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Carlo Mollino: being part of tradition

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"The only thing that need worry me", wrote Mollino in 1940, "is how to use expression as a means of calming my obsession with those forms, which remain a mystery until you have finally finished shaping them the way you wanted them - and the way you felt was right and inevitable": a clear declaration of faith in the Croce formula of art as intuition-expression in which content and sentiment is "poured and fused" into form. A declaration of a faith that began to 'take shape' in his youth, but which he maintained right to the end. It reveals the particular nature of Mollino as a cultural figure and how different he was from his contemporaries (like Ridolfi, Albini, and Gardella, who were all born in 1905), who had accepted and defended their definition as "Rationalists" and considered architecture not just one of the arts, but also a technical skill to be used to transform society. Mollino was certainly aware of the critical position of Persico and, in "Dopo Sant'Elia", the book published by Editoriale Domus in 1935, he had read the essay in which Argan maintained that "the attempt to start from practicality in order to reach art " had "failed most miserably", adding that "one can therefore see how this 'rational' theory of architecture contains not the slightest theoretical possibility of art, or rather, it does not provide the architect with any ideal process that leads to art... and, basically, it is not a theory - in other words an antecedent to art - but rather an after-event, an attempt to insert one's own fantastic creation as best as one can among contemporary needs." Of all the architects of his generation, Mollino was the most sensitive to the problem of going beyond a certain position - that of Rationalism which, already in the late 1930s, was undergoing a severe crisis throughout Europe. Right from the beginning, his decision was absolutely clear: he would tackle the crisis as an artist by following his own instinct and intuition, contending with the mystery of the forms that obsessed him, trying to "shape them" in every possible way, by defining them according to a principle of need.

His awareness of the fragility of the theoretical basis of Rationalism, which is quite evident in the creative debut he made with the Società Ippica di Torino, becomes conspicuous in the interiors of the homes of Miller and Devalle from 1936 to 1940. On the other hand, his endeavors in the Ezio D'Errico house were included, without any explicit differences, together with a series of interiors by contemporary architects, which were published by *Casabella* and *Domus*. "Having arrived in Turin a few years before from distant lands and occupations that were more concrete, if not in the slightest way practical; 'says Mollino, "Ezio D'Errico asked me to help him to "sort out" his luggage, "shore up" his books and create a landscape for him in place of the drab walls - but also to allow him to be free to leave, even after three years or six months. The trunks and furniture can be cleared out in a day: he didn't want his home to grow roots."

The most noticeable aspect of the interior was the giant prints which filled two walls: the one at the entrance with the fresco by Benozzo Gozzoli in the chapel of Palazzo Medici Riccardi, and the one in the studio with a drawing by Leonardo for the Adoration of the Magi. The idea of pushing back space through the perspective of pictorial images, which had already been experimented by Ponti,

here acquired a very different value as a result of the anything but decorative choice which shapes space in an illusory manner and breaks down the monotony of the minimal shapes. The steel furniture and the bookcase, a series of shelves, open at the ends and resting on two slender tubes which stretched from the floor to the ceiling, pay homage to the taste of the Rationalists, while introducing the ironic note of the tubes jutting out like improbable climbing frames.

The innovative element is the little door that led to the bedroom, for here the outline is rounded and it is raised from the ground, like a watertight door in a submarine. This unexpected detail bursts into the calm layout with a note of magical decontextualisation that was to remain unexplained when it was published in *Domus*. In fact, the periodical did not show the room and only stated that the door was lined on the other side with "padded yellow silk".

In the time between the interior design for D'Errico and Miller house and the interior design of Devalle house, Mollino's style underwent another change - already clearly perceptible in the "Ippica" building - which freed him from a series of inhibitions linked to the poetits of Rationalism. It is difficult to say how this change took place, since Mollino did indeed leave us an architectural auto-biography, in the shape of his drawings and buildings, but he never wrote the story of his life. One important clue to understanding the change of direction is however given by the presence in his library of the thirteen issues of *Minotaure*, the legendary magazine published by Albert Skirà from 1933 to 1939, which can be considered the leading mouthpiece of the Surrealist culture, though not of the movement itself. Leafing through the pages of *Minotaure* is rather like reviewing Mollino's poetic world in its original, clamorous form. Most of his passions, idiosyncrasies and 'obsessions' find a perfect correspondence in the magnificent archive of experiences and images, which the magazine collected through the good work of its main contributors, from Picasso to Breton, Eluard, Dali, Masson, Matta, Ernst, Man Ray, De Chirico and Lacan.

In particular, some of the salient characteristits of the Surrealist culture, which found a formidable sounding-board in *Minotaure*, appear to have been fundamental for Mollino: the tendency to put contemporary art and the art of the past on the same level, in a timeless perspective, thereby uncovering the 'modern-ness' of artists such as Paolo Uccello, Tintoretto, Cranach and Friedrich; the reassessment of periods of art and architecture that Rationalism had eliminated and derided, such as Symbolism and Art Nouveau; the inclination to reappraise the "poetes maudits" and the culture of Decadentism; the renewed interest in the 19th century, the interest in astrology and the occult; and, lastly, full recognition of the artistic value of photography.

There is considerable evidence of Mollino's direct debt to *Minotaure*, even though it concerns individual aspects while, in my opinion, the encounter was decisive on the more general level of the culture of imagery, and had as its catalyst his close friendship with Italo Cremona. When Mollino published his "Il Messaggio dalla Camera Oscura" in 1948, for example, about thirty large anthological plates on the history of photography were taken from the pages of the magazine. While this may have been expected in the case of Man Ray, this cannot be said of the photos by Alvarez Bravo, taken from a special edition of the magazine dedicated to Mexico, to whom Mollino attributed a significant role in his book. The chapter dedicated to Man Ray proves, as if it were necessary, how Mollino was capable of giving a poetical interpretation of the deep meaning of the Surrealist vocabulary. "The encounter with Man Ray takes place in the silence of the night or early dawn, once extinguished the flames of the slumber of every will. The only one left awake begins to record, judges and humanly, though tacitly and in a dramatic certainty of meaningful lights and shadows, conveys that which survived the flames, the allusions of the senses, the wrangles or disputes of a long war, that of deep tedium, pain, satiety and of our destiny of mediocrity or grandeur which is still tolerated without complaint, turned into life or silent folly. His penetrating way of observing things and humans, as a mad entomologist - almost delighted, behind a screen of

professional sincerity, by what appears under the outburst of the light of his wishes, by what is proffered, unaware of its gracefulness or desolation, in a surprised and helpless face, by an anatomised nudity, an inner strength or a presumptuousness - may appear cruel - if the drive of his will, were not redeemed by mercy stemming from the intense and clear comprehension of a damnation of weakness of the senses and of matter - because, in his will, humans and things suffer in the same way and both prove to endure the same fate." The architect's writing is as penetrating and plastic as to border on self-identification, proving his literary qualities.

No less significant for Mollino is the half-derisory, half-nostalgic tone with which *Minotaure* often refers to the culture of the image in the early years of the nineteenth century, and its vein of ingenuous eroticism (for example, in an article by Paul Eluard on postcards of 1905-1906). Compared with the similar homespun approach of his friend Maccari, the editor of *Il Selvaggio*, Mollino's option was to prove far more congenial to the Surrealist tone. This makes it extremely interesting to reread the essay by Pierre Mabile on mirrors, with photographs by Raoul Ubac, in which the issue - which was so central to Mollino's interior design - was looked into from a psychoanalytical point of view, with respect to its narcissistic and erotic potential, and referring to the relationship between the subject and its double. Here we can offer the reader some significant excerpts from the essay: "Si, grâce à l'habitude, nous parvenons à reconnaître notre reflet dans le miroir, il n'en demeure pas moins que l'image constitue un mystère dont nous cherchons l'explication. Quelle est cette seconde personne qui surgit en même temps que nous? On en fait volontiers un double que l'on chargera de tous les espoirs dont la réalité nous prive. Nous désirons être éternels sans poids, invulnérables, toujours vigilants. Le double le sera pour nous. Il devient une représentation améliorée, idéalisée du "soi". Des siècles ont été nécessaires pour que l'homme puisse ramener à lui l'image qui semblait extérieure, pour qu'il l'incorpore à sa personne... Le miroir étant, je l'ai montré, l'arme principale de la prise de conscience du "moi", conduit par là même à s'inquiéter des caractères véritables de la réalité. En effet, les phénomènes de réflexion sur les surfaces polies constituent le premier exemple d'une illusion, c'est-à-dire d'un cas où les sens sont pris en flagrant délit d'erreur, où le doute peut naître".¹

But the most interesting coincidence is in the statement at the end of the editorial in the last issue of *Minotaure*, which was published in May 1939: "In view of the undeniable failure of Rationalism - a failure that we foresaw and announced - the vital solution is not to go backwards but to move FORWARDS INTO UNCHARTED TERRITORIES. Our ambition is to define and delineate them. Our role is to maintain, continue and improve this position." It is only right to recall that the Surrealists' magazine, which also included architecture as one of its subjects right from the first issue, never published even a single design by a contemporary architect in the six years of its publication.² In order to fill this conspicuous gap, it published the famous essay by Salvador Dalí on the "Beauté terrifiante et commestible, de l'architecture Modern'style", as well as a picture of the building by Facteur Cheval in Hauterive and a watercolour by Helene Smith entitled *Paysage Ultramaritien*. It is truly paradoxical that one of the few architects (one might mention, together with him, Niemeyer and Barragan, as well, of course, as Le Corbusier 'on vacation', with the Beistegui apartment) who attempted to translate the sensitivity of the Surrealists into a work of architecture was none other than Carlo Mollino, as we can see in the "Ippica" building and in the interior decoration of Miller house and Devalle house. It is also paradoxical that this happened in Turin, in one of the few European countries where not even one of the Surrealist events so carefully listed in *Minotaure* took place.

Mollino's exploration of the "uncharted territories" outlined in the magazine took place during the war and thus during the 'back stabbing' of France inflicted by Fascist Italy - and if we know nothing of his relationship with politics up to now, we can nevertheless also attribute some values of an

ideological nature to his Surrealist approach. Miller house, designed by the architect for his own personal requirements, is an authentic personal manifesto that Devalle house clarifies and completes. In both cases, the creative use of mirrors reveals a precise plan: that of playing real and virtual space against each other, in a continuous and unending game of superimpositions, interweavings and geometrical interpenetrations that reveals the seasoned experience of the photographer, used to reasoning on image "focussing" and thus on how to highlight or hide perspective planes. Besides elements of Surrealist imagery - the three-legged table, the mirror in the shape of Venus, the horse's head resting on a rug, and Michelangelo's captive under the glass tabletop in Miller house we can also find elements of a Rationalist taste, such as the glass showcase that, in spite of its surprising, threadlike base, recalls the one included by Persico in his interiors for the Parker store in Milan. References to the past, which were still faint in Miller house (an old clock, a baroque mirror, both placed in atonal fashion below the ceiling), explode in the Devalles' homes where, having abandoned all inhibitions, Mollino created several style elements: the little wooden columns - an ambiguous Pompeian or nineteenth-century reference - the top with alternating balusters in the style of Borromini, the glass-top table that echoes sixteenth century models, and the bed head whose sinusoidal baroque motif is, however, treated with a degree of freedom that recalls Aalto. Even more explicit is the reference of the tympanum which appears ironically placed as a sort of theatre stage at the centre of a horizontal glass showcase with a mirrored background. In the premises of the Società Ippica Mollino had already included baroque wrought-iron gates and gilded wooden light fittings as a sort of stylistic key to the curved sinusoidal wall, which modified the viewer's perception of the whole. In the Devalle interiors, however, the die was cast and the legitimacy of contamination between ancient and modern was asserted not only by including antique pieces in a modern context, but also by inserting elements which were intentionally designed with an eclectic taste that drew on antiquity, with great freedom of choice in either the finished form (the literal reference to an original) or, in more general terms, in some stylistic inflections summoned up in a manner that was at once affectionate and ironic. In the "Ippica" building, the use of curved surfaces clearly revealed the idea of using a formal tool of Baroque architecture, just as Aalto himself had done a few years previously, though without aiming for contamination. This conscious anachronism appears only in the gates, thus only as an extrinsic decorative element. In the Miller and Devalle houses, on the other hand, we can see a declaration of creativity that explores the "territory of contamination" that Surrealists from Dali to Ernst, and Picasso and Cocteau had entered, and would enter again after the war. A similar approach in architecture was to mature only thirty years later, when Charles Jencks suggested it could be considered symptomatic of a departure from "modern" and an entry into "post-modern". However, he had not noticed the fundamental role played by Mollino as a precursor and experimenter of that line of research which, in the 1980s, was to involve a large part of the architectural culture around the world.

The spirit with which Mollino put his spectacular interiors together is well illustrated in a quote on Devalle house reported by Albino Galvano: "As for calling a guy like me exceptional, when you think of the vaults in the church of the Gesù, or the angels and their 'frozen' scenes exploding among the organ pipes into somersaulting, gilded angels...: well, wouldn't it be better to say that our architects simply lack courage and imagination?"

Quite apart from any linguistic problems, the two interiors mentioned pose a problem in terms of assessing the success of Mollino's experiment. This is complicated by their disappearance, even though the photographic evidence is largely autographical and thus constitutes an 'authentic' interpretation of his intentions, as well as of the results he achieved. The impression one has when observing the surviving material in its entirety is that of a result that is not specifically architectural

and yet important precisely for the way it involves other forms of artistic expression - photography and cinema, as well as both visual and literary art. Mollino allowed himself to be driven by oneiric themes pertaining to surrealist imagery, but also to a great extent from his personal experience. He channelled the whole range of impressions into a "unity of form" - a 'difficult' unity, to use a term much loved by Robert Venturi - achieved in this case by means of ebbs and flows, overlappings, and cross-fadings. Just consider the quilting (here it might be better to use the French word *capitonné*): its appearance on doors and ceilings as well as on armchairs and sofas (as was the fashion in those days) creates a situation we might refer to as 'acoustic', but at the same time also an interweaving of cross references that unites and amazes. Like Picasso, to whom he dedicated an essay, Mollino abandoned neither Cubist deconstruction nor traditional image density (this can be seen in the heart-shaped sofa with the curtained bed in the background), obtaining an effect of magical suspension and anticipation from the mingling and continuous overlapping of images, which are fragmented by the mirrors. Alberti's *concinnitas*, and from many points of view, Croce's interpretation (which states that nothing can be added or removed without a loss of harmony), is achieved here by using *avant-garde* techniques, which are viewed as from a distance, with skilful irony.

For many reasons 1941 was a crucial year for Mollino: it marked the outbreak of the war (which the architect managed to avoid by means of an expedient), with all the psychological and professional difficulties this involved, and he had an increasing number of opportunities to work on town planning assignments (Aosta and Moncalieri), and the "Rassegna" of the Order of Architects in Turin published his article on Alessandro Antonelli: a passionate defence of the great Piedmontese engineer that explores the secret "modern" virtuality hidden in the cupola of San Gaudenzio and almost revealed in the sweep of the Mole. A letter he wrote to his friend Velso Mucci in June allows us to understand his feeling of uncertainty and anticipation and the extraordinary quality of his thoughts, that were open to the future. At the age of thirty-six, with a brilliant professional debut already behind him, the architect appeared dissatisfied with the results he had achieved, and seemed determined to overcome their temporary and fragile nature. With reference to Art Nouveau, he wrote: "The "Liberty" [Art Nouveau] issue is, as you know, still obscure and frightening. We'll come back to this. To be more precise, talking of the floral style, though not as something overlaid and purely decorative, I can assure you my work as an architect is directed to rid itself of any controversial or intellectualistic postulation to make sure that the architectural form springs naturally. Openly "Jaillir". This shift from the closed form (functionalism - which I intend as a poetic result, not as a ground for controversy) towards an open form, is something I can only carry out with great care, for I do not want to fall into the trap of decorativeness - a sort of "Neo Liberty", one might say. In other words, the shift (and here I feel I am almost alone in this direction) must take place 'necessarily' and naturally. So I will be nature - not nature in the literal sense, but in the sense of my spirit - and I will follow my own interior rules to originate forms in absolute naturalness, and thus freedom. Depending on how I react, lianes will bend in a certain way, leaves will form a fan-shaped circle only to welcome or shun. A need will be satisfied with majesty or cruel limitation - the shift of a glance to a specific path and wonder. In other words, I shall conclude in compliance with my 'interior nature'. These words apply to every poetic expression any time, but in my case they well serve the purpose of defining a form of architecture achieved indeed as a 'natural event' and as an unequivocal and obvious revelation - obvious only upon completion - in other words poetry. To explain myself better, I would need to continue making distinctions. I hope I shall be able to do this when we next meet. Even better, I resolve to do this through architectural works. After the "The Welder", I'm thinking of writing a "Disquisition on Bones" as a paraphrase of my poetics as an architect".³

The use of the adjective "floral" might suggest an intentional reference to the Italian heritage of Art Nouveau, but in my opinion it refers more to a desire to clarify the relationship between architecture and nature beyond the misunderstandings of naturalism stigmatised by Croce.⁴ The high, metaphorical tone of the words supports this argument, helping us understand the transition from the Surrealist taste of unexpected juxtapositions towards that of osteological structures and correspondences between the form of the body and that of the spaces and objects containing it, which are typical of Mollino's second period. The architectural form needs to go beyond the closed form of functionalism towards an "open" form, to use Wolflin's term, by carefully following a path that avoids the dreaded predominance of decorative elements. Along this path, the artist himself becomes "nature", in the sense that he absorbs the beauty of his inexhaustible source and, through his own interiority, transports it into the world of art for which beauty - and that of nature in particular - is simply an opportunity to be grasped, a provocation to be accepted. Mollino believed that nature was "the most imposing example, in its absolute lack of imagination, of the univocal solution exquisitely implemented at the boundaries of the infinite varieties of life"; the exact opposite, therefore, of art which must make use of it, without illuding itself of being able to identify with it. This "following my own interior rules to originate forms in absolute naturalness" is none other than the overcoming of mimesis in its passive meaning. "By elaborating impressions," wrote Croce, "man rids himself of them. By objectivising them, he detaches them from himself and becomes superior to them. The liberating and purifying function of art is another aspect and another formula of its type of activity. This activity is liberating because it drives out passiveness." Mollino loved nature (indeed his alter ego, Oberon in his unfinished novel published by *Casabella*, reveals this in his list of "serene things" to be said: "perfect organisation of society, simple life and no forward march of progress, easy life with good, healthy people who are happy to be alive, boundless love of nature."). But his objective was to find a way for the impressions gathered while observing nature to fit and merge into expression and for this reason he follows a path of his own - that of an architecture "approached as a natural event" which endeavours to imitate, not the form of nature, but "naturalness", the presence of laws that subtend it, the sense of necessity transferred in virtue of a technical and formal knowledge stemming from "imagination", or creative ability.

The metaphor he uses to render the idea to his friend Mucci is highly significant and comes straight from the world of Art Nouveau imagery ("Depending on how I react, lianes will bend in a certain way, leaves will form a fan-shaped circle only to welcome or shun"), which is directly related to the aesthetics of *Einfühlung* that Croce was to stigmatise as infamous with the accusation of psychologism. Mollino, who never confused aesthetics and poetics, often pursued the ideal of animating his buildings - as proven by his definition of the platform for the Lago Nero sledge-lift station as being "a terrace on tip toe" - but he always avoided the phytological decorativeness of Art Nouveau by deliberately choosing as a 'paraphrase' of his poetics the cold obedience of bones to structural logic. The relation between architectural form and vegetable form "by means of naturalness" is sometimes maintained without inhibitions, such as in the case of the plans for the Vetroflex - Domus competition, where next to plants and perspectives we can find is customary excellent sketches of flowers, fruit, snowflakes, tree trunks, landscape fragments, shells and... swimming costumes.

The Art Nouveau issue became a crucial problem in the personal career of the architect, and involved the subconscious ("a dark and frightening thing"). His inner forum housed what was to become a drama of historiography: should Art Nouveau be included in the range of the "modern movement", as Pevsner was to do, or should it be expunged as a "childhood disease", like Tafuri and Dal Cò did? Returning to this subject eight years later, Mollino saw matters in a less dramatic way: "If Art Nouveau adapts to the catalogue of eclectic styles and coexist in it (even though it is

dead now, there is concrete evidence to suppose partial exhumations and rehabilitations), on the other hand, it has a 'historical' merit which is worth recalling once and for all: it is the first movement of taste that totally releases space, surface and decoration from the millenarian canons of the classicist-style framework. And that is no mean feat. To find such nonchalance not only in the decoration but also in the layout of a house, one needs to look at Japan, Crete and Mycenae. In the same essay, which was published in instalments in "Utopia e Ambientazione",⁵ the world of Art Nouveau imagery is celebrated with literary skill. "Exhibition rebounds and now-famous magazines saw the outset of soaring lianes, stalks extenuated into subtle recurrences and stretched cowards geometrical bunches of flowers, chairs, tables, and cupboards modulated into select botanical curves, curved glass corolla-shaped canopies held by metallic vine-leaf brackets, fluent castings of wavelike ribs". The lianes in the letter to Mucci emerge once again, crystallised in a distant past. One might suppose that in the eight years that elapsed between the two essays, Mollino might have thought of re-proposing a flowing, billowing use of space, as anticipated by the masters of Art Nouveau, released from the "millenarian canons" in a far more radical way than the orthogonal syntax of Rationalism. A radical "Neo-Liberty", born together with Torre Velasca in the second half of the 1950s, far removed from the cautious version of his pupils who were more inclined to reutilise the remaining values of the Vienna Secession or of the School of Amsterdam. This was a form of "Neo-Liberty" to some extent close to the contemporary taste for deformed surfaces (clearly prefigured in the hanging ectoplasm in the "Tea Number 2" exhibition of 1935), for liquid volumes and decorations spread over large surfaces but, for what my hypothesis may be worth, certainly devoid of the cold arbitrariness and arrogance of the present architectural drift.

Apart from any subjective hypothesis, the state of mind revealed by the letter exposed an existential unease and a need for change that, in the field of architecture, was to lead to the creation of an authentic masterpiece: the Lago Nero chalet in 1946. Here the plan to fluidify space, which is so clear in the protrusion of the terrace, is combined with a sincere tribute to the alpine tradition of wooden architecture. The difficulties arising from the existing walls seem to have directed the architect towards a less ambitious plan for the interior areas and furnishings: organising the existing space in a theatrical sense (in the direction of a "cruel limitation"), giving the furniture a leading role (where "needs" are thus satisfied with true "majesty"), modelling them pursuant to that "disquisition on bones" that transforms architecture into a "natural event".

It does however seem appropriate before discussing the last interiors designed by Mollino, to mention some designs for houses or interiors that were created without the constraints of pre-existing structures. In 1943, together with other ideal homes by young architects, *Domus* published the "House on the Hills of Turin" that Mollino imagined for himself, accompanying it with a letter to Ponti in which he confessed without reticence.

"I must however confess to you first of all that, personally, apart from the Homeric but silent struggle I have every day with my father, whom I care immensely for," he writes, "I have not the slightest wish to change the environment I live and work in: the office is a faithful copy of a Dutch merchant bank, the house a prodigious overlapping of lifestyles and ways of thinking, from Humbert I to the late floral style, with all those ramifications that a total absence of worries about taste can bring about. If I were to remain alone, I wouldn't change a single chair. The setting is as neutral as I could possibly want: it doesn't bother me, it doesn't cause me to make mistakes, and it leaves me free to be alone with my imagination. I could say it is my inner landscape, to give a tone to my disquisition. There remains only a continuously renewed sense of slight nausea necessary to prevent acquiescence, easement. So if I ever had to, if I ever needed to build a house for myself, I would start from the concept of not disturbing, leaving myself free to move and my spirit free to evolve, while surrendering to my present tastes as little as possible, in the awareness that the

Platonic sphere of the achieved result always ends up by coinciding with the present-day status of taste. But the truth of the matter is quite different: to avoid affecting the future poetic event that is necessarily different from the current one with the overbearance of a room, we might say that this is indeed the only issue concerning the expressiveness of an architect's house". So we find the architect still absorbed by his doubts, and yet willing to undertake an exercise in style. The concave convex curve of the wall towards the hill can be ascribed to its approach to architecture as a "natural event", which he had already experimented in the Ippica building. The same is true for its sweeping junction to the asymmetrical arch and the inserted staircase, but the individual floors of the tower are also dynamically structured by concave curves in dialectic conflict with the rectilinear windows overlooking the city. In the "Ricefield farmhouse bedroom", published by *Domus* in 1943 (no. 181) his ability to transfigure a prismatic shell achieves a level of virtuosity.

The main tools brought into play are the semi-transparent red fabric curtains that create a second, smaller inner prism, placed diagonally. Like an antique alcove, this pavilion contains the bed and its canopy, as well as what might be termed a physiological 'surrounding'. It is a divertissement that does not peter out in a number of meticulous working drawings. Mollino feels the need to create this utopian refuge in the ricefields, conceived for a "young, serious and very serene" couple, and he prepares it provisionally in his own home, adding objects that emphasize its ironic nature. These include a mirror, a hygrometer under a glass dome, a fossil and, in the foreground, a bird in a rococo frame that we find again in his "House Towards the Hills" of 1950, published in issue no. 264-5 of *Domus*. This was one of those panels "from the early nineteenth century - in stunning colours that," writes the architect, "it would be stupid to throw away simply because they don't fit in with the style."

In April 1944, together with a long letter, Stile published the "House on the Heights", which was another response to the doubts and worries he expressed in his letter to Mucci. On the subject of his project, which he also intended for his own home, Mollino quotes De Maistre and the Gospel of Saint Luke with regard to "Transfiguration". He imagines something that participates in the temporary nature of the tent and in the horizontality of a story that already reveals the complexity and contradictions that accompany a free revisitation of the recent and distant past, an implicit foreshadowing of what Robert Venturi was to theorise twenty years later in his famous book. The airy vaults that connect the main hall to the side rooms form a basilica-style system, while the sitting room has a sloped ceiling onto which a magic lantern can project the sumptuous decorations of ancient buildings. The library, which is misaligned to the cloister, recalls the silhouette of the Hagia Sophia dome. At this point, no inhibition could prevent Mollino from recuperating ancient techniques, archetypes and transfigured formal solutions.

"I'd like to talk to you", Mollino wrote to Gio Ponti, "about my feeling of our times that is no longer that fertile driving force behind beautiful, concrete works that can be summed up in the word 'functional' or in so many other parallel descriptions. Where does this imagination come from if not from an inner landscape and from a morality of feeling? A feeling that, in this case, is no longer solely exalted by the biological myth of technique and of the organised and joyful life of charts and vitamins, of ultraviolet rays and controlled weights, and of beehive scientificism, as an end in itself. All too often we have forgotten that science is not just the servant of technique, but also and above all a sublime dialogue between man and reality. This is the exquisite faculty that truly makes men of us.

The technician myth is effective in providing works of art (and we have some stunning examples), but by now it is insufficient and truly discredited. So what remains after that? Promised lands that are invariably found to be dried up and sterile.

And I am not beguiled, if only, by the hypnotic, physiological enchantment of formal rhythms -

those that are the pretext for the dawning of inspiration and aesthetic recreation, but are still not yet art. Nor an escape from reality, nor a song of decadence, but the domination of all that constitutes our world of knowledge. An outline, in space and time, of our daily needs, of the mechanical and biological life of matter as well as that of the spirit: 'live and know'." His disquiet, compared to the letter of 1941, seems to lead to a new form of eclecticism: "I think that, for some time now, there is an eclecticism in the air which is very different from that of the late nineteenth century. This is my impression, and not only mine (as it would not be indispensable to its legitimacy).

Eclecticism: a dangerous word, but I wouldn't be able to find a more fitting one. Currently used improperly for that comprehensive architecture rather than in the sense of synthesis, an original after thought - as I, and nor only I understand it - but as it is in its precise etymological and philosophical meaning, thus in opposition to 'syncretism', which may more properly be defined as that rhetorical mixture of culturalism of the late nineteenth century and unfortunately (since it remains unsolved) still alive today recurring in the most unlikely incarnations (such as in Russia, but not only) and heavily aligned with all technicist ideologies".

This letter also reveals a fascinating project, well ahead of its time, and indeed perhaps ahead of our times, in this uncertain and fanciful dawn of the third millenium, and we may wonder why. Also in this case Mollino will not offer but a few fragments of it. The truth is that between the architect and the society he lived in - that of post-war Turin - there seems to have been no 'real' channel of communication, no possibility of mutual understanding and fruitful cooperation beyond some minor house furnishing opportunities and a few assignments among the snows of the Alps. Turin of the Agnelli family, appears not to have noticed the 'Turinese' peculiarity of this man, and he is called for a competition by invitation, won by Kevin Roche, only in 1973, the year of his death. Adriano Olivetti himself, when he commissioned Mollino to build a hotel on the rock of Castellazzo in Ivrea, abandoned him to the incomprehension of his 'dear colleagues' Quaroni, Fiocchi and Raineri, who wanted him to be sensitive to their idea of ambience. Mollino's bitter reflections on the client architect relationship reveal, with a tinge of irony, how he tragically experienced a difficulty of understanding that was at the root of his incompleteness as an architect. "Without a client," we read in his "Life of Oberon", "architecture does not exist. In order to 'create art', we must have one. Without one we are like artists debating in a café. It's the client that should be deported, kicked about, it's he who should be threatened with armed force."

To come back to Mollino's 'interiors', from the Devalle houses of 1939-40 to the one for Ada and Cesare Minola of 1944-46, Mollino produced several interior - design projects in which the theme of the free curved surface is strongly present. The finest of these is the room for Ettore Caretta, of 1941, which a series of highly effective drawings allows us to link to the subjects embraced in the letter to Mucci; such as the organic shape of the little desk linked to the book case, and the curvilinear outline of the drapes that enclose the bed in a semitransparent shell. From 1941 to '48 he also produced some designs for houses in which convex spaces with mixtilinear outlines suggest a gradual comprehension of Alvar Aalto's line of research. This can be seen in the Damonte villa, in the house in Positano and in the two houses - which are similar in their inspiration - designed for Ada Minola and Umberto Mastroianni in Acitrezza. These are designs in which architecture really does become a "natural event", described with an impulse and delight that makes one regret its destiny as 'interrupted architecture'.

In the two Minola houses, the strategy adopted by Mollino in his second period becomes clear: he tends to steer clear of Surrealist coup de theatre in favour of a rigorous narrative approach. The walls draw regular prismatic spaces that the furnishings soften and link together through visual suggestions. A giant print (in Ada and Cesare's house) of an engraving with a wood and a cave, creates a fantasy-world background against which the taut, vivacious lines of the furniture stand out.

These pieces of furniture perform their triangular drama originating from the solid consistency of the chaise-longue, the erect outline of the armchair and the skeletal shape of the little table that mimics the muscular tension of a horse preparing to jump.

For his own home-cum-refuge in Turin, Mollino abandoned the decadent mask of Des Esseintes, which Brino had been observant enough to see reflected in Miller house, to wear the more congenial one of the lay monk. A rectangular area, with a very simple bed placed against the wall, the walls themselves lined with fabric or narrow wooden strips placed together to form the "rigatino", so fashionable at the time, that hides wardrobes, and increasingly more sophisticated furniture, in which the inspiration of the Art Nouveau style is present but faint - a clear sign that the architect had achieved his long sought objective of naturalness in this field.

In the Orengo house we find the same simplicity and sweeping gestures, though here with the use of mirrors and an original transparent screen that recalls Mackintosh. In the Rivetti house, on the other hand, we find Mollino in his finest form: mirrors, drapes, and giant prints that invade even the ceiling, though with a highly controlled atmosphere that gives a sense of detachment, the achievement of complete maturity. As always, the detonator is the furniture, which recalls bows and crossbows just about to be discharged, with an elegance that has now reached its highest point. The self-critical comment, as always, is right on target. "Before a theme that has now become extremely subjective", he wrote, "the authentic architect enjoys enviable freedom, feeling as if he were a demiurge in a world of the imagination, where the client has the consistency of a butterfly or a bat. If he is a butterfly, he will be ready to accept the colorful tone of the architect's novel."

In 1950, together with Aldo Morbelli, Mollino won the bid to renovate the Teatro Vittorio Emanuele in Turin and he created one of his most beautiful and least complex spaces, turning it into an auditorium suited to the needs of the RAI. The background with the organ enclosed in an arched outline recalls the designs of Mendelssohn, as does the light and airy arrangement of overlapping circles. Although very brief, the period Mollino spent in the German maestro's office undoubtedly influenced his professional development.

From the mid-1950s, after the trauma of his father's death, Mollino shifted his interest to other passions and obsessions of his life: mechanics, flying, and photography as art or as a mere tool of melancholy eroticism. He continued designing but the quality of his work was never the same, at least until the end of the decade. Some designs, such as those for the Balbo cinema, for the competition for the regional government headquarters in Trento, for the Hotel Royal in Courmayeur, and also for the new Chamber of Commerce, show how he was unable to complete a self-critical itinerary with his customary wealth of imagination. This involitional spiral was broken by the Lutrario ballroom in Turin in 1959, in which his skill as an enchanter emerged once again, as well as his ability to control a complex orchestration in which space, light, colour, mirrors, reflections, and linear tangles create a never-ending sight conceived not for abstract contemplation but for enjoyment amidst the movement of a swirling, lively, loud crowd. The staircase in particular, with its slender handrail wrapped like a net around the void showed that Mollino had lost none of his ability to fashion images of a surprising biological taste. The ballroom also offered the opportunity to understand Mollino's relationship with tradition which unites and distinguishes him at the same time from his contemporaries Albini, Gardella and Ridolfi, who worked together in the 1950s to reconstruct a link with tradition which could, beyond the *tabula rasa*, render it effective again. Of all of them, Mollino was the bravest and most transgressive, reaching the point of admitting the legitimacy of anachronistic quotations and of arrangements that make use of strictly classical 'fragments'. Not only using the 'architecture without architects' language of the alpine environment, but also copying Juvarra without complexes, if necessary for his poetics. In this way Mollino is similar to Scarpa, who was to talk of his "great desire to be part of tradition", but

Mollino was more unscrupulous and independent, aware no less than Scarpa that being part of tradition does not mean being determined by it. For those who know and love history, tradition represents continuity, freedom to change, even to betray, yet listening, knowing, studying, learning and amending mistakes and lost opportunities.

Almost contemporary to the Lutrario ballroom, the apartment in via Napione, 1960-1968, which he composed for himself but never lived in on a regular basis, allows us to investigate the level achieved in the field of domestic furnishings and the retrospective meditations of the architect who had reached the age of sixty. Many of the ingredients of his past experience were repropounded here: mirrors, giant prints, drapes, butterflies, giant shells, a tortoise shell, leopard skins but, strangely enough, very little of the furniture was designed by him - almost as if his passionate ardour had been followed by a sensation of satiety: there are pieces of furniture and lamps by Saarinen, Magistretti, Borsani, Frattini, and Venini. Almost all the specially designed items are classical in style: the door with the oval looks as if it came from the *séparé* of an old French restaurant, the table set on two columns seems at first glance to be an antique, the fireplace inserted into the mirror and miniaturised to create the perspective illusion of distance is in the Louis XVI style, and the four mirrors derive from nineteenth-century door-frames. Only the mixtilinear profiled marble consoles are typical Mollino-style items. The architect confines himself to design the bedroom boiserie with butterflies and a large bookcase with a drop leaf desk decorated with an image of Michelangelo's *Captive*, forming a rhymed couplet with the one in Miller house. The feeling one gets from observing the solid, composed tone of the apartment in via Napione is that it was conceived as the last stage of a lofty journey towards death. In a letter to the superintendent of the Teatro Regio dated 18 April 1973, Mollino writes: "As a Chinese of rank adorns his mausoleum during his lifetime, so I am preparing - in this late maturity of mine - a corridor in my home, as a kind of sunset road, with a succession of photographs and other souvenirs of my life: all are beautiful, or almost all". I do not know if he was referring to the apartment in via Napione or to the family home where he lived and died, but it was certainly in via Napione that Mollino prepared to make his exit, as always in theatrical style, from a 'stage' he had continually enriched with unexpected experiences and an impressive array of images. In an enlightening essay, Napoleone Ferrari offers us a secret key to interpreting the bedroom in via Napione as a sort of funerary itinerary. "This room recalls the 'journey' that, in the belief of the Egyptians, the soul undertakes towards the city of Abydos. The cushion in the foreground - part of the original furnishing - makes explicit reference to this. The blue fitted carpet represents the water the 'boat' sails on; the platform represents a sign of elevation. The leopard-print wallpaper recalls specific Egyptian ceremonies and the butterflies, neatly arranged in a *trompe-l'oeil* effect, are reminiscent of the funerary objects used by ancient civilisations".⁶ We know Mollino adhered to Freemasonry, even if with predictable absenteeism, and that he would probably have agreed with what Mozart wrote to his father in 1787, possibly inspired by a book by Moses Mendelssohn: "...when one comes to think of it, death is the real goal of our life, and since a couple of years now I have been on good terms with this true, excellent friend of man, so that the image of death is no longer terrible to me but very consoling and soothing. I thank God for having given me the fortune and opportunity to recognise in death the key to our true bliss."

Before his death in 1973, Mollino measured himself with the congenial theme of theatre design and he did so, overcoming fatigue, with a splendid unaccomplished project and with his last masterpiece: the Teatro Regio in Turin. The solution he proposed at the competition for the theatre in Cagliari - where he was awarded third place behind an awful design by a group of young architects, which was then carried out, and an absurd stage mechanism by Maurizio Sacripanti - consisted of a fairy-like pumpkin shaped auditorium immersed in a dynamic volume outlined in

accordance with the spirit expressed in Mendelsohn's sketches. The cross-section and perspective drawings revealed an unexpected and intact freshness of one who has stored an entire world of dreams and is still able to propose, on the awaited occasion, the best part of such dreams. The "Regio" was the great occasion of his life: to build a large theatre in the heart of his own city with no constraints other than that of fitting into a pre-existent context preserving such composure and uniformity that are characteristic of Turin's identity; a constraint he viewed positively, having released himself from every inhibition towards history. The decision not to encroach on this uniformity was the first fortunate intuition that focused Mollino's entire attention on the inner space, that was discreetly enclosed between two high brick walls in which the rusticated motif of the "Ippica" building formed the base for a brick face with a negative and positive pattern of stars similar to those designed by Guarini for Palazzo Carignano. The two walls, curved as though to fashion the sound box of a musical instrument, conversed from a distance with the reconstructed front facing the city. Only towards the entrance did the walls open up into large windows, illuminating a monumental system of staircases and escalators through which the architect successfully confronted himself with Juvarrà's work in Palazzo Madama. In the auditorium, which has unfortunately been modified recently, Mollino effectively arranged a contrast of three dominant themes: the bite of the offset boxes bound to the basket-like ceiling scored by a labyrinth of slits; the cascade of stalactites of the central chandelier; the vibrant crimson surface of the stalls, curved like the valve of a shell. A symbol of eternity, often surprisingly placed on furniture or drawn on paper with a soft pencil, the shell emerged for the last time from the architect's mind as the image of a welcoming space, putting the seal on a life devoted to the cult of art - art in life and of life. Life as a work of art.

¹ P. Mabile, *Miroirs*, "Minotaure", no. 11, spring, 1938, pp. 18 and 66.

² The only article by an architect was the one by Le Corbusier, but this was dedicated to an artist.

³ The letter kindly pointed out to me by Napoleone Ferrari shows the, to some extent prophetic clairvoyance of the "lieber Meister" of Roberto Gabetti. In 1957 he asked me if I had invented the term, while trying to throw me off track with regard to the purely Turinese affair of a "Neo-Liberty" style that was foreshadowed more than ten years previously.

⁴ Cfr. B. Croce, *Estetica*, Laterza, Bari, 1950, p. 24.

⁵ "Domus", 237, pp. 14-19 and 238, pp. 20-25.

⁶ N. Ferrari, *Carlo Mollino: due interni*, "Abitare", no. 449, April 2005.