

Mario Tessari
Between Historical Stylistic Eclecticism
and Concern for the Human Dilemma

Note: This essay is the English translation of an original text in Italian. The references to the images can be found at the Italian site at:

<http://www.mariotessari.it/index.php/2008-Leda-Cempellin-I-parte.html>

Part I
Artistic Influences in the Evolution of Tessari's Corpus of work

The artistic career of Mario Tessari, an Italian artist born in Gorizia and living in Pordenone, demonstrates extremely learned thought and deep spirituality.

Contemporary art criticism took note of Tessari as early as 1983. These preliminary studies have noted Tessari's stylistic eclecticism that draws from a broad gamut of sources. In 1984, Giuseppe Mariuz mentioned Symbolism, Futurism, Surrealism, Metaphysical painting, and even Jackson Pollock as artistic references [\[www.mariotessari.it\]](http://www.mariotessari.it). Later, in 1989, Paolo Rizzi widened the spectrum of the historical references in several directions: the XVI century Mannerism, from Arcimboldo to Bosch; the Surrealism in the 1920's and 1930's, including Ernst and Dali; the Abstract Expressionism of De Kooning and Gorky; and finally, he mentioned the realism of the Italian postwar artist Corrado Cagli [\[www.mariotessari.it\]](http://www.mariotessari.it).

Indeed, we can observe surrealist fragments in such paintings as *Proiezione al Futuro* [*Perspective on the Future*, 1978] and *Le Strade del Destino* [*The Streets of Destiny*, 1980] (Figs. 1 & 2), while *Natura Morta sul Tavolo* [*Table Still Life*, 1982] (Fig. 3) echoes the Futurism of Balla and Boccioni in the variety of directional forces. It is clear that, from the outset, Tessari's work has demonstrated continuity with the tradition of the historical European Avant-garde. Even a recent work such as *Studio per Pellegrinaggio* [*Study for Pilgrimage*, 2005] (Fig. 4) echoes the suspended atmosphere found in the 19th Century symbolist paintings of artists like Puvis de Chevannes, yet here, Tessari takes the opportunity to introduce dynamic elements that disturb the overall balance.

Tessari's manner of stylistic assimilation, which has been defined by Paolo Rizzi as "*un modo originale di saldare l'antico con il moderno*" ("*an original way to weld antiquity and modernity*"), coincides with the comprehensive eclecticism that has characterized the passage from mature Modernism to Postmodernism – a new anachronistic and decontextualized phase for art – as expressed in random embryonic European Neo-expressionist, Anachronist,

and Citationist movements that, from the mid '70s on, were preparing their move to center stage¹.

However, since the beginning of our extensive conversations, I was surprised to learn from Tessari that he was not aware of Post-modernism in those years:

“Most of the paintings I have made in the past, and even those I am working on now, are like premonitions of things that are going to come. I have always been given this ability, even if I cannot explain it myself: I have premonitions that carry me to a truth not completely known yet” [Tessari 2007].

Indeed, the key to grasping the challenge faced by the artist, as he was determining his stylistic shifts between realism and abstraction, is much more deeply motivated than as a mere adherence to a major artistic sensibility characterizing those years.

A clue to this has to be found again in the art criticism of the 1980's. An article that appeared in “Il Gazzettino” in 1983, pointed out that Tessari's art shows *“quante possibilità ancora inesplorate abbia l'uomo di accostarsi alle cose per conoscerne l'identità “vera”, quella che sta sotto le croste dell'apparenza”* (“how many possibilities still unexplored, are available to mankind as a means of approach to discover the ‘true’ identity of things, that which hides underneath appearances”). [www.mariotessari.it]. And more recently, in 1990, Paolo Rizzi has described Tessari's work as a *“Pittura di impronte, larvale e misteriosa: volti che emergono dal caos di una natura che risente di un'antica, favolosa eco umanistica. Un artista che colpisce per la sua originalità e profondità”*. (“A painting of imprints, larval and mysterious: faces that emerge from the chaos of a nature that feels the effects of an ancient, fabulous humanistic echo. An artist who amazes for his originality and depth”). [www.mariotessari.it].

My recent discussions with Tessari have provided a greater opportunity to come to terms with the multi-valenced message of his art: all pointing to an eschatologic vision, seen initially as an irremediably lost

¹ For Rizzi's observations, 1989, see www.mariotessari.it. A citationist attitude emerged in the early '70s. However, Citationism matured as a movement in the late '70s and early '80s. In 1974, an exhibition at the Studio Marconi in Milan, titled *La Ripetizione Differente* [*The Different Repetition*], curated by Renato Barilli, exhibited the work of Luigi Ontani alongside Arte Povera and Conceptual Art (Crispolti 183). The term ‘different repetition’ explains the motivation of the citationist artist towards the imitated artwork (Crispolti 183). In 1978, the Whitney Museum of American Art held an exhibition in New York titled *Art about Art* (Crispolti 265). In the catalog of the exhibition *Linee della Ricerca Artistica in Italia 1960-80* [*Principles of the Artistic Research in Italy 1960-80*], 1981, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Rome, Filiberto Menna proposed the term “arte come storia dell'arte” [“art as art history”], which was based on citationism and self-reflection (Crispolti 184).

dimension, in which the artist explores the different manifestations of human suffering and solitude. These admonitions shift to hope of salvation in *Il Dono Di Dio [The Gift of God, 2004]*, a magnificent fresco, which is an eclectic synthesis, both stylistically and symbolically, of his message of salvation and the future of mankind.

A comparison between an early painting by Tessari, such as *Il Bosco Incantato [The Enchanted Forest, 1974]* (Fig. 5), and a few examples of traditional iconography, reveals an open dialogue between the contemporary artist and the past: the artist utilizes innovative ways to conceive the same subject, as it relates to a new cultural sensibility reflecting a different era.

The traditional iconography related to Saint George and the dragon, typically shows Saint George as riding a white horse (a symbol for purity of intentions) in the forest (see Albrecht Altdorfer, *San Giorgio nella Foresta [Saint George in the Woods, 1510]* at the Alte Pinakothek in Munchen), or in the act of defeating the dragon, seen as an incarnation of demonic forces (see Paolo Uccello, *San Giorgio e il Drago [Saint George and the Dragon, 1455]*, at the National Gallery in London).

In *Il Bosco Incantato [The Enchanted Forest, 1974]* (Fig. 5), Tessari has introduced a major iconographic change: the Saint-warrior and the dragon are represented beside one another, both petrified and caught in a forest, whose trees are undergoing a disquieting metamorphosis. The metamorphosis of the saint and the monster, into large fractured stones, makes these figures appear fragile, motionless and decadent, while the adoption of a color scheme almost reduced to monochrome conveys a deep incommunicability. As Ugo Perniola wrote in 1985: *“L’incomunicabilità, di cui doviziosa testimonianza sono gli essenziali monocromi, è lo spazio di una nuova epifania: nel mostro ipotecato dell’alterità, concettualmente gli si rivela il mostro insospettato che si annida in noi”*. (*“The incommunicability, abundantly expressed through essential monochromes, is the space of a new epiphany: in the uncertain monster of difference, the unsuspected monster that harbors in us is conceptually revealed”*). www.mariotessari.it. The art critic must have had some early paintings, such as this one, in his mind. The color scheme is drastically reduced; the figures are juxtaposed, revealing a lack of interaction, as if caused by immobility. Monsters gradually reveal themselves from the tree trunks, so that it is difficult to understand if this forest is the real enemy for the knight or if it represents a projection of the human’s interior fears.

Vulnerability, solitude, suffering, arid and sterile petrification, are all emblematic of mankind’s paralysis in its social and spiritual evolution. Humans are surrounded by a terrifying nature, which progressively undergoes a grotesque metamorphosis to embody the obsessions and guilt of mankind. In the painting *Muse in Eterno Parto [Muses in Eternal*

Birthgiving, 1976] (Fig. 6) the muses emerge as a symbol, since the figure in the background appears to be a masculine, rather than feminine presence: the birth giving process symbolizes extreme suffering, which shatters these solitary figures into several pieces and overflows like drops of blood onto a deserted land. In the sky, a dark and threatening cloud, resembling an enormous radioactive spot, is moving towards them. The overall composition echoes De Chirico both stylistically and thematically, in the resumption of existential uneasiness, which in this painting becomes the artist's preoccupation for the destiny of mankind.

Disquieting human and animal-like figures are hidden throughout the painting *Le Tentazioni di Sant'Antonio [The Temptations of Saint Anthony, 1986]* (Fig. 7), in both landscape and the wing of the central hybrid figure; a bird-like body and a face between human and angelical. This painting must be observed several times, by the audience, in order to increasingly reveal deeper layers of meaning: it is an admonition to proceed beyond appearances and go further, in both the careful observation of the painting itself, and in the reflection of the message it carries. Paolo Rizzi has noted these mysterious faces hidden in many of Tessari's paintings, which have been described as "*volti che emergono dal caos di una natura che risente di un'antica, favolosa eco umanistica*" ("*faces that emerge from the chaos of a nature that feels the effects of an ancient, fabulous humanistic echo*") [www.mariotessari.it].

Nature's disturbing anthropomorphic look represents a twofold message. On one side, nature should be seen literally in this painting as a terrifying presence. In this sense, it would specifically remind a twenty-first century audience that nature should be feared as capable of vengeance against violation and disrespect. When commenting on *Il Dono di Dio [The Gift of God, 2004]* (Fig. 26), Tessari has said: "*La natura sta a guardare l'umanità, ma non è che stia solo a guardare: prima o poi comincia anche a reagire*" ("*Nature is looking to mankind, but does not simply look: it will soon start to react*").² On the other side, nature could be seen as the visible manifestation of the monsters that lurk inside the human soul, in the forms of temptation and guilt. In this sense, nature's anthropomorphic look becomes a mirror of our soul. Indeed, in 1984 Giuseppe Mariuz has reported Tessari saying: "*Si usa l'arte per rispecchiare l'anima*" ("*We use art as a mirror of our soul*") [www.mariotessari.it].

Saint Anthony, who appears in the left side of the painting, is meditating on the Holy Scriptures laid open on his knees; the frottage technique fragments his blue body, materializing his attained consciousness of the fragility inherent to the human condition. All the blue nerves running through the Saint's body, spreading in all directions,

² These observations appear in Part II of this essay: *Meditations on the Human's Destiny: The Gift of God*.

become the visible manifestation of a complexity of thought; the search for clarity in being able to see all the dangers that hide beyond the appearances of things.

Similar to the previously analyzed *Il Bosco Incantato [The Enchanted Forest, 1974]* (Fig. 5), and in the case of *Le Tentazioni di Sant'Antonio [The Temptations of Saint Anthony, 1986]* (Fig. 7), Tessari's painting sets up a dialogue with the traditional iconography of the subject, and introduces a major innovation. Classically, the figure of Saint Anthony is usually surrounded or attacked by horrific figures and monsters, as incarnations of evil forces whose origin is outside him. Examples of this are Hieronymus Bosch's *Triptych of the Temptations of Saint Anthony, 1505-1506*, at the Museu Nacional de Arte Antigua in Lisbon, and Matthias Grünewald, *Temptations of Saint Anthony, 1515*, at the Musée d'Unterlinden in Colmar. Instead, in the specific case of Tessari's *Le Tentazioni di Sant'Antonio [The Temptations of Saint Anthony, 1986]* (Fig. 7), the figures are not surrounding the Saint. Instead, they are barely visible, hidden between the layers of colors in the landscape. The main demon is an indeterminate figure, with the monstrous body of a giant bird, and the face of an angel. The iconographic variation suggests that the danger of temptation lies in its ambiguity, in the difficulty of making a judgment about what is good and what is evil in our experience.

One of the major pictorial and existential challenges has been, for Tessari, to represent the abstract dimension of suffering in visible form. In 1984, the artist tried to concretize the theme of *Il Dolore [The Pain, 1984]* (Fig. 8) in the form of sharp red needles. The composition is made highly dramatic by the symbology of the color scheme and the directional dynamism of the sharp needles, a strong echo of Giacomo Balla's paintings.

Even in an unquestionably figurative work, such as *Cristo [Christ, 1987]* (Fig. 9), the suffering takes form in two long and intense shadows evocative of knife blades. These shadows symmetrically cross the cheeks and lengthen on the neck to form a sharp triangle that points to the rest of the body and to the fire-red garment; at once a royal mantel and a shroud soaked with blood.

In 2001, the terrifying events of September 11th produced a homonymous painting, of which the topic has expanded, through subsequent contemplations, to an entire series. The painting, *11 di Settembre [September 11th, 2001]* (Fig. 10) was compulsively created in few hours time, during which the most unbelievable, terrifying and surreal events of our current era were being broadcast live on television. This painting efficiently synthesizes the frottage technique and the chromatic dynamism of the Futurists, with an intensity previously unparalleled. The imagery does not represent a specific person, but rather a creature that is

emblematic of a tormented humanity. The extreme violence erupts from several directions at the top of the picture plane. Lights descend on the human figure, striking him in a multipronged attack. The figure, blood-stained and unconscious, becomes increasingly red like a blaze of fire that explodes, seemingly wanting to run through it from head to feet, giving the sensation that the it falls apart in fragments. The heat of the combusting airplane fuel did, in fact, cause the ultimate disintegration of the Twin Towers on that fateful day. From the upper left part of the painting, an unalarming celestial presence, is trying to take hold of the human figure by the neck, in a failed attempt to lift him to salvation.

In our conversation, Tessari has described the painting in these terms:

“What takes the attention the most is the face, that’s in the shadow and that looks at the its arm, in the center of the painting, and slightly above. That arm is like a fusion of flesh that is changing, and that in the end becomes an abstract form, in these fingers that slightly show movement, the torsion provoked by intense pain. Everything else seems to have been torn and reconstructed exclusively to render the image, the sense of the overall scene. Indeed, this painting could just be centered on the arm and on its impotence: the arm without the rest is a part, and at the same time a projection in the becoming, the construction, the pain, the blood, the color of rotten flesh. I have had the experience of a third-degree burn on my right hand, the one with which I paint: to be able to see the inside, how we are composed, to have the image of pain, these things do not scare us, as much as hurts us, since it takes so much out of our life.

The mouth is torn, while some parts are immersed in the light: it is as if floodlights are showing parts of the image, and your mind, by mixing all these fragments, can rebuild the overall image, as it should be just a moment before the total decomposition. I wanted to give the feeling of this moment: what remains, the moment right before destruction. In this sense, this painting constitutes a more general expression of other moments of destruction in the history of mankind” (Tessari 2007).

This painting is not merely the expression of a specific tragedy, but becomes more generally emblematic of human violence. This is made clear when comparing Tessari’s *11 di Settembre [September 11th, 2001]* (Fig. 10) and Corrado Cagli’s *Buchenwald*, 1945, a mixed media composition. In both works, the face of the victim is partially illuminated and partially shadowed; the body is perverted through suffering, and is already undergoing a partial decomposition. However, in both works the human figure reveals, paradoxically, the traces of a dignity that could still

be restored, if the image is efficiently perceived as a general admonition for the future choices of mankind. In the 1976 exhibition in Rovigo, Italy, Cagli wrote that “... *Il soldato di ventura non può che tramandare l’immensa pietà per i suoi fratelli e la loro infinita dignità nella fine più orrenda, nelle spire di un vortice che parve ingoiare negli abissi del genocidio trenta e più secoli di civiltà*” (“... *The soldier of fortune cannot but transmit the immense compassion towards his brothers and their immense dignity in the most horrific death, in a whirl that seems to swallow thirty and more centuries of civilization in the abyss of the genocide*”).³

The lesson of Cagli has been deeply absorbed by Tessari, since both artists have intended to represent human tragedy as an admonition towards avoiding self-destruction.

In the next painting of the same series, *Dopo l’11 di Settembre [After September 11th, 2001]* (Fig. 11) three figures are imprisoned in a blue semi-sphere, grotesquely deformed as in Edward Munch’s *The Cry*, 1893. Bare and extremely unhappy, they look like condemned souls.

The atmosphere is similar to the one developed just one year later by *Girone Dantesco [Dante’s Circle, 2002]* in its final version (Fig. 14). We perceive the complete paralysis and deformation of the human figures through a maturation of the frottage technique, which now is capable of fragmenting the figures and powerfully presenting the monstrous metamorphosis of the flesh. In *Dopo l’11 di Settembre [After September 11th, 2001]* (Fig. 11), a claustrophobic semi-sphere, similar to the irregular atmosphere surrounding the souls in *Girone Dantesco [Dante’s Circle, 2002]* (Fig. 14), reveals the impotence of humans to make any movement or to change their situation.

When Tessari was painting the series related to the events of September 11th (Figs. 10 & 11), his primary challenge was to represent the most intense moment immediately before the complete destruction. It is the moment to which we wish we could return, but it is too late, and all we are left is to witness the horrific vision and show it to humanity, as a caution never to repeat this horrific mistake again. In Tessari’s words:

“I have made three paintings with similar topics, but different in terms of colors and structure. The most intense is 11 di Settembre [September 11th, 2001] (Fig. 10), because it is necessary to live a moment like that to be able to throw away the most intense expressions, the dismay, the embarrassment, the suffering, the fact of getting lost in a form of craziness, from which we cannot escape. What has to remain in our memory, as admonition against its unavoidable consequences, is this attitude,

³ These observations, made by Corrado Cagli in 1976, appear in De Micheli, 11.

to destroy everything and keep destroying ourselves, maybe because it is part of our human nature” (Tessari 2007).

Tessari’s artistic exploration of human suffering has led him to make extreme representations of tragedies and forms of condemnation, produced as warnings for mankind. However, the artist still conceives a possibility of salvation, which is best expressed in the representation of the healing process, symbolized by the figure of the *Sciamano [Shaman, 2003]* (Fig. 15), a medic of the body and soul. Color, in its complex and deep symbolism, becomes a fundamental aspect of this healing dynamic. In this painting, several colors have been used and charged with subtle symbolism, thus referring to several healing and self-healing levels. The dominant color red seems to come out of the kneeling body of the shaman, while the intense greens of the surrounding nature, which carry all the healing virtues, enter the body through the legs. The virtue of healing is therefore based on a more harmonious relationship with nature: it is significant that the shaman is crouched in the fetal position in that this position is the most natural and primordial. It is the only position that is not learned through progress.

Tessari explains the colors used in this painting in these terms:

“If somebody has not seen this painting, he/she would imagine it as a red lake. Instead, these are fragmenting pieces of a lively, carmine red, a beating color, similar to blood, of course, but lively, as if it was a volcano’s lava: something which is more ancient and full of life, in terms of nature. A doctor, a person with healing virtues, helps the patient to heal; he does not heal the patient himself, because he is not God. Each of the different colors inside the painting carries its own symbolism. The violet-purple is the color of God. The red has a double meaning: the red mantel usually represents royalty; however, when some gold is present, too, it is like a crown, symbol of economic power. In this case, the purple-red chosen is a deep red, which with a little blue becomes violet, therefore becoming a color that carries some divine power. In this painting there is also a lot of green, which represents nature that enters in this huge space beyond the shaman’s shoulders and carries a high spiritual connotation, because it is the color of healing” (Tessari 2007).

The spiritual power of the shaman is represented by a delicate and subtle interplay of luminous transparencies, in the representation of his silhouette. With the exception of the shaman, the crouching figures are generally symbolic of solitude, self-closure and spiritual captivity.

In *Solitudine* [*Solitude*, 2001] (Fig. 16), the artist has played with the same transparencies of the *Sciamano* [*Shaman*, 2003] (Fig. 15). However, in case of *Solitudine* [*Solitude*, 2001] (Fig. 16), these transparencies are caused by the splitting of the human figure in what is defined, in the Indian theosophic system, as the “*etheric double*”: an “*invisible part of the physical body*”, which is “*of great importance to us, for it is the vehicle through which flow the streams of vitality which keep the body alive*”.⁴ In this case, even though the crouching position occurs in a natural setting, it does not carry the same sense of healing as in *Sciamano* [*Shaman*, 2003] (Fig. 15). In opposition, the body language of the figure in *Solitudine* [*Solitude*, 2001] (Fig. 16) connotes desperation and high suffering, since his division is caused by a lack of harmony between body and soul.

The comparison between *Sciamano* [*Shaman*, 2003] (Fig. 15) and *Solitudine* [*Solitude*, 2001] (Fig. 16) shows that, before the former, mankind’s destiny was envisioned by Tessari as hopeless. This is apparent in several other works made between the late 1990’s and 2002: a few examples will follow.

In *Chiusura* [*Closing*, 2001] (Fig. 17), a distorted human figure has been imprisoned in a transparent, rectilinear cube, canned as a consumer product ready to be sold. *Compresso* [*Compressed*, 2001] (Fig. 18) features a human figure crouching in an attempt to be completely included in the space of the picture plane, at the cost of deformation. The painting, *Solo nel Tunnel* [*Alone in the Tunnel*, 2002] (Fig. 19) shows a crouching figure, seen from the back and looking up at the oppressive dark capsule that imprisons him.

In the constant open dialogue with the tradition, Tessari’s investigation on human suffering has reached one of his most mature points in the representation of hell as a condition of extreme unhappiness and spiritual imprisonment. This research inspired a series of three paintings titled *Girone Dantesco* [*Dante’s Circle*, 1990, 1998 and 2002] (Figs. 12, 13 & 14), which were preceded by other paintings such as *Bloccata* [*Blocked*, 1996] (Fig. 20), and *Consolazione* [*Consolation*, 2002] (Fig. 21). These precursors seem to be important steps in Tessari’s maturation for the more famous series. Once again, a significant iconographic innovation has been introduced. Indeed, the figures painted by Tessari do not literally translate, in visual form, Dante’s poem: they have not been depicted as subjects of physical torture or demonic torment. For Tessari, the most unimaginable punishment for mankind would be its complete paralysis, which implies the impossibility to communication, to act, to evolve, and also in the fragmentation caused by interior conflict, which is made visible, in the painting, through the technique chosen. The

⁴ These observations appear in C. W. Leadbeater, *The Chakras*, 3.

process of petrification of the human figure, which started as early as 1974 with *Il Bosco Incantato [The Enchanted Forest, 1974]* (Fig. 5), and continued throughout the following decades, has reached its most intense form in the series of the *Girone Dantesco [Dante's Circle, 2002]*, especially in the last version (Fig. 14).

To be more specific about the literary source, this series by Tessari comments on, develops and reinterprets some famous excerpts from cantos XXXII and XXXIV of Dante's *Inferno*, part of his *Divina Commedia [Divine Comedy, ca. 1308-1321]*. Dante has arrived to Cocito, the innermost level of hell: he observes the souls of the traitors hammered in a layer of ice, whose freezing temperature, "*in diretto e proporzionale rapporto con il ghiaccio che ha gelato in terra il cuore dei traditori*" (Pasquini - Quaglio, 348) ("*in direct and proportional correlation to the ice that has frozen in earth the heart of the traitors*"),⁵ is maintained by the shaking movement of Lucifero's wings.

"Then I turned my head and saw, in front of me / and under my feet a lake that because of the frost / seemed made of glass, rather than of water. [These observations appear in Inferno XXXII, 22-24]. "And similarly as the croaking frog / with its face out of the water, when the woman farmer dreams of gleaning / blue down to the pubis / were the suffering shadows in the ice / shaking their teeth as a singing stork. / Each of them kept his face down; / from their mouth the cold is shown, and from their eyes the sad heart" [These observations appear in Inferno XXXII, 31-39]. "I was already, and with fear I put this into rhymes, / where all the shadows were all covered, / and gleam as straw in glass. / Some are laying down; some others are standing, / one head up and the other feet up; / another one, as to form an arch, bends the head to reach the feet." [These observations appear in Inferno XXXIV, 10-15].

Tessari's *Girone Dantesco [Dante's Circle, 1990]* (Fig. 12), as the earliest stage of this series, illustrates the concept of mankind's condemnation to paralysis still in the context of his relationship to nature, as the main color of the background suggests. In the following painting of the series, *Girone Dantesco [Dante's Circle, 1998]* (Fig. 13), nature is substituted by a red background, which can be read in two ways: as a visual interpretation of Dante's passage, in the blood caused by the innumerable betrayals of the condemned traitors, and also as an anticipation of the symbolism that will be developed a few years later with *Sciamano [Sciaman, 2003]* (Fig. 15), where red is the color of illness, and

⁵ These observations appear in Pasquini-Quaglio 348.

in the specific context of *Girone Dantesco* [*Dante's Circle*, 1998] (Fig. 13) becomes a visible manifestation of the illness of an entire civilization.

Finally, the most recent version, *Girone Dantesco* [*Dante's Circle*, 2002] (Fig. 14) imprisons the bodies of the damned, who have lost solidity, in a completely icy background. While Dante has imagined the bodies of the damned people as blocked by a layer of ice in the ground, instead Tessari has introduced the interesting iconographic variation of an ice occupying both ground and background, without any distinction, and completely enveloping the figures; their bodies are undergoing a dreadful metamorphosis towards dissolving into this all-inclusive ice mantel.

This iconological variant may find explanation in Tessari's awareness of Oriental Karma philosophies, which describe the *karma* as a causal correlation between the individual and the whole, where the latter is constituted by monads, each of them being a "semi-permeable membrane" of energy, which "at once connects it and separates it from its surroundings".⁶ In this sense, Tessari's hell is the representation, in visible form, of the total absence of Karma, a condition in which the monads become rigid, making it impossible for the condemned person to interact with other humans or to affect the surrounding environment.

Here are Tessari comments on this painting:

"There is a circle, in which Dante arrives in a valley where people are petrified, as fixed in time, still and incapable to move. For the damned, their condemnation is to live for eternity in the impossibility of asking, of doing, of interacting. It is a heavy condemnation. In another image, that I have not expressed in art yet, I have imagined hell as a number of clouds in an empty space, a black nullity. The heads and legs of these damned people are inserted into glass air pocket, and cannot exit from there. Even if they were crying for help, they would be unable to go beyond these boundaries. The world of the dead, or the lost souls, is visualized by my mind as a damnation of the black souls. I see the expression "burn in the hell" as a synonymic image, which can be interpreted in different ways: the most common is the fire that burns and consumes, even though something remains, the ashes. The worse interpretation is the one I intend, the torture of the soul. Beyond the body, which is a visible and palpable part of reality, the pain I am talking about is a torment that relates to the souls and pervades all times, all eras, all dimensions. There is not a physical space that could contain it, if not a container where the absolute void absorbs and fills it at the same time. It is impressive to describe it, because I would need to draw from my worst nightmares and deepest

⁶ These observations appear in Hanson and Stewart, 67.

anguishes. It is a topic that I would avoid if possible, because the anguish, if transmitted, could cause many more damages than what it already naturally does: the human being has already such a destructive and self-destructive power, that it is better to avoid that as much as possible also in paintings. The secondary effect of the atomic bomb, the shock wave, is as much devastating as “the thought” in its most abstract and profound form. In my opinion, to be able to draw this is the most extreme limit that an artist could reach. I arrived at this form of suffering in my life, not in my art yet, but if possible it would not be my intention to transmit all of this (Tessari 2007).

Another form of punishment for a disobedient mankind is revealed in *Il Sole nelle Mani [The Sun between Hands, 2002]* (Fig. 22). When comparing this painting with *Il Dono di Dio [The Gift of God, 2004]* (Fig. 27), it is visible, in both of them, a form of the arrogance of the human being as the original sin: in the former, by the man who is trying to hold the sun (or the moon) in his hands; in the latter, by showing the fall of the human and bird hybrid figure, whose complex symbology will be analyzed in the part II of this essay (*Meditation on the Human Destiny: the Gift of God*).

The difference, between the two paintings considered, is a major change clearly noticeable since 2003, when Tessari’s painting opened to a new hope of human salvation, as we have already seen in the introduction of the concept of healing in *Sciamano [Shaman, 2003]* (Fig. 15).⁷ *Il Sole nelle Mani [The Sun between Hands, 2002]* (Fig. 22), previous to this change, represents the fall of the human being, and consequent punishment, as unavoidable: the figure seems to be instantly petrified; the

⁷ [In an email dated July 24th, 2008, Tessari emphasized that in the most recent years, two opposite moods, between ‘optimistic’ and ‘pessimistic’, are both observable in his paintings. This concept will be clear when talking about *Ides of March*, 2007-2008. In this essay, and with the information available to me at this point in time, I have attempted to reconstruct and motivate these latest changes occur in Tessari’s painting, giving the year 2003 as a turning point. However, the artist has warned me that “*Ci sono altri quadri che ho dipinto negli ultimi tre anni, che si legano a questi due opposti punti di vista, che trattano l’esperienza iniziale della pranoterapia legata alla storia dell’uomo, e allo stesso tempo a una forma di spiritualità o di ‘denuncia’ sulla strada che dovrebbe essere percorsa – ma che in realtà non lo è. Sono lavori non terminati, quindi non ancora visibili, e forse sono gli anelli mancanti al percorso critico che tu vuoi portare avanti*” (“*There are other paintings, which I have made in the last three years and are related to these opposite viewpoints. They deal with the beginning experience of spirit healing as it relates to the history of mankind, and at the same time to a form of spirituality or ‘denounce’ on the path that should be taken – but unfortunately it is not. These works are not finished yet, and therefore they cannot be publicly displayed at this time; maybe they will solve this issue that you have found in your critical discourse*”). For this reason, in the present essay I will have to leave the issue only partially solved. Further studies, at a later and more mature time, might use this very important issue as a point of departure].

heaviness of his original sin of arrogance prostrates the figure in a desperate crouching position; other figures are already crouched, condemned to work and suffer.

Il Dono di Dio [The Gift of God, 2004] (Fig. 27), which has been made after this change, represents the fall of the human being as an action not yet completed, frozen in the image of the fresco as a possibility, not a fact, in order to give humans the possibility of salvation.

Besides *Sciamano [Shaman, 2003]* (Fig. 15), also *Scambio di Doni [Exchange of Gifts, 2004]* (Fig. 23) and *Il Dono di Dio [The Gift of God, 2004]* (Fig. 27) reflect this new hope of salvation.

“A new season is inaugurated, under a new reality that supports the spiritual and physical healing, which can be established by resuming some concepts that have been previously abandoned, as a last attempt for human kind to save himself” (Tessari 2007).

In *Scambio di Doni [Exchange of Gifts, 2004]* (Fig. 23), two Greek figures, symmetrically opposed as in Picasso's *Two Nudes, 1906*, one a celestial creature, the other a terrestrial one, mutually exchange gifts. The terrestrial creature, completely petrified, holds a book in her stiff hand; the angelic figure has beautiful flesh-colored skin, and is giving a present, possibly a fish, to the other figure. Since *Scambio di Doni [Exchange of Gifts, 2004]* (Fig. 23) has been made in the same period as *Il Dono di Dio [The Gift of God, 2004]* (Fig. 27), the two works share similar symbolism.

The female figure, petrified and holding a book in the left side of *Scambio di Doni [Exchange of Gifts, 2004]* (Fig. 23), could be interpreted as a symbol of the human race petrified by the degradation of culture that is an enemy to nature. This concept is also shown in the paralysis and unhappiness of the colossal, petrified figure in *Il Dono di Dio [The Gift of God, 2004]* (Fig. 27). The other female figure of *Scambio di Doni [Exchange of Gifts, 2004]* (Fig. 23), on the right, whose body is composed of soft flesh and holds a natural gift for the former figure, could be associated with Christ in *Il Dono di Dio [The Gift of God, 2004]* (Fig. 27), who offers Himself to mankind. Therefore, *Scambio di Doni [Exchange of Gifts, 2004]* (Fig. 23) represents a dialogue between nature and culture, the opening to a new hope, for the corrupted humanity, which was unimaginable in Tessari's paintings of the previous years.

The exchange of gifts is blessed by a circular moon, whose symbolism has been explained by Tessari in this form:

“The ball is a new energy, which comes from the past; it was, it is now and it will always be. The energy is like a nucleus: just consider the sun. It is not only a physical energy, but much

more: it is something which creates and destroys, therefore continually renewing itself” (Tessari 2007).

An interesting peculiarity of *Scambio di Doni [Exchange of Gifts, 2004]* (Fig. 23), which is a variation of the frottage technique visible through most of Tessari’s paintings, is the co-presence of very tiny painting strokes, some white and some black that run uniformly throughout the entire painting. It is the expression of cosmic energy that interconnects everything and is the expression of a positive exchange of energies.⁸ Tessari commented on these title gestures in these terms:

“The black and white gestures are like two opposites, as yin and yang, principles that are opposed and complementary in the creation and maintenance of the cosmic harmony. The charkas⁹ are like whirlpools, which carry the external energy inside the body of the people. The oriental philosophy says that inside us there are energies which we absorb from outside, from the light, from nature, from the air, even from words. For instance, in the constructive dialogue, the auras of the people involved get in touch and exchange energies, which create harmony. This is an exchange of gifts, and is even transmitted in the air through non-verbal messages” (Tessari 2007).

The sense of hope, clearly visible since 2003 in some paintings, alternates with other paintings expressing severe warnings to humanity. *Dopo il Temporale [After the Thunderstorm, (2004)]* (Fig. 24), is one of these. A white-clothed girl; a symbol of innocence walks through a turbulent natural environment, filled with frightening presences similar to those seen in earlier paintings, such as *Il Bosco Incantato [The Enchanted Forest, 1974]* (Fig. 5) and *Le Tentazioni di Sant’Antonio [The Temptations of Saint Anthony, 1996]* (Fig. 7). In the words of Tessari, *Dopo il Temporale [After the Thunderstorm, (2004)]* (Fig. 24):

⁸ It is very interesting to observe a similar concept in Don Eddy’s paintings, where the tiny little circles, which run through the entire painting, function technically as underpainting, and ontologically as a homogeneous substance that gives to humans, angels, nature, toys, etc. the same cosmic energy, as reflection of the artist’s energy profuse in the painting. This observation results from conversations I had with Don Eddy, and appear in L.Cempellin, *Conversazioni con Don Eddy – Conversations with Don Eddy*, 2000, pp.68-71.

⁹ “One of the most impressive discoveries is the one made by the initiates of India about the seven chakra system (...). The human being has subtle centers along the vertebral spine, centers that have been called chakra (in sanscrit=wheel) (Aïvanov 127). In the physical body there is no trace of these spiritual centers, since they are situated in the etheric double; however, the organs of our body are subjected to their influence” (Aïvanov 129).

“It is a moment of reflection. There is hope, which I have expressed in the form of a girl, who walks with difficulty over sharp rocks, through a landscape that has been completely lacerated. That piece of tree, broken and dry, with few roots that are undergoing petrification. Nature is becoming again what it once was, because it has been turned upside down, and not by the severe weather conditions (which are just a manifestation, but not the most violent one). This is a warning to mankind” (Tessari 2007).

This reproach intensifies in the most recent paintings, such as *Le Idi di Marzo [The Ides of March, 2007-2008]* (Fig. 25).¹⁰

Here is its description by Tessari:

“Le Idi di Marzo [The Ides of March, 2007-2008] (Fig. 25) recall a festivity that is celebrated in India, where women can scourge men, while men can throw pigments to women and insult them. I have inserted this episode in a more general context, where all of this turns against the whole of mankind. The wind, for me, is the expression of God's will, a number of whirls that you cannot avoid; even if you try to hide inside a glass dome, you will be given what you deserve. This is a second admonition. The nude male figure in the center has been inspired by Michelangelo's *Giudizio Universale [Final Judgement, 1534-41]* because it is the only figure that is completely naked. I wanted to insert the dismay, a common denominator that united all these situations, the person that covers himself, the person that insults the others, etc. Dismay is not only fear; it is something that from the mind reaches the body as well. The nudity is the cruelty of this person who is waiting for the worse to happen, since he is protecting his interior parts, part of the face, part of his truth, since he has become aware that the moment has arrived, and he is waiting for a sudden terrible thing to happen. I thought this painting to be a warning as well. Scourging is the attitude that each person has towards himself and the others, which condemns the single person, without forgiveness. There will be no remittance, nobody will be spared, and everyone will have what is deserved. In *Mattheus, 24, versus 21* we read ‘there will be a huge tribulation, as never happened from the origin of the universe until now, and never will be’. By saying so, I ask people to repent: since I make neither a too generalized, nor a too specific speech, I needed to turn all the setting of this painting to show this concept. What I really love about this painting is the effects of colors: even though

¹⁰ [In the recent email of July 24th, 2008, previously mentioned, Tessari wrote to me that “L'ultimo quadro, quello delle Idi di Marzo, è la continuazione del Girone Dantesco, e nonostante sia traslata in una immagine di festa, è preludio di tempi duri e di cambiamento” (The last painting, Ides of March, represents a continuation of Dante's Circle, and even though it is an image of celebration, however it anticipates times of difficulty and change)].

there are just a few warm colors, however there is an explosion of energy at all levels, and therefore I think the message I had the opportunity to give in this painting will be fully understood” (Tessari 2007).

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