# Chapter 3 Exactitude

For the ancient Egyptians, exactitude was symbolized by a feather that served as a weight on scales used for the weighing of souls. This light feather was called Maat, goddess of the scales. The hieroglyph for Maat also stood for a unit of length—the 33 centimeters of the standard brick—and for the fundamental note of the flute.

This information comes from a lecture by Giorgio de Santillana on the precision of the ancients in observing astronomical phenomena, a lecture I heard in Italy in 1963 which had a profound influence on me. These days I have often thought of Santillana, who acted as my guide in Massachusetts during my first visit to the United States in 1960. In memory of his friendship, I have started this talk on exactitude in literature with the name of Maat, goddess of the scales—all the more because Libra is my sign of the Zodiac.

First I shall try to define my subject. To my mind exactitude means three things above all:

(1)  a well-defined and well-calculated plan for the work in question;

(2)  an evocation of clear, incisive, memorable visual images; in Italian we have an adjective that doesn't exist in English, "icastico," from the Greek eixaorixóc;

(3) a language as precise as possible both in choice of words and in expression of the subtleties of thought and imagination.

Why do I feel the need to defend values that many people might take to be perfectly obvious? I think that my first impulse arises from a hypersensitivity or allergy It seems to me that language is always used in a random, approximate, careless manner, and this distresses me unbearably. Please don't think that my reaction is the result of intolerance toward my neighbor: the worst discomfort of all comes from hearing myself speak. That's why I try to talk as little as possible. If I prefer writing, it is because I can revise each sentence until I reach the point where—if not exactly satisfied with my words—I am able at least to eliminate those reasons for dissatisfaction that I can put a finger on. Literature—and I mean the literature that matches up to these requirements—is the Promised Land in which language becomes what it really ought to be.

It sometimes seems to me that a pestilence has struck the human race in its most distinctive faculty—that is, the use of words. It is a plague afflicting language, revealing itself as a loss of cognition and immediacy, an automatism that tends to level out all expression into the most generic, anonymous, and abstract formulas, to dilute meanings, to blunt the edge of expressiveness, extinguishing the spark that shoots out from the collision of words and new circumstances.

At this point, I don't wish to dwell on the possible sources of this epidemic, whether they are to be sought in politics, ideology, bureaucratic uniformity, the monotony of the mass media, or the way the schools dispense the culture of the mediocre. What interests me are the possibilities of health. Literature, and perhaps literature alone, can create the antibodies to fight this plague in language.

I would like to add that it is not just language that seems to have been struck by this pestilence. Consider visual images, for example. We live in an unending rainfall of images. The most powerful media transform the world into images and multiply it by means of the phantasmagoric play of mirrors. These are images stripped of the inner inevitability that ought to mark every image as form and as meaning, as a claim on the attention and as a source of possible meanings. Much of this cloud of visual images fades at once, like the dreams that leave no trace in the memory, but what does not fade is a feeling of alienation and discomfort.

But maybe this lack of substance is not to be found in images or in language alone, but in the world itself. This plague strikes also at the lives of people and the history of nations. It makes all histories formless, random, confused, with neither beginning nor end. My discomfort arises from the loss of form that I notice in life, which I try to oppose with the only weapon I can think of— an idea of literature.

Therefore I can even use negative terms to define the values I am setting out to defend. It remains to be seen whether by using equally convincing arguments one cannot defend the contrary thesis. For example, Giacomo Leopardi maintained that the more vague and imprecise language is, the more poetic it becomes. I might mention in passing that as far as I know Italian is the only language in which the word vago (vague) also means "lovely, attractive." Starting out from the original meaning of "wandering," the word vago still carries an idea of movement and mutability, which in Italian is associated both with uncertainty and indefi-niteness and with gracefulness and pleasure.

To put my cult of exactitude to the proof, I will look back at those pages of the Zibaldone where Leopardi praises il vago. He says: "Le parole lontano, antico e simili sono poeticissime e piacevoli, perchè destano idee vaste, e indefinite … (25 Settembre

1821)" (The words lontano, antico [faraway, ancient], and similar words are highly poetic and pleasurable because they evoke vast, indefinite ideas). "Le parole notte, notturno ec, le descrizioni della notte ec, sono poeticissime, perchè la notte confondendo gli oggetti, l'animo non ne concepisce che un'immagine vaga, indistinta, incompleta, sì di essa che quanto ella contiene. Così oscurità, profondo ec. ec. (28 Settembre 1821)" (The words notte, notturno [night, nocturnal], etc., descriptions of the night, etc., are highly poetic because, as night makes objects blurred, the mind receives only a vague, indistinct, incomplete image, both of night itself and of what it contains. Thus also with oscurità [darkness], profondo [deep]).

Leopardi's reasoning is perfectly exemplified by his poems, which lend it the authority of what is proven by facts. Leafing again through the Zibaldone in search of other examples of this passion of his, I come across one entry longer than usual, a list of situations propitious to the "indefinite" state of mind:

la luce del sole o della luna, veduta in luogo dov'essi non si vedano e non si scopra la sorgente della luce; un luogo solamente in parte illuminato da essa luce; il riflesso di detta luce, e i vari effetti materiali che ne derivano; il penetrare di detta luce in luoghi dov'ella divenga incerta e impedita, e non bene si distingua, come attraverso un canneto, in una selva, per li balconi socchiusi ec. ec; la detta luce veduta in luogo, oggetto ec. dov'ella non entri e non percota dirittamente, ma vi sia ribattuta e diffusa da qualche altro luogo od oggetto ec. dov'ella venga a battere; in un andito veduto al di dentro o al di fuori, e in una loggia parimente ec. quei luoghi dove la luce si confonde ec ec colle ombre, come sotto un portico, in una loggia elevata e pensile, fra le rupi e i burroni, in una valle, sui colli veduti dalla parte dell'ombra, in modo che ne sieno indorate le cime; il riflesso che produce, per esempio, un vetro colorato su quegli oggetti su cui si riflettono i raggi che passano per detto vetro; tutti quegli oggetti insomma che per diverse materiali e menome circostanze giungono alla nostra vista, udito ec. in modo incerto, mal distinto, imperfetto, incompleto, o fuor dell'ordinario ec.

the light of the sun or the moon, seen in a place from which they are invisible and one cannot discern the source of the light; a place only partly illuminated by such light; the reflection of such light, and the various material effects derived from it; the penetration of such light into places where it becomes uncertain and obstructed, and is not easily made out, as through a cane brake, in a wood, through half-closed shutters, etc., etc.; the same light in a place, object, etc., where it does not enter and strike directly, reflected and diffused by some other place or object, etc., where it does strike; in a passageway seen from inside or outside, and similarly in a loggia, etc., places where the light mingles, etc., etc., with the shadows, as under a portico, in a high, overhanging loggia, among rocks and gullies, in a valley, on hills seen from the shady side so that their crests are gilded; the reflection produced, for example, by a colored pane of glass on those objects on which the rays passing through that glass are reflected; all those objects, in a word, that by means of various materials and minimal circumstances come to our sight, hearing, etc., in a way that is uncertain, indistinct, imperfect, incomplete, or out of the ordinary.

So this is what Leopardi asks of us, that we may savor the beauty of the vague and indefinite! What he requires is a highly exact and meticulous attention to the composition of each image, to the minute definition of details, to the choice of objects, to the lighting and the atmosphere, all in order to attain the desired degree of vagueness. Therefore Leopardi, whom I had chosen as the ideal opponent of my argument in favor of exactitude, turns out to be a decisive witness in its favor… ..The poet of vagueness can only be the poet of exactitude, who is able to grasp the subtlest sensations with eyes and ears and quick, unerring hands. It is worthwhile to read this note in the Zibaldone right to the end, since the search for the indefinite becomes the observation of all that is multiple, teeming, composed of countless particles.

Per lo contrario la vista del sole o della luna in una campagna vasta ed aprica, e in un cielo aperto ec. è piacevole per la vastità della sensazione. Ed è pur piacevole per la ragione assegnata di sopra, la vista di un cielo diversamente sparso di nuvoletti, dove la luce del sole o della luna prò-duca effetti variati, e indistinti, e non ordinari ec. E piacevolissima e sentimentalissima la stessa luce veduta nelle città, dov'ella è frastagliata dalle ombre, dove lo scuro contrasta in molti luoghi col chiaro, dove la luce in molte parti degrada appoco appoco, come sui tetti, dove alcuni luoghi riposti nascondono la vista dell'astro luminoso ec. ec. A questo piacere contribuisce la varietà, l'incertezza, il non veder tutto, e il potersi perciò spaziare coll'immaginazionè, riguardo a ciò che non si vede. Similmente dico dei simili effetti, che producono gli alberi, i filari, i colli, i pergolati, i casolari, i pagliai, le ineguaglianze del suolo ec. nelle campagne. Per lo contrario una vasta e tutta uguale pianura, dove la luce si spazi e diffonda senza diversità, né ostacolo; dove l'occhio si perda ec. è pure piacevolissima, per l'idea indefinita in estensione, che deriva da tal veduta. Così un cielo senza nuvolo. Nel qual proposito osservo che il piacere della varietà e dell'incertezza prevale a quello dell'apparente infinità, e dell'immensa uniformità. E quindi un cielo variamente sparso di nuvoletti, è forse più piacevole di un cielo affatto puro; e la vista del cielo è forse meno piacevole di quella della terra, e delle campagne ec. perchè meno varia (ed anche meno simile a noi, meno propria di noi, meno appartenente alle cose nostre ec). Infatti, ponetevi supino in modo che voi non vediate se non il cielo, separato dalla terra, voi proverete una sensazione molto meno piacevole che considerando una campagna, o considerando il cielo nella sua corrispondenza e relazione colla terra, ed unitamente ad essa in un medesimo punto di vista.

E piacevolissima ancora, per le sopraddette cagioni, la vista di una moltitudine innumerabile, come delle stelle, o di persone ec. un moto moltiplice, incerto, confuso, irregolare, disordinato, un ondeggiamento vago ec, che l'animo non possa determinare, né concepire definitamente e distintamente ec, come quello di una folla, o di un gran numero di formiche o del mare agitato ec. Similmente una moltitudine di suoni irregolarmente mescolati, e non distinguibili l'uno dall'altro ec. ec. ec. (20 Settembre 1821).[[2]](#_2__Zibaldone_di_pensieri__2_vol)

By contrast, the sight of the sun or moon in a vast, airy landscape, and in a clear sky, etc., is pleasing for the vast-ness of the sensation. And also pleasing, for the reason mentioned above, is the sight of the sky dotted with little clouds, in which the light of the sun or the moon produces varied effects, indistinct, out of the ordinary, etc. Most pleasing and full of feeling is the light seen in cities, where it is slashed by shadows, where darkness contrasts in many places with light, where in many parts the light little by little grows less, as on rooftops, where a few secluded places hide the luminous body from our sight, etc., etc. Contributing to this pleasure is the variety, the uncertainty, the not-seeing-everything, and therefore being able to walk abroad using the imagination in regard to what one does not see. I say similar things of similar effects produced by trees, rows of vines, hills, pergolas, outlying houses, haystacks, wrinkles in the soil, etc., of the landscape. On the contrary, a vast level plain, where the light sweeps and spreads without variety or obstacle, where the eye loses itself, etc., is also highly pleasurable, for the idea of infinite extension that results from such a sight. The same is true of a cloudless sky. In this regard I observe that the pleasure of variety and uncertainty is greater than that of apparent infinity and immense uniformity. And therefore a sky dotted with small clouds is perhaps more pleasurable than a totally clear sky; and to look at the sky is perhaps less pleasurable than to look at the earth and the landscape, etc., because it is less varied (and also less like us, less of our own, belonging less to things that are ours, etc.). In fact, if you lie down on your back so that you see nothing but the sky, separated from the earth, you will have a far less pleasing feeling than if you look at a landscape, or look at the sky in proportion and relation to the earth, integrating them from the same point of view.

Highly pleasing also, for the above-mentioned reasons, is the sight of an innumerable multitude, as of stars, people, etc., a multiple motion, uncertain, confused, irregular, disordered, a vague rising and falling, etc., which the mind cannot conceive definitely or distinctly, etc., like that of a crowd, or a swarm of ants, or a rough sea, etc. Similarly a multitude of sounds, irregularly mingled together, not to be distinguished one from another.

Here we touch on one of the nerve centers of Leopardi's poetics, as embodied in his most famous and beautiful lyric, "L'infinito." Protected by a hedge, on the far side of which he sees only the sky, the poet imagines infinite space and feels pleasure and fear together. The poem dates from 1819. The notes I read from the Zibaldone date from two years later and show that Leopardi went on thinking about the problem aroused by the composition of "L'infinito." In his reflections, two terms are constantly compared: the "indefinite" and the "infinite." For Leopardi, unhappy hedonist that he was, what is unknown is always more attractive than what is known; hope and imagination are the only consolations for the disappointments and sorrows of experience. Man therefore projects his desire into infinity and feels pleasure only when he is able to imagine that this pleasure has no end. But since the human mind cannot conceive the infinite, and in fact falls back aghast at the very idea of it, it has to make do with what is indefinite, with sensations as they mingle together and create an impression of infinite space, illusory but pleasurable all the same: "E il naufragar m'è dolce in questo mare" (And sweet to me is foundering in this sea). It is not only in the famous ending of "L'infinito" that gentleness prevails over fear, for what the lines communicate by the music of the words is, throughout, a sense of gentleness, even when these words express anguish.

I realize that I am interpreting Leopardi purely in terms of sensations, as if I accepted the image he wants to give of himself as a disciple of eighteenth-century Sensism. In fact the problem Leopardi is facing is speculative and metaphysical, a problem in the history of philosophy from Parmenides to Descartes and Kant: the relationship between the idea of infinity as absolute space and absolute time, and our empirical knowledge of space and time. Leopardi therefore starts with the rigorous abstraction of a mathematical notion of space and time, and compares this to the vague, undefined flux of sensations.

Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, ch. 3, translation by Patrick Creagh