

i.

in the late 1990s helmut kohl moved out of his office at the bundeskanzleramt, the german federal chancellery, leaving behind the summation of a long and weighty political career in the form of a staggering miscellanea of objects. these included, among the rest, a collection of about 700 elephant figurines from all over the world and a 240-litre fish tank—with real fish still swimming in it. old helmut was a renown collector of everything and his office's walls and desk were crammed with items whose appearance ranged from the priceless proto-christian relic to the junk shop leftover. in his native germany public opinion saw this and other personal traits, such as the thick accent and fondness for hearty food, as the unmistakable marks of the plebeian; from abroad these quirks were interpreted as evidence of unmatched statesmanship.

from an extreme crowdedness to an as extreme emptiness: kohl's departure from the bundeskanzleramt after the difficult campaign that failed to confirm him for his sixth term came just before the seat of the unified german government moved quarters from bonn to berlin, and the overlapping timing of the two epoch-making events

marked the unequivocal sign of the end of an era. but kohl didn't leave the chancellery empty-handed. as he bid goodbye to his office he took his massive rosewood desk. its disappearance from the former chancellor's headquarters caused a very minor ruckus several years later, when the desk was actively and passionately—for german standards, that is—sought after by federal organizations and ministries. at the time, correspondence was exchanged and requests forwarded on the subject, but the desk ultimately stayed with its longtime owner.

defining the piece of furniture's discreet charisma is a lot like defining kohl's long-lasting success in politics. indeed, in photographs taken in the course of the chancellor's administration the desk is a constant presence: unobtrusive, and yet hard to miss. straight and unfussy, the deep-hued desk seemed the only thing in the chancellery able to confront and balance kohl's imposing frame, his eagerness to amass trinkets and guests, his desire to please. he clearly felt at ease around it, covered it in stuff: presents, medals, a tiffany clock, a collection of pipes, the bronze figurine of

a mouse squatting on the round shape of a cabbage—
an ironic but not too subtle reference not only to the
chancellor's last name but also to his provincial upbringing.
in all that jumble, the desk's bulk gave the impression
of extending on and on, offering limitless supporting
surface, a resting place. it was, all in all, reliably angular,
solid. over the years many hands, certainly hundreds of
them, were shaken in its proximity, and under its watch
smiles were dispensed liberally all along, while in the
meantime the threads of history thickened.

ii.

the story goes more or less like this: it's Italy in the mid '90s. it's dinner time and a man, currently in his late fifties, makes an announcement on state television. the setting of the recorded broadcast feels contingent, yet without a doubt it's carefully arranged: in the foreground is a desk at which the man sits, empty but for papers and a silver plated set whose most notable piece is a considerably long letter opener; in the background, slightly out of focus, a bookshelf filled with publications, family photographs in conspicuous frames, and one less easily identifiable item that looks like an alien sculpture. the man's dark attire and posture, the choice of objects surrounding him and the palette of the studio set all radiate an uncanny familiarity. the feeling is of the kind one gets when looking at vanitas paintings, a lurking sense of finality binds together whatever is on display. but there's also something reassuring in the scene, in its soothing banality, which deep down makes it tempting for everybody to see a better version of their own lives in the man's. If this is the image of a ruler in the making it is also remarkably like the image of the proverbial everyman.

there's a cut in time. more than twenty years later we see the same man, now old, sitting again at a desk in preparation of an announcement. he's been in charge of the country on and off all the while and he bears the marks of wanting much and accepting little. the feel of the new scene is that of the *déjà-vu*: of course, we recall watching many such broadcasts over the years, at regular intervals. if we look carefully we can even recognize some of the objects in the background. the geometric alien sculpture for instance, revealed as a travertine capital sitting on a column right at the back, has been around for as long as we can remember.

and now some practical details: the man at the desk is silvio berlusconi. his political record is more or less known and therefore, perhaps, not worth repeating. but the stone capital, copy of a real monument by sculptor pietro cascella that berlusconi donated to the citizenry of milano 2, a residential center outside milan that he built in the 1970s, suggests a parallel story, one that is less about power in itself than it is about eschewing time through it. milano 2 as synecdoche for country,

the monument as metaphor of a bond with the people. people who will remember, surely? like its original, the capital's copy withstood the disfiguring weight of the years; both will be there after their patron is gone. in perennial commemoration of the construction of milano 2 silvio berlusconi laid this stone, and so on and forth, an inscription at the base of the monument reads. stone that endures, words that endure, bonds that endure. and then images, fixity against impermanence. which is what, if not the wish for reversed remembrance?

metaphors associating time and power are nothing new, and while they had deeper philosophical implications in the ages of descartes and voltaire, they have been part of the customary political lexicon some time. in the past, monarchs understood well the efficacy of the parallel and surrounded themselves with clocks not only for practical reasons or for the novelty of it, but also for the mystique these objects evoked and infused their persona with. the french seemed particularly receptive to this kind of symbolism and the courts of the variously numbered louis nurtured several generations of horlogers, as for instance the lepautes, arguably the most known dynasty of royal clockmakers.

as everybody remembers, monarchy in france was sent packing in a flamboyant fashion. the myth of the clock however, although refashioned to fit in with updated sensibilities and productive practices, endured well beyond the fall of the kings. when in the 1970s georges pompidou renovated the presidential palais de l'elysée and reshuffled its interior by relocating the meeting venue of the french cabinet to the salon murat, he spotlighted

a brass lepaute clock as the prominent supporting figure in the function he intended his administration to fulfil. sitting between president and prime minister at the center of the table during the cabinet's meeting sessions, the clock thus spoke essentially of the constitutional balance of powers. it performed such a role diligently for decades, until emmanuel macron took over and sent it packing, too.

macron presented himself from the start as an exceptional man with extraordinary focus and sense of purpose; early hagiographies described him as an ambitious small-town boy who, by exertion of his intelligence and will, transcended his modest origins. if most of his laudatory portrayals were not flat-out lies, enough were examples of biographical over-ornamentation; but macron certainly didn't lack a sharp sense for the zeitgeist, and he adopted everything that suited the needs of the moment, inside and outside of the tradition. this naturally included the suggestive discourse around time and institutional power, which he made part of his rhetoric. i am the master of clocks, you better get over it, he repeated again and again, and while the pronouncement came across as quite

the self-proclamation—and even more so considering it was uttered in the 21st century by the youngest french presidential candidate to date—he actually seemed to believe it. it's not surprising then that the lepaute clock invoked by pompidou and his successors was also summoned by macron for his official portrait: the timepiece can be spotted as it peers timidly from behind the president's back, together with smartphones, de gaulle's memoirs, and a copy of stendhal's *le rouge et le noir*. what, given macron's pronouncements, is less surprising is knowing that the same clock was subsequently removed from the cabinet's meeting table. not anymore a balance of powers then, but a showcase of total self-reliance, feeding on all and everything.

a budding margaret roberts smiles for the camera. the soft glimmer of her sharp little teeth betrays the excitement for the start of a journey. it also says, look out, because i already know where i'm going. on her immaculate blouse, perhaps the work of her dressmaker mother, a row of pearls are set aglow by the sudden camera flash. if one didn't know about her later endeavours, the young roberts of the photo could be mistaken for a rather ordinary young woman with some important and likely unfulfillable aspiration. but the perspective changes as soon as one remembers that the ambitious smile and the mellow glow radiating from her bosom solidified into girders that over time sustained the framework of her ponderous public persona.

nobody can say for sure how well roberts actually knew where she was going when she discarded a career in chemistry for one in politics, but it's undoubtedly due to a certain practical prudence, a sign of her times perhaps, that she didn't make her move unprepared when she decided to put on a brand new costume and play out its corresponding role. indeed, common sense holds

that no one in their right mind would embrace power while bare-skinned, and that those who did didn't last long. a public persona is, after all, nothing more than a stage garment that is partly protective armor and partly serviceable disguise. it's made equally to safeguard and to invest belief in. with painstaking precision roberts stitched the thatcher persona together, amending it whenever the occasion required, but looking closely, one can see that her protective suit repeatedly showed instances of coming apart at the seams. an inner tension developed between incongruous inclinations: on one hand a severe form of majorette syndrome, a wish to ostentatiously stand out from the murky milieu she belonged to; on the other a cautious and rather unimaginative desire for propriety, embodying the very values her former placement dictated. which, of course, was an apparently unsolvable conundrum.

pearls naturally became thatcher's amulet in that they reconciled the incompatible and reduced it to simple, familiar terms. with their humble roundness

and untroubling luster, the presence of pearls was empowering and reassuring. being traditionally associated with the eternal feminine, the stringed stones suited both the noblewoman and the family manager. adorning her persona in pearls, thatcher figured she could legitimately mingle with the elites while winking at the lower middle-classes, make policy while showing how to pour the perfect cup of tea. she could, in brief, be at the same time gloriana and grantham housewife, exhibiting a supposedly flawless combination of national and womanly virtue. the rows of pearls, which she already wore in her younger days, grew in number and sophistication around her neck, oftentimes spilling in other forms—as brooches and earrings—over her lapel and earlobes. although magnified by iteration, the reticent brilliance of the stones gradually ceased to be reassuringly ornamental and became shape of the woman herself.

i am the light of the world, thinks the man of steel, while bent over his papers he writes. on his desk the domed lamp is always lit, tirelessly spreading a quiet bloom on the man's smooth forehead and hand. even in the small hours, with the country asleep or on the brink of falling into the embrace of the unknown, the man of steel is perpetually awake and at work. he's like the judicious saint jerome—or saint paul, or matthew—industriously pouring his wisdom into the task at hand; but unlike those consumed fathers of the church there's no trace of mystery to his likeness, no suffering, no doubt. the only expression emanating in the undisturbed light of his study is the hint of a smile hovering on his knowing face.

what such an image of integrity and discernment could have really meant for those beholding it in stalin's age is anybody's guess, but it's hard to ignore the irony of its message, especially since for many in those times even electricity was not a given. the so-called commissar lamp, which in its most accomplished form was sitting on stalin's desk and on the desks of countless other high functionaries of state, was the pride and wonder

of soviet manufacture; but it was also a seal, a great divide between high and low, between the chosen and the masses. its metal body slender and solemn, crowned with dyed textiles and a massive polished dome, the lamp became rather the ubiquitous mark of a covenant, a presage of heaven—or hell. throughout the dusky izbas and the drab dormitories of factories where lamps of this kind were assembled every day by the dozens, the serene effigy of the leader bathed in comforting light meant to spur onward and inspire. whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, promised the lamp, in terms so clear that no one would have dared to doubt. yet only the wise understands that there's nothing as luminous as faith and nothing as deceptive, for salvation always comes with a trade-off. a savior must be as firm as he is just; he cannot only give, most of the times he will claim back. on stalin's desk the light was always on, indeed; away from its comforting light there was nothing but blackness, terror, and cold.

nothing is ever more frightening than the prospect of the dark. it's thus around light that josef stalin conceived a surrogate of faith for a world where

there was none. he was the first to know that state and church, so eager to be at odds with one another, more often than not speak in the same tongue. and if churches enthrone their kings, then secular powers can consecrate their enlightened few. yes, enlightenment is only for the few and for the rest there's hope, which like a light in the dark can be glimpsed at from afar.

the profile of two men emerges from a fine metal surface. the one in the foreground, easily recognizable, is that of john fitzgerald kennedy; right behind him and slightly ahead is lyndon baines johnson; confident within the framing of the bronze medal, both men look expectantly onwards. despite the assurance of the subjects, one can easily see that the dual portrait is rough, its lines more than a little awkward in some places, which gives it a degree of warmth and personality. the kennedy-johnson medal is a rather unusual specimen among commemorative tokens for the inauguration of an american presidency, especially when compared with the canon. it's not a matter of design, as pose and bearing of the portrayed fit the standard, it's rather something about its proportions, which makes any imperfections even more conspicuous. it almost looks like sculptor philip kraczkowski made the two profiles so large that there would barely be any space left around them; extending their reach as far as the physical limits of the medallion would allow.

to be precise, it's not a presidency that the medal in question commemorates; it's a vice presidency, that of

johnson in 1961. it's somehow curious to know that the inaugural medal signed by krackowski was on display for a long time on johnson's desk after he succeeded kennedy, especially given that johnson and kennedy represented opposite poles, and furthermore didn't much like each other. the clumsy portrait, with the two of them looking ahead as if into the future, has today the air of a strange relic from a simpler, more principled past, but history itself challenges this impression. johnson's presidency was no bed of roses: highly praised by some and highly criticized by the rest, he was a man who didn't hold a nuanced view of the world. appropriately, his aspirations and sense of moral calling were matched by extreme egotism and vanity, his tirelessness by ruthlessness. johnson was aware that he was leagues away from the political refinement and acumen of his predecessors, but at the same time he was a pragmatic man. all his career was marked by a pursuit of the kind of legitimacy that would allow him to fulfil his self-imposed mission, to get things done. from this perspective, whether the things he achieved were right or wrong for others didn't make much difference.

there is a certain wisdom in the things one surrounds oneself with. the medal that haunted johnson's desk for years disappear from it late in his mandate. it was more than anything else a potent legitimizing talisman, one which worked both on him and on his observers. in this light, its removal is all the more telling. It was when johnson finally felt that he had earned his right to authority that he lost grip on his mission.

