplomatic affair, a courtesy visit in remembrance of his Polish predecessor, who twenty-seven years earlier had been the first pope to set foot in a Protestant church, this very one, in Via Sicilia. My wife, Flavia, and I had sat approximately where I was sitting now. A lovely production it was, a gentle spectacle to mollify well-meaning Protestants dreaming of church unity or equality, whom he scorned, as we knew from other sources. He'll never forgive you for your five-hundred-year-old act of disobedience against the fraud of indulgences, Flavia said afterward, laughing, he needs you guys so that he can keep putting the blame on you for splitting the church. Why do these Protestants' eyes light up when they are allowed to shake hands with him—with *him*, of all people!

So it did not surprise me to encounter the prominent visitor here again. I might have asked myself why he turned up in this place for a second time after such a relatively short interval, but I gave the question no thought. The images of his official visit were still so fresh in my mind that I felt no excitement or awkwardness about this apparently unofficial visit, without papal armor, almost incognito. I thought only: Make good use of the unexpected audience, look at the hands, what is it about the hands?

The organ droned in the background. The man who had assumed the role of pontifex did not behave as though he were the center of attention. It seemed to me that I was the only one among the thirty or forty present giving him my undivided attention, unobtrusively, from the corner of my eye. He was sitting almost on the fringe, looking on and keeping silent. No cameras were pointed at him, neither the television recording machines carried on shoulders or mounted on tripods nor the heavy artillery of reporters, not even the handy camera phones you otherwise see held up on every street corner, in every church, every museum. Here no one was filming or taking pictures, and that alone lent the scene to which I became a witness on that Sunday before Rose Monday, Shrove Tuesday, and Ash Wednesday something agreeably old-fashioned, even surreal.

There are sights more exciting than the pope in profile, and I felt little inclined to stare at one side of a milky, careworn face. I just peered over at the partially shaded hands, hanging, resting, supporting, on their fingers no sign of the ring that his subordinates and the devout are wont to kiss. Turn on your brain camera, I commanded, point the zoom at the hands. Think of painters, who make sketches before they stretch the canvas, mix the oils, and reach for a brush: sleeves, cuffs, each finger, every joint of a slightly curved hand, every nail bed, the creases, the veins. Think of the tensely curling fingers of Raphael's Julius, of Titian's hand of Paul III, of the letter in the left hand of Innocent by Velázquez. Note carefully what you see, I commanded myself, even without a pencil.

I had planned the afternoon of a tour guide quite differently. While Flavia, after a meeting at Lake Como, was taking the bus to Milan after about two p.m., then

the express train to Rome, I had intended, before leading a group from Heilbronn, to take one more stroll through the city by myself, not having to play explainer and pseudo-all-knowing answer giver, without eager German listeners and their much-too-tight schedule, which they've recently started calling a window of time. I had intended just to follow my nose without the great Roman Jupiter Symphony in my ears, the allegro of motor noise, honking, car alarms, construction equipment, the rattle of motor scooters, dogs barking, the counterpoint of seagull calls and telephone calls, the crescendo of aggressive, stinking, or methane-tamed buses clattering over potholes, the andante of jostling on the black pavement along trampled tourist routes, the abrupt stops and ceaseless evasive maneuvering on zebra-striped crosswalks and photogenic stairways and in front of fountains, the slow tempos between souvenir shops, before columns, at tables of cheap goods, the dissonances of waiters in front of restaurants croaking in English to recruit customers and of black-skinned vendors shouting "*Capo!*" and selling white socks.

On Sundays, only the little symphony is on offer, andante cantabile, Sundays are more boring, but only on Sundays can I give my thoughts free rein in the city center, discover details and expand my knowledge, wander aimlessly through the realm of stone, which on the seventh day is not so bustling, clogged, noisy, and beset by traffic as it is on other days. Facades are not blocked by trucks, cars are not as slow and close, beggars restrict the range of their activity to church steps. Only on Sundays can one sit outside in front of the bars and not be immediately pestered by Africans selling Kleenex and fake handbags, Bengalis with fake watches and Chinese toys, Romanians with fake songs. On this Sunday I had only one objective, to get to the place where I was to meet the Heilbronnians by five, at the

finger of doubting Thomas in Santa Croce, my favorite relic, as I say to amuse my more or less un-Christian friends and acquaintances.

A day for a Roman walk, another stroll from north to south through the whole Villa Borghese Park, delighting in the most beautiful women in the world without having to see them framed and banished to museographic order. I jilted them, left them in the Galleria Borghese, just retrieved a few paintings and sculptures from memory, the series of wonderful creatures, the Daphnes and Danaës, the Sibyls and the great Circe, the various deluxe editions of Venus, the ladies with unicorn and swan, Proserpina and Paolina, and then the dancing Satyr and the horny Apollo, Flavia's favorite god, placing his left hand so tenderly yet with such possessive determination on Daphne's hip and stomach, vainly trying to hold onto the beautiful girl as she flees the realm of the senses and turns into a laurel tree. I had walked past the bright facade of the museum, aware of the panorama of divine and earthly love and worldly pleasures behind it, commissioned by wise cardinals or popes, strolled under pines and dying palm trees, down pathways and over meadows and had created my own gallery of these magnificent women: Brescianino's Venus alongside Correggio's Danaë, Bernini's Daphne, Fontana's Minerva, and Titian's Sacred One, images that I could not forget, could not thrust from my mind, even now, when I found myself surrounded by conventional decor, beneath a golden Protestant mosaic heaven from the period of the First World War, in the unexpected and unaccustomed presence of a pope.

Not two hundred meters from Titian's *Amor Sacro e Amor Profano*, a woman of perhaps sixty, who must once have been very beautiful, repeatedly yelled "*Amore!*" at

her hysterically yapping dog, and only when I was past her did I see the comedy of it and in that moment began to wonder. Her face, it looked familiar, could that have been the Sandra or Alessandra or Alexia with whom, decades ago, during my first internship in Rome, I had sat on the steps of Sant' Agostino half the night talking about God-knows-what and whom I followed when the clock struck two? Definitely a mistake. In the exchange of glances between us, while the amore animal was barking at my legs, there would have been at least a tiny moment of embarrassment or awkwardness. Forget it, I now decided, no brooding about the past, please, no amore nostalgia, it was just an older woman who was once young, as I once was.

Woman with dog, an everyday and familiar scene, a talking symbol for the new dog cult. I could give whole lectures about it: Rome going to the Dogs and the Expulsion of Cats in the Transition from the Twentieth to the Twenty-First Century, The Tenfold Increase in Dogs in the Last Fifteen Years, The Dog Craze as Index of Italy's Decline. That's how far I could have taken this silliness if talk of decline were not already an Italian commonplace. Except that the wretched condition of the date palms had nothing to do with the decline of Italy; the insatiable red palm weevil immigrated from Spain. But what did I care about that beetle? I tried to force my thoughts back into the church where I was sitting and had set myself the modest task of concentrating on only one object: the left hand.

But the images of beautiful women that I had called up only moments before continued to run in the background, hard to control and not to be restrained, as though they wanted to defy the papal presence. And Lord Byron refused to be shoved aside either. I had just visited him at the southern end of Borghese Park

on his pedestal with the verses, "Fair Italy, thou art the garden of the world. . . ." The poet, captivated by his own lines, gazes down Via Veneto, taking possession of the city with his enthusiasm, "Oh Rome! My country! City of the soul!" An ur-tourist, a tireless dreamer, who, from the filthy Rome of the early nineteenth century, from the dull dictatorship of priests, fabricated a Garden of Eden and paradise for souls. Byron's poetic pathos missed the mark back then and corresponds still less to today's realities. For that very reason I liked him, with his aloof, almost ridiculous pose, his narcissistic intoxication with Rome.

On this afternoon, too, reading those verses engraved in stone, I had envied them again, the Romantics and all who came after them, who were able to rewrite the world into a garden and idyll for themselves and cultivate the beautiful misconception that the foreign soil on which they stood was meant for their personal emotional satisfaction. Tourists, antitourists, and my enlightened tourists who travel for education, in every one of them there is a sight-seeing enthusiast, a history enthusiast, an arcadia seeker. On Via Veneto they want to think only of *la dolce vita*, breasts, champagne, and sports cars, of the formula or fiction of *la dolce vita*, which existed at best only for a few years or only in one movie. Every one a would-be Goethe, every one a dreamer, every one clings to his clichés and collects what fits them—I understand it well. Who, for example, wants to hear that this famous street was once the boulevard of the Nazi occupiers and today flourishes as artificially as it does thanks to the Casalesi and Russian Mafias, which doesn't keep the rats from paying their respects at the twilight hour. If I can bring myself to say: Look at that hotel over there, it was once the Hotel Flora, where SS murderers lived in luxury and the Roman resistance set off a bomb, though not as

successfully as they did in Via Rasella, and so on, then the faces grimace. Nazi terror in the Eternal City? That kind of retrospection spoils the vacation mood. People prefer to read today's murder stories in crime novels or enjoy them on TV, see them set in Iceland, Sweden, or the Eifel rather than behind glorious facades and the inscrutable faces and gestures of waiters on Via Veneto.

People want to rhapsodize. Once hard-earned euros have been put down for flight and hotel, they want to bathe the soul in clear light, see it reflected in a cloudless blue sky, they want to experience the postcard views of ruins and sunsets behind umbrella pines on location, they want to taste the warm air and cooling pistachio ice cream and have the guide steer them to what is supposedly the best ice cream in Italy, they want the fairy tales. People want the palm trees, not the palm weevil. After all, you go to Rome to hear fairy tales, and on Via Veneto it can be only the fairy tale of *la dolce vita*—Swedish breasts, champagne, and Italian sports cars included. In the forum they need a kindly Caesar and antiquity as heroic epic, or, under St. Peter's Basilica, they want the ready-made legend of St. Peter's bones. Nowhere else have so many legends and myths been invented, and, because they've been repeated thousands of times, they miraculously become all but indistinguishable from the truth. Nowhere else, I say—though, I must admit, I know only Rome and Bremen—are people so eager to believe fabrications and so ready to let themselves be deceived as they are here.

Sometimes I envy them, the foreigners I guide, because they do not know and do not need to know what the police tell the press every now and again after someone is gunned down in the streets: which neighborhoods are controlled by the Calabrian Mafia and which by the Chinese, which by the Neapolitan, Casalesi, Romanian,

or Russian Mafia gangs. They even give the names of the families involved and their spheres of influence and put maps of the city in the newspaper with their names. Mafia-free zones seem no longer to exist in the “city of the soul,” which obviously bothers no one in the land of a reigning friend of the Mafia. Sometimes a murder helps to achieve reallocation of turf and consolidation of supply routes; the garden of the world is staked out and divided up, “fair Italy” a battleground for business people—not exactly known for fairness—in the weapons, drugs, gambling, prostitution, human trafficking, extortion, and blackmail sectors. But here is my dilemma: visitors to Rome do not like to hear allusions of this kind; only when it’s rumored that the Vatican is engaging in money laundering do people prick up their ears. The church and capital, that’s always a big draw.

The most beautiful women, the handsome Byron, the amore woman, the elegant Veneto, the veiled Mafia, it surprised me how rapidly each new image faded in over the last, how rapidly my brain processed the simultaneous showing of these fresh impressions while I tried to get used to being in the presence of a pope. Clearly I did not want to be distracted, least of all leave the awkward, unpleasant field of Mafia associations, the minefield before which everyone immediately cries out: Careful! Cliché! Italy cliché! As enlightened, prejudice-free Europeans we are supposed to avoid that. Fighting preconceived notions has become the highest virtue, higher even than fighting the Mafia, which people like us can fight only by not remaining silent when everyone else is silent, by calling by their names whatever or whomever the police call by their names. The more these gangs spread out over all of Italy and half of Europe, the greater the Mafia’s share in the proceeds of every tomato, every orange, the stronger this taboo becomes and the more strenuously everyone objects.