Medical Digressions in a Maltese Novel

Giovanni Bonello

A rather mysterious and atypical manuscript preserved in the National Library under wraps of massive oblivion, eventually saw the light in 1929.[1] It recounts at considerable length and substantial detail the desolate life of Gabriello Pulis and his misadventures in Malta and through the Mediterranean. Pulis, an irresistible magnet for misfortune and calamity, strove hard to prove that, for some elected ones, if anything could go wrong, it would.

Its author, the lawyer and chaplain Fabritio Cagliola (1604 – 1665) of Maltese origin, emerges as a writer not devoid of literary talent or narrative artifice. His *Disavventure Marinaresche, o sia Gabriello Disavventurato (Figure 1)*, with which we are concerned, were written c. 1660.

Everyone always assumed the *Disavventure* to be a work of fiction, and the principal character, Gabrilello Pulis from Senglea, a figment of Cagliola's imagination. My research (to which I will revert elsewhere) has established Pulis to have been a living seafarer, and that, at least some, of the adventurers attributed to him by Cagliola find precise confirmation in the records.

The confessions of eight 'bandits' – fugitives from criminal justice and from civil liabilities who had taken refuge in Gozo and who Pulis hosted in his boat to help them escape to Sicily, make up the bulk of the novel. All the eight had sad or strange stories to relate, the bottom line in each being that crime pays little and virtue even less.

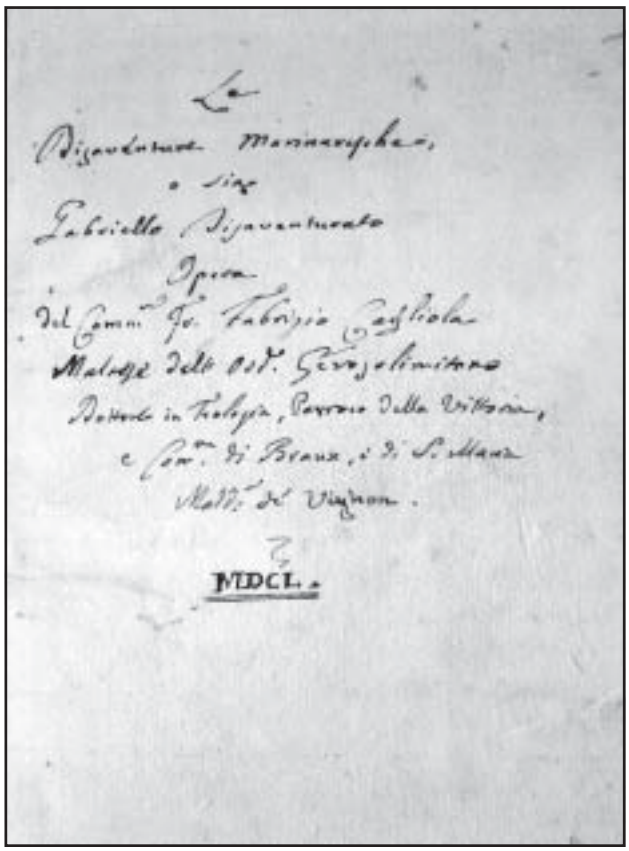
Cagliola's novel can be read in many keys: historical, narrative, psychological, literary, sociological. I will puruse it to see what inklings of the medical sciences it contains – diseases, treatments, hygiene, aetiology, traumatology, doctors, pharmacy, alchemy – and, not least, old wives tales. One aspect appears indisputable – preoccupation with health and medicaments figures no weaker then than today. I believe Cagliola's to be among the very first known digressions into medicine by a Maltese to have survived.

The *Disavventure* mentions many forms of illness – from tarantism to venereal disease, from the bubonic plague to infertility and prostate enlargement. It would be anachronistic to judge the then-current 'scientific' views by reference to today's state of curative wisdom. Though a lawyer and a theologian by profession, Cagliola seems to have cultivated a healthy inquisitiveness into many and various fields; not least, the medical sciences.

One of the eight bandits hiding in Gozo who Gabrilello took on board to return to Sicily, was Martinotto from Ferrara, a man affected by the *ballo di San Vito*. "Having, while ten years old, been taken to the city by my father, I was bitten by a tarantula that, suddenly injecting its poison through every part of my body, reduced me to become the butt and joke of the other children, because involuntarily I was forced to twist my mouth and appear to laugh, and at the same time to jump high into the air and that justly made me resemble a wild goat".

One of Martinotto's companions nicknamed the Philosopher for his cognitive faculties explained why: "These effects are caused by the same infection that induces the laughing and jumping – properties of the tarantula that communicated them by its bite. Gabrilello appears sceptical at this explanation: "And who ever saw a tarantula jump? Do they not rest motionless at

Figure 1: *Frontpiece of "Calgliola's novel" (courtesy of the National Library)*



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the centre of their webs once they have finished weaving, catching flies and similar insects on which they feed and survive?"

The Philosopher does not give up. "But in Taranto, where they thrive by the thousands, it has been observed that, at the sound of some musical instrument, they so sway in rhythm with the tune, that everyone says they are dancing. And you see that those who have been bitten experience no greater relief than from music". Martinotto agrees he could find no repose except through "the melody of some concert of instruments" and in the company of two others similarly oppressed by St Vitus's dance.

The Philosopher perseveres: two reasons for the *male di S. Vito*: crimes such as not stopping a dance when the Holy Host passes by, to adore it on bended knee: the culprits found themselves compelled to dance for the rest of their lives; or through the agency of melancholic secretions of the brain that forced them to jerk around as if they were dancing. Martinotto plays the pharmaceutical card: "By the help of heaven and certain remedies of theriac and mithridate (two antidotes for poisons) administered to me in various conserves, I found the way of being cured."[2]

Martinotto next brings in venereal disease. Science then drew no net distinction between syphilis, gonorrhoea and other S.T.Ds. In Malta Martinotto took up service with a young gentleman from Lecce, handsome and charming but nowhere wise enough to resist losing his head over one of the several high-class whores on the island, quite exceptionally the daughter of a principled mother, appalled at the way her daughter slept around.

In truth, the mother dreaded her daughter's promiscuity not so much on moral reasons as for medical ones. Maltese V.D. had, through the centuries, established a horrid reputation. "What irks me most" she told her daughter "is that running from a Spanish knight to a French one, to an Italian and a German", she would contract a formidable cocktail of venereal infections. "When the contagion is solely French, it is already almost incurable. What will you do when it will also be German, Spanish and Italian?"

The courtesan responded with a back-hand: at least, when I make love, my intercourse is with knights and gentlemen. Look at you: you, an old hag are in love with a lowly musician, a young minstrel only capable of playing a couple of fugal compositions on a clavichord (*toccare due ricercate su d'un cembalo*).

Soon, however, her promiscuity submitted its invoice. "She noticed, from a certain itching, that her selling point was infected, that some remedy had to be sought, and that the palms of her hands and her cheeks betrayed her condition." Her father too saw these symptoms, but the mother, herself cheating on him with the young musician, treacherously blamed her daughter's disorder on the husband: she showed him two bottles of *rosolio* (a sweet liqueur) under the whore's bed: what do you expect, that she drinks that stuff and does not show boils on her hands and cheeks?

Figure 2: *16th century catheterisation*

The young *amoroso* from Lecce paid the price too. After giving the courtesan virtually all he had, and persisting in sleeping with her when it was clear she was riddled with the pox, he ended gnashing his teeth each time he tried to urinate and so awfully in pain that all he could do was curse the follies of his debauchery. Messer Agostino (?) administered some syrups to her and ordered a diet lasting several days. The gentleman from Lecce, disregarding the suffering and his stabbing pains, rushed back to her bed. She repulsed him publicly, slamming her door to his face. His friends, on the other hand, went on enjoying her, and blamed him for his exclusion from her mattress. How dared he publicly associate her name with venereal disease, when he had probably contracted it from other whores?[3]

Cagliola's jaundiced assessment of Maltese V.D. echoes through other old accounts. Shortly after him, the anonymous *Nouvelle Relation* published in 1679 asserts quite *ex cathedra* that "There is no place in the world where venereal disease attacks faster and spreads easier than in Malta, for there it is a compound of all the poxies in the world."[4]

The author inserts in one of his pages a diagnosis of the illness that eventually killed the first Maltese historian Gian Francesco Abela (1582 – 1655). Abela, "notwithstanding his sobriety and abstinence, died of urine retention and through the great spasm caused by inflammation that supervened when the surgeon operated (Figure 2)."[5]

Traumatology plays a leading part in the adventures of Gabriello. Not at all surprisingly, as he lived in the most violent of times, and the incidence of wounds and fractures held pride of place. His list of injuries seems interminable. In an encounter

at sea with the Muslim galleys of Biserta, Gabriello, already hit by two musket shots, received two wounds in the hand-to-hand fighting.[6] In another sea skirmish, when Gabriello was about to board a well-armed Turkish *pinco*, a Muslim hurled a fire pot (*pignatta di fuoco*) into the Christian ship; this hit the ammunition depot and the explosion hurled Gabriello and others in the air. They fell in the sea, half roasted. The victors picked them up with fishing hooks and herded them into slavery. The captors, *fiere arrabbiate*, noticing Gabriello all blistered and scorched, enjoyed themselves flaying the skin off his face, arms and hands, and kicked him violently to the threshold of death.

In captivity, the *tiranno* accused Gabriello of planning an uprising to capture a galley and escape to Malta. Before having a chance to defend himself, his jailers stripped him naked, subjected him to 500 lashes on his stomach and buttocks, and flayed him again to such an extent that the scars show to this day, adds Cagliola. His captors then confined him to a roofless cell, so small he could not lie down.

Once freed, he went on business to Sicily; in Jaci, near Catania, bandits assaulted him in a forest. The Christians treated him worse than the Muslims: "These thieves, trained in cruelty, surpass the Tartars and the Moors in evil and inhumanity."[7]

Gabriello gave as good as he got. When *comito* (crew leader) of the galley *Santa Rosalea*, he believed the rowers to be malingering, barely skimming the water with their oars. He grabbed an axe and lopped off the arm of one of them, to set an example to the others. Cagliola defends Pulis: "This action, though inspired by a great cause, the capture of a (Muslim) galley, gave a pretext to his enemies to accuse him of cruelty and impulsiveness. The (Muslim) crew, lamenting that he, in reprisal for the outrages he had suffered on the Barbary coast (where he had been enslaved) had grown to treat them inhumanly and with hatred, rather than lovingly, it was resolved to transfer him to the galley *del passo*, a fast ship periodically commissioned to transport the letters of the Order and other necessities."[8]

In Syracuse Gabriello's violent nature erupted again. He punched in the face (*sul mostaccio*) a villain who was making fun of him and the latter in turn hurled a stone at Pulis which hit him squarely between the forehead and the nose, broke his skull and deformed his visage which lost its native symmetry and made him look like a wild beast. This disfigurement, Cagliola comments, mortified him more than his captivity in Africa, particularly as wherever he passed, people stared at him and asked hurtful questions.[9]

Before embarking on an intriguing discourse on the Maltese breed of dog and the cute feats of other canines in Malta, Gabriello recounts an encounter with savage hounds in Sicily. Approaching a farmhouse to obtain some food, four ferocious beasts suddenly attacked him – "he never felt his life so much in danger", being crippled in his arms by previous injuries. He retreated with his back to a tree, gripped a club which he swirled around to keep the hounds at bay. One took a flying leap at his throat and left deep fang-marks on his neck. Their owner luckily turned up in time to save him.[10]

Another fugitive, Tonno from Calabria, was, in 1632, a servant in Malta with the eminent knight Fra Antonio Pappacoda. During a naval skirmish against the vessells of Bizerta, two young knights, one from Valencia and the other Portuguese, died while leaping from Pappacoda's galley to an enemy ship. They jumped short and disappeared in the waters. Pappacoda, descending for cover, held on with his hands inside a slit in the woodwork. He slipped down some stairs and his hand remained caught, breaking one finger clean off, to his, and his servant Tonno's, *eccessivo dolore*. Pappacoda developed a *febbre maligna* on his return and died in Pisciotta, Calabria.[11]

Gabriello has a long spread describing and damning duels, so common in his century, "not aware then of the miserable death of his son Salvu who, challenged to a duel, ended killed, though it was common belief that many had set on him together."[12]

Another of the eight bandits, Jeanbert from Tours, saved by Gabriello in Gozo had a sad tale of thwarted love and how, on discovering that his fiancèe had been given in marriage to another, fainted from shock and grief. "I am still amazed how, with the loss of my senses, I did not equally lose my life. I remained whole hours motionless before my mother who, believing me ill, shouted and cried her and my own misadventure.[213]

The last bandit, named Lupo (wolf), suffered many adverse comments because of his surname. He defended himself claiming names to be deceptive and irrelevant. How many Angelos behaved more like devils? And was not the Maltese Fra Pietro Magro rounder than a barrel and Giovanni Montemagno no higher than a dwarf, and Antonio Santo condemned to row in the galleys as a convicted thief? Lupo claimed he got his name through a birthmark or mole on his arm in the shape of a wolf. The wise Philosopher among the brigade explained how these birthmarks come about: when we are in our mother's womb, neither the foetus's heart nor its lungs yet work – life comes from the parent's heart. If the mother gets a strong craving for something, that remains impressed on the body of the foetus, from the state of weakness it is then in.[14]

'The belief that cravings of a pregnant woman leave their mark on the foetus still makes the rounds today, 350 years later. A proverb attests this belief: *mara bix-xewqa, lewn uliedha jigu imzewqa* (a woman with a craving will bear children with a birthmark). And the Maltese to this day refer to a birthmark as *xewqa* – a craving.[15]

One extremely intriguing part in the story of Lupo has all the makings of an unexpected forerunner of the doctrines of Cesare Lombroso (1835 - 1909) the criminal anthropologist so influent in late Victorian times: in our physical shape and features can be read psychological characteristics like vices, criminality, derangement.

"From external features can be deduced our internal

inclinations" in conformity with the teachings of (Saint Gregory) Nazianzeno through Giuliano (of Athens), says Lupo. He rejects the equivalence of beauty with virtue (see Absalom, so handsome and yet so perverse), but "what we can argue from a beautiful body is that it is less inclined to vice than an ugly one." He condemns generalizations, believing that the sources of goodness and evil are to be sought in a wholesome or bad education "with the consideration that those beautiful and handsome will be persuaded to good and to avoid evil with greater ease."[16]

Lupo, embarrassed by the taunts about his surname, has a few good words to spend about the wolf, one of which related to pharmacology. "Its excrement, dried and in powder form, drunk in hot water and salt, works beneficially against colics and witchcraft spells."[17]

The *seicento* already acknowledged moderation in food to be a prerequisite to healthy living. A stingy master who only fed his servant a crust of bread and a bite of cheese, so answered the calls of his starvation: "Lucky you that can endure deprivation and live so soberly – besides acquiring merit, you will enjoy good health for many years." The famished servant thought otherwise: "My father used to say it is better to live in enjoyment for a short while than to live in misery for many years."[18]

Gabriello cultivated a studied ambivalence where doctors were concerned. He records that, during his first captivity in North Africa, just after his detention, he was lying on straw in prison, with his arms bandaged following the wounds he had received. An old woman whose son he had killed in battle came up to him, spitting all over his face, outraging him with insults, vulgarities and a thousand curses. This upset him so much that 'his blood altered', fever set in and a doctor had to be called. He asked for the best physician around, and someone recommended the Sultan's personal doctor, a Jew who spoke Arabic fluently and dispensed certain pills that greatly relieved his patients.

These credentials hardly took Gabriello in. "Are you impressed because he can speak Arabic, dispenses medicines haphazardly and possibly prescribes antimony that instead of diminishing inflammation, increases it? What has medical learning to do with knowing various languages? How can maladies due to different causes respond to the same medicament? Go, get me another doctor who is a Christian and does not dispense medicines in the empirical way of charlatans."

A young doctor, just graduating from Salerno, also a captive in chains, came forward. He offered to treat Gabriello and, to impress him, started reciting by heart some aphorisms of Hippocrates. He failed to. "Son, said Pulis, what a great difference between words and practice – and, in a doctor, what counts is long experience. I can see you would like to experiment what little you have read, to see if it succeeds. Go, rather, to train with some experienced physician and only then put your aphorisms in practice." And, calling a surgeon jailed with him, he drank two drams of rhubarb in an infusion of chicory, and the fever soon subsided.[19]

One of the bandits Pulis picked up in Gozo, Lillo, also gives an insight into Cagliola's view of doctors: how imperative that a good physician should be in full sympathy with his patient. When King Philip of Macedon started limping after a wound in his leg, his doctor Clisephus followed him limping in exactly the same fashion.[20]

Lillo had come to work in Malta for Fra Francesco Lanfreducci, who died of a mysterious ailment shortly after being elected admiral. Lillo hints at this *infermità incognita* about which I published elsewhere a complete clinical picture and the details of the painful agony lasting seven months which, quite probably was congestive heart failure complicated by cirrhosis of the liver.[21]

Gabriello also expatiated on the medical qualities of tobacco, ice and coffee. Pulis hated tobacco with a passion and had no faith in the curative qualities of nicotine. On board a galley, a convict offered him a pinch of powdered tobacco to snort – according to him "the only relief from suffering." "I need other than tobacco, Gabriello retorted, "to dispel my pains, nor can I comprehend what pleasure can be obtained from a powder so hot that it disturbs the cerebrum and turns it into a still (*a modo di lambicco*) that ferments the dregs."

"That is exactly its benefit" answered the snuff-snorter "that with this distillation, the brain feels lighter." Pulis answered: that would make sense if used once or twice a week; but that, from an uninterrupted alteration of the cerebrum, any good can be expected, I cannot conceive. Pressured into experimenting, Pulis gave it a try. Not being accustomed to tobacco, this acted instantly on his brain and in his stomach; he had convulsions and fell to the ground in a faint. His companions revived him with buckets of water. Regaining consciousness, he found it opportune to curse all nicotine addicts.

His friends tried to fortify him with a glass of iced water (mixed with snow). He refused it scornfully, although drinking iced water was then so fashionable in Europe. Laugh at me as much as you care, added Gabriello. Only I know what harm comes from cold water, so contrary to the body's natural warmth. One friend from Messina had become dependent on iced drinks, and swallowed them every hour. Returning home from a comedy with his blood warmed up by the theatre's atmosphere heated by the lights and the breath of so many spectators, he swallowed a whole jug of iced water. His stomach instantly gave up on him and he passed away within a day.

And here Gabriello sings the praises of coffee, drunk in Africa: those addicted to it find it gives the same satisfaction as does the coolness of snow, but, differently from cold drinks, comforts the viscera, and keeps them healthy and robust. All depends on getting used to coffee, in so far as drunk hot or cold, it is always pleasureable, unless one suffers from negative prejudices about it.[22]

This novel predates by several years the first organic treatise on coffee published in Europe, incidentally written by another Maltese, the encyclopaedic Domenico Magri: the *Virtù del Kafè*.[23]

The second bandit to relate his adventures, Dioscoro from Zante, Greece, was the son of an amateur alchemist, a devout follower of Paracelsus. One of the by-products of alchemy, chemistry, the father practised assiduously. His concern lay in extracting essential oils from hard substances. Out of sublimate, precipitate and other complex elements he formed pills which he dispensed for all sorts of illnesses. Among other patent medicines he derived "a certain liquor which, given to anyone in quantity, induced heavy sweating for a whole day and night." To say the truth, added Dioscoro, often his father restored to health sick people who had given up on doctors, but so many were those he killed that he merited more blame than praise.[24]

Follows a paean for Paracelsus, obviously shared by Cagliola. To one who condemned Dioscoro for reading this author prominent on the list of the Church's prohibited books, Dioscoro answered:'"You have no idea who Paracelsus was, nor have you read two lines of his works, yet you have the arrogance to condemn the merits and virtues of a man so great?" Why? simply because he did not follow Hipppocrates and Galen in his treatments?[25]

Poor Dioscoro eventually left the alchemist after a spark from a fire he was blowing hit his eye and almost cost him his sight. He came to Malta where some bad companions introduced him to the (many) brothels on the island; here he lost his every tari and escaped to Gozo to avoid his creditors.[26]

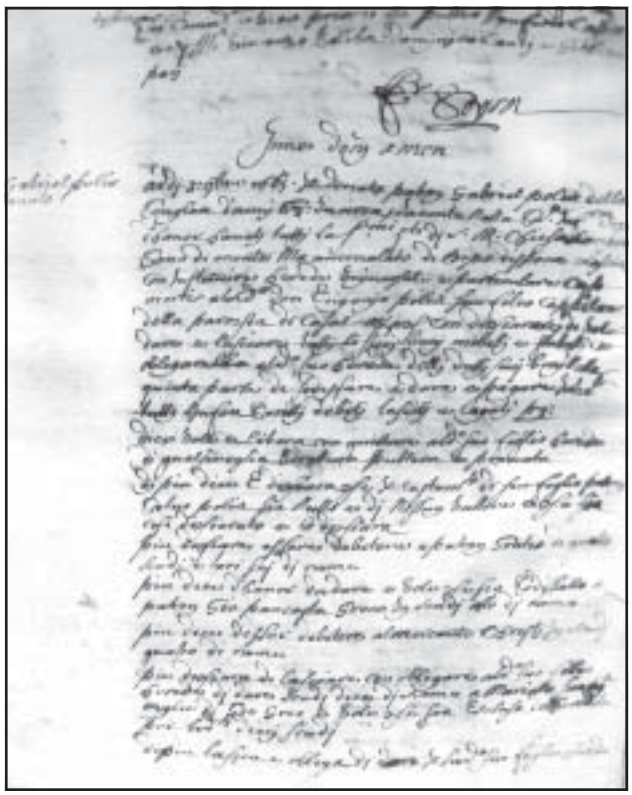
Gabriello steered the conversation to medicine. He asked Dioscoro; "Have you learned any sort of pill that heals bad humours without greatly altering (the body) and without difficulties? For, to say the truth, when I came to cure myself with beverages made up of rhubarb, *polipodi (polipodium vulgare), turbiti* and other juices, I ended oppressed with symptoms and suffering so serious that I believed I was about to die." Of course, answered Dioscoro, I have some pills of wonderful powers that purge away negative humours even though these be of impenetrable viscosity."

In a moment of inquisitiveness Gabriello swallowed two of them. At first he felt merry and went on joking and clowning as was his habit, "but, when they began to take effect, he started changing colour and, suddenly feeling cold, the pain in his intestines increased so much he had to lie down on the floor, moaning he had been poisoned." He pushed two fingers down his throat to promote vomiting, and threw up yellow and green lumps in such quantities that no one could believe a body could harbour so much. After that he felt weak and could hardly breathe.

Are these the pills, he asked Dioscoro, you claimed to be miraculous? What did you expect, answered the Greek, not to suffer any pain when such a battle was being waged between enemies inside your belly?[27]

Towards the end of his life, fortune seems to have smiled on Gabriello. His last will (Figure 3), dated November 3, 1665, which he dictated when 68 years old, describes him as *donato* (knight of the half cross) and *patron* (ship owner). In it he remembered fondly his son Salvu killed in a duel, disinherited his daughter Marietta Grech and left everything to his living son, Father Eugenio Pulis, third parish priest of Hal Ghaxaq.[28]

Figure 3: *Gabriello Pulis's last will (courtesy of the National Library)*



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