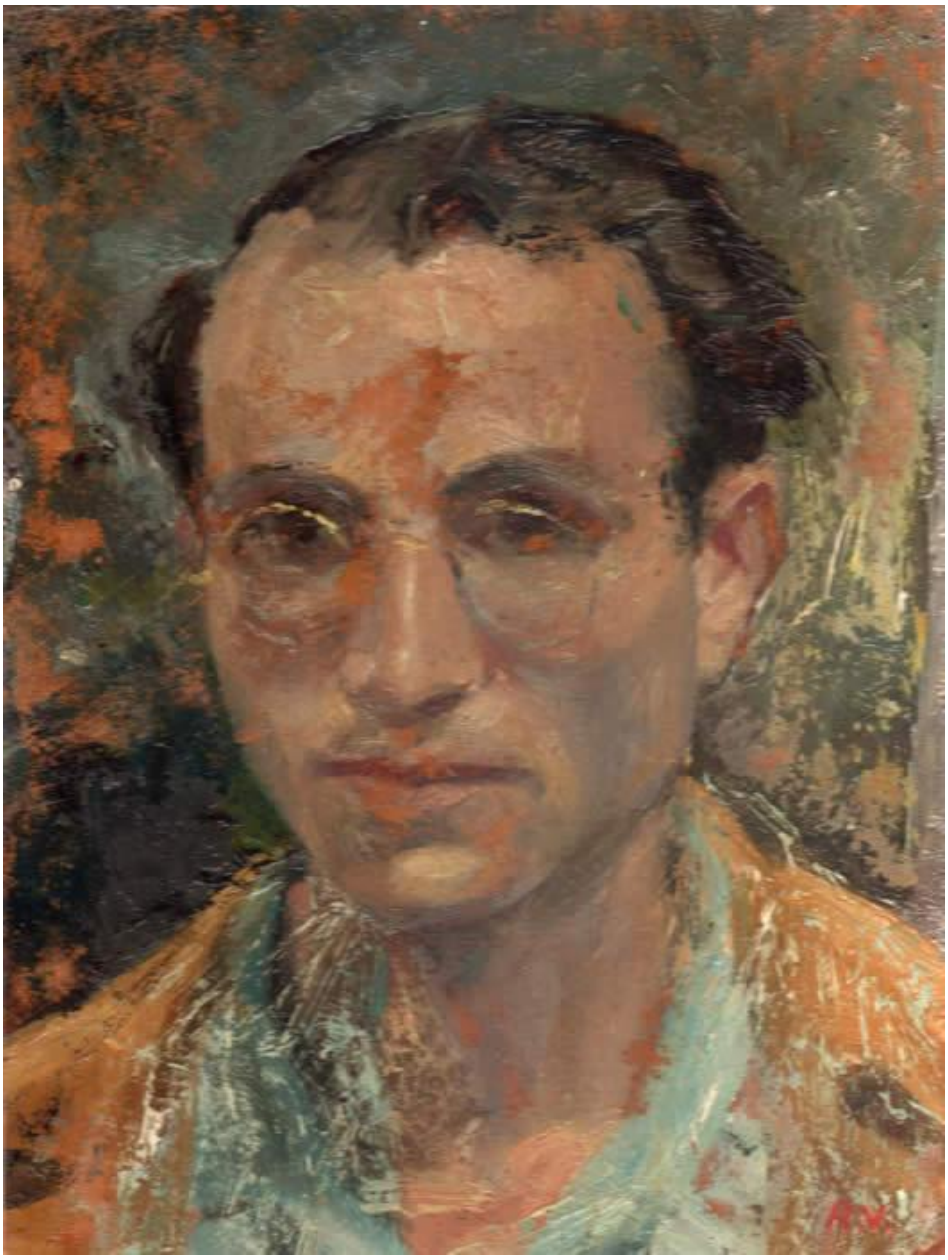
All That is *Solidus*:
A Tribute to Romano Vio



Jeremy Lester

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Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,
Your loop'd and window'd raggedness defend you
From seasons such as these?

William Shakespeare, *King Lear*

* * *

No one can deny, let alone escape, the fact that we live in a society today that is permanently on the go, constantly shifting, and full of fluid movement. To use the description coined by Zygmunt Bauman, we live in an era of 'liquid times'; one in which nothing (and no one) can hold its shape any longer, and one in which everything is in a permanent state of constant liquefaction and dissolution.[1] It is a condition in which nothing at all stands still any longer. Everything is subject to the extraordinary mobility of fluids, not least space (which cannot be fixed) nor time (which cannot be bound).

Bauman, it goes without saying, is not the first to use this analogy. Indeed, if there is one metaphor that has dominated the whole of modern human history (and certainly modern literature) it is surely this one of constant fluid motion. It is sufficient to recall Joyce's 'upswelling tides' and 'swaying reluctant arms', which day by day, night by night, are wearily lifted and then left to fall and drown, in that most fluid of novels *Ulysses*. Or think of Baudelaire's poetic rendering of gaseous, vaporous 'floating existences' or Rousseau's agitated, turbulent, psychic dizziness and drunkenness of modern life, dominated by phantoms in the streets and in the soul (which he describes in his novel *La Nouvelle Héloise*). And who can possibly forget here Marx's description as he sees and feels the ground of an ever-expanding capitalist society forever shifting beneath his feet. That society in which there are oceans of liquid matter forever looking to expand so as to rend into fragments continents of hard rock. That society in which: 'All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away [and] all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify.' That society in which, 'all that is solid melts into air [and] all that is holy is profaned.'[2]

Nor is it just a modern phenomenon either. Ultimately, are we not all descendents of Thales' claim, back at the very origins of Western philosophy and civilisation (in the sixth century Before Christ), that the world is held up by water and rides like a ship, and when it is said to 'quake' it is actually rocking because of the water's movement?[3]

Nevertheless, constant though it might be, there is, Bauman insists, a unique factor at work in today's bottomless depths of fluidity into which we are sinking. In the past, he stresses, the whole point of the process of fluidity and liquefaction was the desire to clear the ground for new and improved solid structures and forms of life. That is no longer the case. Now the movement is in reverse and is one way only – from any form of solidity to permanent fluidity. And the waves of change that we are creating are nothing less than tempestuous, and often catastrophically so, in their effects. Goethe's Mephistopheles – 'the spirit that negates all' for the simple sake of negation itself – has thus triumphed. It truly does seem that we can no longer bear anything that lasts.

In this world of continuous, irrecoverable, disorientating, and disintegrating change that stems from the stress and precariousness of permanent fluidity, where can one possibly find a little solidity to cling to, an anchor, or some element of stability, constancy, rootedness? Where can one possibly find something that has more than just a limited, throw-away existence? Is everything doomed to fall apart? Is there no centre than can hold? Or, to paraphrase Emerson rather than Yeats is there no hero left who is immovably centred?

I have come to Venice. It is hardly the first place that you would think of as being the epitome of solidity – defying all known laws of gravity in the way that the city seems to do – but there is a good reason for being here. Venice and the Veneto region have a strong tradition in many forms of art. Painting of course immediately springs to mind, but equally so does sculpture, and it is the latter that I want to concentrate on, whose pulse I want to take and feel.

If there is anything that has the potential of providing some much needed reassuring solidity in our lives and existence, it is surely sculpture. By its very essence, as Michel Onfray has pointed out, it is the stopping of energy in its tracks so as to contemplate it, to capture its vitality, to tame it so as to nourish it. It is the organisation of chaos around us; it is the creation of order out of disorder so as to bring forth the advent of meaning; it is the creation of a harmony in space that was not there before.[4] It is endurance, it is resistance, the embracing of volume and depth, not just physically but emotionally as well. It is the completion of circular movements, the bearing of weight within one's own constituted being. Above all, the history of sculpture is the history of man's view of man, of his physical body, his metaphysical spirit, and it is the attempt to solidify and unify these two elements.

Are such views too philosophical? Perhaps, but then they are precisely designed to be so, for in this way they remind us of the age-old links that have always united philosophy and sculpture. Just as there has always been a philosophy of sculpture so there has been a sculpture of philosophy, a form of thought that is consciously grounded in sculpture. After all, doesn't a philosopher try to carve out and mould fixed, solid concepts for reflection? And isn't language a tool; one that we inherit but also use, and through usage do we not participate in the productive activities of sculpting new forms of language?

It is a connection, an interchange, a dialogue that goes back to Plato and to Aristotle, to Plotinus and to the desire of the individual to be the sculptor – or to use Aristotle's terms, the material, formal, efficient and final cause – of one's own being and one's own essence. It is a dialogue taken up by the likes of Kant, by Hegel, by Schiller, by Humboldt, and especially by Herder, for whom sculptural thinking and sculptural forms are right at the heart of his philosophy of thinking communities. And it is a dialogue, as Onfray has shown, that has continued down to our day. (Think, for example, of Jean-Paul Sartre's abiding interest in the relationship between sculpture and philosophy, which was particularly embodied in his love and admiration of the works by David Hare and especially Alberto Giacometti).

Of course, at times the dialogue can be interrupted or even broken altogether. Ideas, as well as statues, can equally become rigid and petrified. Absence can dominate substance and emptiness doesn't always want to be filled with materiality. In the realm of sculpture, for example, one cannot help but recall here the thoughts of Arturo Martini – arguably the region's and the whole of Italy's finest sculptor of the first half of the twentieth century – a couple of years before he died (in 1947) when he solemnly pronounced that sculpture had become a 'dead language', killed by idolatry and embalmed in a sealed tomb.[5] Like many such statements, taken out of context it tended to stick and to dominate the mind and impressions for a long time afterwards, serving as a kind of obituary for sculpture's perceived permanent death. But in truth, what the statement really amounted to was a

throwing down of the aesthetic and artistic gauntlet for future generations to pick up so as to breathe new life and meaning into sculpture.

For many young artists trying to make a mark for themselves, Martini's words at this time must have come like a bombshell. But in many ways, worse – much worse – was to follow. In the immediate aftermath of the war, now not only was it sculpture that had supposedly died, but in the eyes of those like Theodor Adorno (and many others) every aspect of culture, from wherever it came, had become tainted with guilt, responsibility and bad faith. In short, if art was to continue to exist, then it could only do so in the absolute knowledge that it was doomed to fail. More than this, as Adorno later clarified, all life must exist from now on likewise knowing that the very purpose of existence itself was doomed to fail. Any notion of simply moving on after Auschwitz was (or should be) delusory and inconceivable. Art had to bear witness from now on to its predestined failure. The only art – and the only artists – worthy of the name had to (self) consciously recognise this.[6]

Given such conditions and obligations imposed on them, it is small wonder that many aspiring artists at this time threw in the towel and laid down their tools for ever. Yet notwithstanding the obituaries, the recriminations, the accusations, and the often agonising reflections that they engendered, not everyone gave up.

The specific reason that has thus brought me to Venice is to take part in the centenary celebrations of the birth of one artist who did not give up and who, perhaps more than anyone else in his artistic sphere, responded in his own quiet way to the various challenges laid down in these difficult times. More than that, he is an artist who, in many critics' minds, arguably went on to become Italy's most accomplished sculptor in the second half of the twentieth century. The artist in question is Romano Vio.

I have used the words 'in his own quiet way', and to a large extent these are words that shaped and moulded most of his life (from 1913 to 1984), as well as the manner in which his work has been received or, just as importantly, ignored. For one needs to stress right from the outset, Romano Vio's most prominent characteristic is the fact that while he is universally recognised as a 'maestro' by all who know his work, he is too often the unknown or 'forgotten maestro' outside of this circle of aficionados (notwithstanding the regular commissions he received, the prizes won, and the various honours bestowed upon him, not the least of which was three appearances at the Venice Biennale and the award of the title *Cavaliere della Repubblica*).

Why is this? As nearly all the commentaries and reflections on his life and work testify, in character and personality he was a very quiet, reserved, reflective and unassuming man, rich only in innate humility and modesty which were of Franciscan proportions, who always shied away from the public limelight and any public tributes that might have been given to him (no matter how prestigious they were). On the outside, he glowed with warmth of feeling and serenity. On the inside, however, there was perhaps a different burning sensation; one that was full of anxiety and occasional moments of (self) doubt and depression, which not even his unshakeable religious faith, and the inner depths of strength that this gave him, could override. In terms of his religious beliefs, meanwhile, not only did these influence his explicit sacred works, but likewise his more secular works as well, and indeed the boundary between what was sacred and what was not was often merged into a single, combined inspirational force – the quiet search for truth and meaning. As he so cogently put it: 'All of life emerges from a centre, then sprouts and expands from inside outwards.'[7] In short, he had a character that was never designed to promote himself or his work other than through what it expressed and articulated by itself. He was likewise a man who believed in the virtues of simplicity,

and as the post-war years gradually started to transform themselves into stronger consumerist tastes and ways of living, he became increasingly alienated from the wider society around him, withdrawing more and more into the safe inner haven of family, close friends and his workshop/studio.

In terms of his work, from a stylistic point of view here too it was almost as though he did everything possible to avoid a fixed, well-established, well-known recognition for himself. Over the years he adopted an almost endless range of styles – Romanesque, naturalism, Gothic, realism, neo-classical, dynamic mannerism and many others one could mention – and he was constantly searching, adapting, and experimenting. Above all, he desperately tried to cling on to the belief of the autonomous subject and his (self) worth. Any price was worth paying so as to be able to retain absolute freedom from any single school of thought or approach to art, and if this meant lack of a wider meaningful recognition, it was nevertheless a price he was very consciously prepared to pay. I am reminded here of the words once used to describe Aristide Maillol: '… he refuses to fetter his genius with formulae and set rules; he is guided only by his taste, his inborn sense of beauty and harmony and his artistic conscience.'[8] Moreover, the same principles applied to his thematic range as well, which was likewise never static but always ranging far and wide – from the pastoral to the mythical, from the personal to the dramatic, and from the symbolic to the allegorical. Whatever the style or the theme, however, there was always the consistency of poetic feeling, purity of form and profundity of expression. No work was embarked upon without desire, and all works in progress emitted feelings of warmth, passion and love in him. Perhaps the words that Rilke spoke in relation to Rodin might not be entirely out of place here:

> With his own development [he] has given an impetus to all the arts in this confused age. Some time it will be realized what has made this great artist so supreme. He was a worker whose only desire was to penetrate with all his forces into the humble and difficult significance of his tools. Therein lay a certain renunciation of Life, but in just this renunciation lay his triumph, for Life entered into his work.[9]

There are two other things here which need to be stressed and which need to be harmoniously intertwined. The first is his constant search for the solidity of ever-greater depth. As he himself stressed to his students at the Venice *Accademia di Belle Arti* where he taught:

> Sculptors, strengthen within yourselves your sense of depth. It is only with difficulty that the Spirit learns to grasp this notion, because Spirit has distinct perception only of surfaces. It is difficult for it to imagine forms in depth. However, that is our task. First of all, establish the main planes of the figure you are sculpting. Give vigorous accentuation to the orientation of each part of the body – to the head, the shoulders, the legs. Art demands decisiveness. It is by means of sightlines penetrating into depth that you become immersed in space; that you master depth itself. When the planes of the composition are right, your job is already done: your statue is already alive, and the details emerge and become organised all by themselves. When you are modelling never think in terms of surface but in terms of "relief". Your mind should conceive of each surface as the extremity of a volume that pushes against it from behind.[10]

'Your statue is already alive'. How one hears the echoes of the old Pygmalion promise of the sculptor's hand. Hand in hand, meanwhile, with this search for penetrative depth is his acute sense and sensitivity of *touch*. Taken together these two things – depth and sensitivity of touch – cannot help but have an enormous emotional impact on the viewer who approaches his sculptural works. One does not come just to look at his works. Much more than that, one comes to touch them, to embrace them, or better still to *caress* them, with the hands if possible, but if this is not allowed in

the context of a museum or exhibition, then at the very least one caresses them with the eyes and with the soul.

Here, we are all disciples of Herder:

> Consider the lover of art sunk deep in contemplation who circles restlessly around a sculpture. What would he not do to transform his sight into touch, to make his seeing into a form of touching that feels in the dark…. [He] shifts from place to place: his eye becomes his hand and the ray of light his finger, or rather, his soul has a finger that is yet finer than his hand or the ray of light.[11]

United by a soft flow of touch, sculptor and viewer become entwined in a shared mutual realm of tactile sensitivity, tactile intimacy and tactile community. All physical, psychological and social alienation is temporarily expunged. There can be no thought, and there can certainly be no truth, without touching and without being touched.

> Is this then a touch? Quivering me to a new identity,
> Flames and ether making a rush for my veins,
> Treacherous tip of me reaching and crowding to help them,
> My flesh and blood playing out lightning to strike what is hardly different from myself.[12]

Let us never forget that a new-born child learns to touch long before learning to see.

> Beauty has no other origin than the wound, singular, different for each person, hidden or invisible, that each man keeps within himself, which he preserves and into which he withdraws when he wishes to leave this world for a temporary, but deep solitude.
>
> This is neither a luxury nor a privilege. It is a presence in the world, with no melodramatic obsession with the wretched and the sordid. It is silent, like death, the death of those close to one, then one's own.[13]

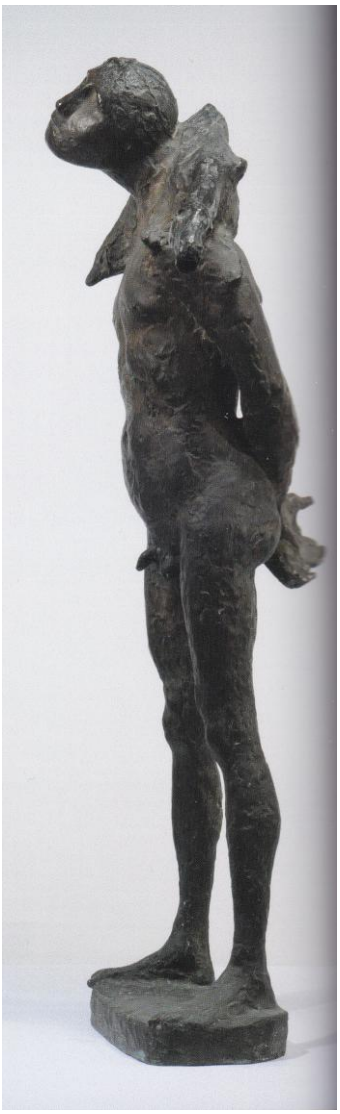
The first passage here comes from Jean Genet. The second, commenting on it, comes from Tahar Ben Jelloun. Both writers are talking about the same person – Alberto Giacometti.

Was there a wound of this kind in the life of Romano Vio? I confess, I do not know. But if there was not, there was certainly one event, one period, I think, which deeply touched him to the core of his skin and his soul and which stayed with him for the duration of his life – his wartime experiences.

With the outbreak of war, the young Romano's teaching and artistic activities – which had already earned him a good deal of praise – had to be put on hold. His initial posting as a combat soldier took him to the Yugoslav front. From there he was transferred back to Italy and for two years, from 1941 to 1943, he was stationed in Sardinia, first of all at Piscinas, near Cagliari, and then at Santadi, before finally being sent to Naples following the arrival of the allied forces. Little appears to be known of his combat experiences on the Yugoslav front, other than the very significant fact that he was awarded the Military Cross. There are, however, a few surviving extracts from a 'war diary' that he kept during his time in Sardinia, together with a number of drawings and sketches, and it is this period, therefore, that interests me most.

In terms of the landscape – not to mention the traditions, the customs, and at least some of the people he would have encountered on a daily basis – it is certainly hard to imagine a greater, starker contrast between his native Venice and Sardinia. The floating weightlessness of the former was

literally a world apart from the heavy, all-encompassing solidity of the megalithic landscape which so dominates the island of Sardinia. Stones prevail everywhere; sculptured stones, carved out by men in the far distant mists of time, as well as naturally carved stones, created – sometimes lovingly, sometimes mockingly – by the force of Nature herself. And no one, least of all someone possessing the sensitivities of Romano Vio, could have possibly been immune from the all-powerful symbolic force that they emit. The *nuraghi* – those stone remnants from the late Neolithic period before the Phoenician invasion, which still to this day offer the hospitality of much needed shelter. The *tanche* (pastures) – piles of stone gathered and stacked together so that the soil, dry and poor as it is, can nevertheless be worked. They are the stones, in other words, which symbolise fertility and productivity. Then there are the *domus de janas* (the witches' houses) and their connection with death, as well as re-birth. And let's not forget the ordinary, everyday stones – the stones that are the living testimony to resistance and struggle. As John Berger has so beautifully written: '[These] stones propose another sense of time, whereby the past, the deep past of the planet, proffers a meagre yet massive support to human acts of resistance, as if the veins of metal in rock led [directly] to our veins of blood.'[14] How fitting for a young artist with such a strong desire to make blood course through the veins of all the materials that he worked with – from bronze to cement, from terracotta to wood, and of course with stone itself.



The inspiration of Sardinia is absolutely prevalent in so much of his sculptural output once he is back on his native, watery terrain. It is most explicitly there, of course, in the series dedicated to *i pastori*, musicians and animals. But it is likewise to be found, I think, in many of the works depicting artisans, which are arguably some of the most beautiful of his entire *œuvre*.

And there is one final matter that I would like to raise before we take leave of Sardinia. The island's most famous son in modern (twentieth-century) times is undoubtedly Antonio Gramsci. Imprisoned far from his home by the fascist regime, Gramsci asks the most fundamental question of all from the confines of his prison cell: 'What is Man? … Reflecting on it, we can see that in putting [this] question… what we mean is: what can man become? That is, can man dominate his own destiny, can he "make himself", can he create his own life?'[15] The words, needless to say, would not have been read or known, but might there be a faint echo of similar kinds of existentialist reflections taking place in the mind of Romano Vio while he is based in Sardinia? After all, in many ways it was precisely during this period that the man he was to become was fully carved; not just the artist and

the direction he would now go on to take, but also the husband and, perhaps most important of all, the father. And what if he could not make himself? What if he did not survive the war? As he writes in his Sardinian diary one Christmas Day: 'I feel danger hanging over us but I stay calm; and in the meantime think of Jolanda and the child. Death seems to be an impossibility, and yet I am aware that in similar circumstances many have died never having known their own son.'[16]

Turning to the suffering caused by the war, which he would have seen at first hand in all its forms and guises, let us reflect a little on one of his undoubted creative masterpieces – *Cristo risorge dalle macerie della Guerra* (1966) – which is cast in bronze and composed in a cubo-realist style. This really is a powerfully evocative piece, made even more powerful, I think, by the contrasting, perhaps even conflicting, emotions that it conveys and bears. On the one hand, there is undoubted pain and anguish in the work. Look at how forlorn and sad the expression on Christ's face is, and the pained look is accentuated by the fact that the eyes are closed. It is almost as though he does not want, or cannot bear, to look around him. He has been resurrected, but for what purpose? It seems almost a reluctant resurrection; as though he is resigned to his fate and destiny but against his will. The memories of his suffering clearly torment him still. Most of all, the eyes are immediately drawn to the severed parts of the arm and hands. Given the fact that in many other works Vio portrayed Christ as a simple artisan and labourer, this figure of Christ simply negates that possibility and potential. How can he be an artisan without the full use of his arms and hands?

Yet for all its sadness, anguish, and pain, there is at the same time a good deal of hope and optimism as well. Notwithstanding everything, the possibility for resurrection and re-birth is there. Moreover, the injured arm does not necessarily convey a sense of incompleteness. The whole history of sculpture is replete with images of men and women without arms, and yet the sense of wholeness and unity is not lost or forfeited by this. There is a description by Rilke of an armless statue by Rodin which could not be more apt in this case:

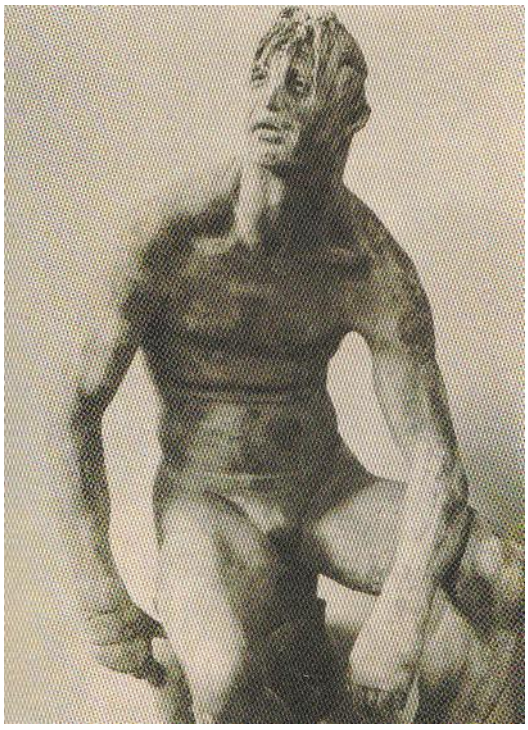
> Never was human body assembled to such an extent about its inner self, so beat by its own soul and yet upheld by the elastic strength of its blood. The neck, bent sidewise on the lowered body, rises and stretches and holds the listening head over the distant roar of life; this is so impressively and strongly conceived that one does not remember a more gripping gesture or one of deeper meaning. It is striking that the arms are lacking. [He] must have considered these arms as too facile a solution of his task, as something that did not belong to that body which desired to be enwrapped within itself without the aid of aught external. When one looks upon this figure one thinks of Duse in a drama of d'Annunzio's, when she is painfully abandoned and tries to embrace without arms and to hold without hands. This scene, in which her body has learned a caressing that reaches

> beyond it, belongs to the unforgettable moments in her acting. It conveys the impression that the arms are something superfluous, an adornment, a thing of the rich, something immoderate that one can throw off in order to become quite poor. She appeared in this moment as though she had forfeited something unimportant, rather like someone who gives away his cup in order to drink out of the brook.[17]

Pain and anguish then, but tenderness and hope as well. *Ecce Homo*.

There is one final element in this cubist puzzle that is perhaps worth mentioning. It is nothing more than a curiosity, but a pertinent one. In London, during the height of the Nazi air blitz on the city, a statue of Christ with arms outstretched, bearing the message 'Come unto me all you who labour and are heavy laden', was partially destroyed in a bombing raid. The parts of the statue that were most pulverised were the arms and hands. After the war, instead of repairing the damage or re-making the statue, the Anglican Vicar of the church decided to leave it as it was. Only the message that accompanied it was changed. It henceforth read: 'Christ has no hands but your hands. And Christ has no arms but our arms.' In other words, in Christian terminology, man is the body of Christ, and in order for that body to move, to embrace, to caress, to love, it must be by our own actions.

Christ has no arms, so we must bear those arms for him and labour on his behalf. In the English rendition of this, however, 'arms' carries a potential double meaning here. They are the arms of the body, but they can also be arms to fight with ('arms' as weaponry). It is noticeable that right from the beginning of his artistic career, Romano Vio was not averse to depicting the physical side of struggle and resistance, especially when it was called for and necessary, and even more so when it was just and proper to fight by 'taking up arms'.



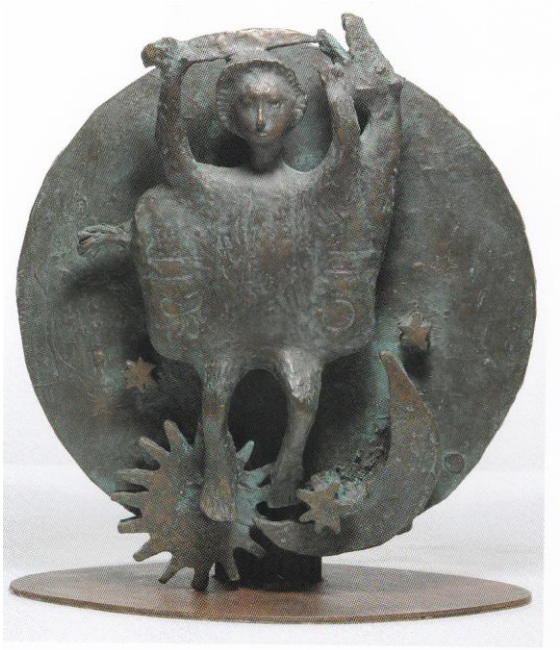
The first, earliest illustration of this can be seen in the 1938 sculpture of *Il pugilatore*, which is generally considered to be the artist's first recognised great work. It is also noteworthy that Vio returned to this work much later in his career (in 1965), so as to produce a very close, but not exact, replica in bronze. Traditional interpretations of both versions have tended to argue that the pose is of a boxer 'at rest' and that, in the first version at least, it would have fitted in well with the dominant political-ideological priority at that time for artists to highlight the muscular virility of man. But I think an alternative reading is possible here, especially when it comes to the 1938 version. The more one scrutinises this closely the more one sees not so much a boxer in his prime, at rest, but the image and pose of a man who is tired and exhausted, almost at the end of his tether. Look at his eyes, morose and staring into vacant space. Look at his mouth, open and downturned. Look at his dishevelled state and condition, the general wear and tear of the body, the veins sticking out, the sweat-soaked hair, and especially the arms which seem to droop from his body and which can barely be held on. For sure, there is an element of undoubted strength here, but it is not so much virile strength so much as the strength which stems from sheer brawn and the grit and determination that goes with it. It is the kind of strength, in other words, which is also fragile and susceptible to frailty. More than anything, I think,

it is the face and image of a poor man; a downtrodden man; a man who belongs not to the 'noble' working class, but to the 'underclass'; a man whose only means of survival for himself and his family, of putting some bread on the table, is to fight. He is the kind of underclass man and boxer that Jack London depicted so superbly in many of his short stories.

The strength that is needed to resist the daily grind of poverty and hunger is one thing. The strength to resist an occupying army in war time is another of course. And yet, perhaps the kind of strength (inner as well as outer), grit and determination that is required is not all that dissimilar at the end of the day. Romano Vio may not have directly experienced both, but he certainly witnessed both, and he knew full well the courage and dignity that both inspired. Looking at his artistic work commemorating and celebrating the wartime Resistance, two pieces stand out. The first is his 1956 Monument to the Resistance, which won first prize in the Città di Savona National Competition, and which is on permanent display in the Savona City Hall. Measuring 270 by 250 centimetres and cast in bronze, it is a bas-relief which combines various perspective planes, depicting not only the popular resistance against the forces of fascist and Nazi oppression, but also other key events such as the deportation of prisoners to concentration camps, and some of the heroic deeds arising out of earlier struggles and conflicts. As *L'Unità* reported following the news of his victory in the competition, it was a work of powerful aesthetic, poetic and moral inspiration, which rendered due dignity and honour to all the popular masses who in their different ways resisted and opposed barbarity in whatever guise it emerged.[18]

As superbly constructed and inspiring as the 1956 monument is, if I was forced to choose just one of his Resistance-inspired works for its outstanding qualities, I would not hesitate for one moment in choosing his 1964 work – *Monumenta alla partigiana*. I will let the artist himself describe the work: 'The group in bronze consists of two figures. The lower is that of a praying mother awaiting the return of her far-distant husband and son. The figure that arises behind her is that of a young woman partisan, a resolute combatant shown calling upon others to rise up against the oppressor; concealed beneath her drapery, her weapon symbolises clandestine struggle.'[19] All choices are personal and subjective, and for me this truly is a sublime work of great beauty, feeling, warmth and inspiration. Here indeed I can feel the blood coursing through the veins.

The impact of his wartime experiences, which had such a powerful effect on his work in so many diverse ways, never left the artist, and I think it can likewise be seen in the very latter part of his life. Amidst the perennial beauty and serenity of the sacred works, and the *luxe, calme et volupté* of his female nudes, the memories and fears of the past – and perhaps even more so at this time, the fears for the future – can never be completely expunged. They are shown very explicitly and very provocatively in the fury and violence of his Dante-inspired works in the late 1970s, and they are there for sure in his five-year long work entitled, simply, *Apocalisse*.



Let us come full circle. The search for something solid; the touch of something solid; the sculptural primacy of solidity. What ultimately lies behind this search? An excavation of the etymology of the word provides us with one possible, one desirable – oh, how desirable – answer.

In contrast to fluids, which are subject to a continuous process of change in shape and form, a solid 'undergoes no flow and can spring back to its original shape.'[20]One can of course change the appearance of a solid – and no sculpture can exist without this change – but it still remains a solid; it still retains the essence of solidity and of what it once was. This is due to the type of bonding that holds the atoms of the solid together and of the structural arrangements of the atoms. It is the *bonding*, therefore, that signifies the stability of solids and which lies at the heart of the resistance that they put up against the separation of the atoms. As a consequence, all solids have a preferential relationship with space rather than time:

> While solids have clear spatial dimensions but neutralize the impact, and thus downgrade the significance, of time (effectively resist its flow or render it irrelevant), fluids do not keep to any shape for long and are constantly ready (and prone) to change it; and so for them it is the flow of time that counts, more than the space they happen to occupy: that space, after all, they fill but "for a moment". In a sense, solids cancel time; for liquids on the contrary, it is mostly time that matters. When describing solids, one may ignore time altogether; in describing fluids, to leave time out of account would be a grievous mistake. Descriptions of fluids are all snapshots, and they need a date at the bottom of the picture.[21]

Does this perhaps explain why many sculptors (and this certainly applies to Romano Vio) often fail or ignore to put a date on their works?

But let us excavate deeper here. Let us try to carve out an even more specific human bond with all that is solid. The Latin root of the word is *sol*, which means 'whole'. The Latin word for solid, meanwhile – which refers to the stability of a substance and the manner in which liquid and physical matter are in equilibrium or are wholly combined – is *solidus*. The neuter form of *solidus* is *solidum*, and it is from *solidum* that we derive the origin of the modern-day word – *solidarity* – which primarily has the double meaning of psychological or material support and the unifying bond between individuals as the basis of a collectivity or community.

Just as there is a direct link between *solidus* and solidarity, so there is a direct, special link between anything that pertains of solidity and sculpture. It was for this reason that a philosopher like Herder in particular was always so keen to emphasise and to hold on to sculptural forms of thinking as the core basis of any stable community built on solidarity. Solidarity has to be seen as one of, if not *the*, basic ethical categories of human life. And for solidarity to exist and to be maintained, there has to be empathy, there has to be a solid structure of feeling, not just in the minds of people but in the concrete ways in which they are in touch with themselves and with everyone around them. Tactile intimacy creates a tactile community. No one is more innately aware of this than a sculptor.

Of course, it goes without saying that a sculptor, like a great many artists, invariably works on his own in isolation, in *solitude*. But solitude does not in itself undermine wholeness or community or unity. The *sol* – the wholeness – is still there – and can (should) partake in every solid structure that he creates. In short, solitude is not a hindrance to solidarity. No one has perhaps given a better understanding of this than in the tribute paid by Tahar Ben Jelloun to Alberto Giacometti:

> … when confronted by one of Giacometti's works, one feels filled with humility. One is intimidated because a man, aloof from the world, from all market value, has succeeded in expressing all of us by hollowing out clay, by hollowing out metal, remembering that human

> tragedy is immediate – like that which he lived through during the Nazi period – or distant, dating from whenever man humiliated man.[22]

The sculptor in solitude can sculpt works of profound three-dimensional human meaning, which give rise to feelings or desires of profound human solidarity. Notwithstanding their completely different styles, themes, and approaches, the tribute paid to Giacometti by Tahar Ben Jelloun is one that, I am convinced, is equally worthy of being paid to Romano Vio.

All that is solid, all that is *solidus*, does not always melt into air. There is a corner of Venice where one can still hold on to what is solid in life, and where one can find a much-needed antidote to the fast-flowing, neurotic, chaotic and all too often catastrophic age in which we live.

Sculpt in solid solidarity.

* * *

Notes:

[1] For most of the past two decades, nearly all of Bauman's work has been devoted to the overarching theme of the 'liquid times' that we live in and the multiple effects this has had on all dimensions of our life, both at a society-wide level as well as for the individual. For more details on all these considerable works and many other initiatives that have developed out of them, see the website of The Bauman Institute – http://baumaninstitute.leeds.ac.uk

[2] Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Communist Manifesto* (authorised English translation of 1888 edited and annotated by Frederick Engels) published online at www.slp.org/nyln.htm, pp.11-12.

[3] This particular perspective of Thales' views is mentioned by Seneca in his *Naturales Quaestiones*, III, 14, (1).

[4] Michel Onfray, *La sculpture de soi. La morale esthétique* (Paris : Grasset, 1993), pp. 67-90.

[5] Arturo Martini, *La scultura lingua morta* (Milano: Abscondita, 2010).

[6] Theodor Adorno's analysis of the role and status of art and culture in the aftermath of the Holocaust can be found in a number of his works, most notably *Prismen*, *Negative Dialektik*, *Ohne Leitbild*, and *Noten zur Literatur*. The Collected Works (*Gesammelte Schriften*) of Adorno are published by Suhrkamp.

[7] As cited in Ennio Pouchard and Elsa Dezuanni, *Romano Vio: uno scultore dell'animo* (Villorba: Evolution Printing, 2013), p. 33.

[8] John Rewald, *Maillol* (London: Hyperion Press, 1939), p. 23.

[9] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Auguste Rodin*, trans. Jessie Liemont and Hans Trausil (New York: Sunrise Turn, 1919), p. 80.

[10] *Romano Vio*, p. 33.

[11] Johann Gottfried Herder, *Sculpture: Some Observations on Shape and Form from Pygmalion's Creative Dream*, trans. Jason Gaiger (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 41.

[12] Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass. The First (1855) Edition* (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 53.

[13] Tahar Ben Jelloun, *Alberto Giacometti*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Paris: Flohic, 1991), pp. 16/18.

[14] John Berger, 'How to Live with Stones', *Counter-Hegemony*, Special Issue Zero, 1998, p. 30.

[15] Valentino Gerratana (ed), *Antonio Gramsci. Quaderni del Carcere, Vol. 2* (Torino: Einaudi, 1977), §54, pp. 1343-1344.

[16] *Romano Vio*, p. 29.

[17] Rilke, *Auguste Rodin*, pp. *38-39.*

[18] See Paolo Rizzi, *Romano Vio. Scultore 1913–1984* (undated catalogue).

[19] *Roman Vio*, p. 106.

[20] See Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 1.

[21] Ibid., p. 2.

[22] Jelloun, *Alberto Giacometti*, pp. 74/76.

[23] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'extériorité* (Dordrecht : Kluwer Academic, 1992), p. 311.

[24] Guy Debord, *Commentaires sur la société du spectacle* (Paris : Éditions Gérard Lebovici, 1988).