

Raffaele Di Santo

SIX GLASSES

Raffaele Di Santo, *Six Glasses*
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*In the forest to and fro
I can wander, I can go;
See the spider and the fly,
And the ants go marching by
Carrying parcels with their feet
Down the green and grassy street.
I can in the sorrel sit
Where the ladybird alit.
I can climb the jointed grass;
And on high
See the greater swallows pass
In the sky,
And the round sun rolling by
Heeding no such things as I.*

From *The Little Land*, by R. L. Stevenson

SIX GLASSES

INTRODUCTION

In limine

This book was given to me by the author (who is my best friend) in the form of a typescript for me to pronounce on it, when it was – so to speak – still in the wild and before the hypothesis of its publication was aired, an “absolutely frank” and, if necessary, “ruthless” judgment. In short, no connivance, no friendly indulgence. In the wake of such a severe and transparent injunction, I began to read and as soon as it came to an end I offered to write the preface, this preface. Nothing special, actually. And not only because I objectively believe that it cannot provide elements that are really useful for the understanding of the text, but above all because I am convinced, as Fernando Pessoa said, that “The only preface of a work is the brain of the reader”. Each reader then (and I hope there are many) should make his own personal preface. The following are therefore only simple observations that attempt to show how the author, having taken on the difficult task of describing the living conditions, ways of thinking, the culture of a rural community, immediately before and at the moment of the “great transformation” which marked the end of peasant civilization, has managed to carry it out with great effectiveness.

I am still a bit on the threshold – this time I mean the threshold of the book – to collect the precious indication offered by the sentence placed in the epigraph: “There is a flavor in fruit

juices / that those who climbed the trees know". To fully understand this, it is necessary to think that the generation protagonist of this singular story is the one born between the end of the Second World War and the beginning of the 1950s, which includes both the author and the drafter of these notes. Well, that generation whose grandparents and parents were the extreme active representatives of the traditional peasant world was the last to directly experience the ways of that world. And that is the last one who lived – just to give a few examples – without having in the house (even if only for a few years) the toilets and running water and with the animals in the stable, almost always attached to the other poor environments of the housing. Here, that generation has personally experienced all the situations and occurrences referred to in this book and, having climbed the trees, knows well that certain flavor of fruit juices. Behind the light veil of the metaphor appears a precise announcement by the author: in this book there is a close relationship between experience and writing. I try to say better and more: the writer is claiming to be the son of those experiences and that through writing he will try to give us back their authentic flavor. It is no small thing if you think that in the last two decades we have seen the benches of bookstores crowded with works (even the most admittedly autobiographical ones) that dip the pen not in lived experience but in imaginary materials, in other books or in the flood of handled images from television and cinema. At this rate we will have writers engaged only in exhibiting their ability to construct plots, to contrive, at the table, brainy plots. No claim to objectivity though. The writer puts his cards on the table from the first page, where he says that his writing "consists of a collection of personal mem-

ories” concerning the period from 1955 to 1970 with some effort backwards to recover events that happened before and stories “On the popular attitude towards religion and imaginary stories that are lost in the mists of time”, together with the evocation of some moments and aspects of the life of his grandparents. Not a report, therefore, nor a chronicle but a series of subjective memories concerning “the agricultural experience that one can have up to twenty years in a community particularly dedicated to the cultivation of vines and olives”. That one is the author himself, the one who lived this experience. The community is that of Guardia Sanframondi, an important agricultural center in the province of Benevento. It is okay to humbly declare your intentions; understatement is always a good practice but the reader should know that this book – as we will see – contains more than just personal reminiscences.

On Making Embroidery

On the first page, the one that acts almost as an introduction, the author says that to carry out his writing enterprise he has chosen “wine and the fuse of the imagination” as his companions. As for wine, I play along and add that he has finished – whether he is aware of it or not – to summarize the substance of some Greek and Latin judgments on the quality of that drink. Starting from the most ancient, which associated wine with truth and which only in the Middle Ages took on the most known and definitive form (“*in vino veritas*”) to those which attributed to it the ability to cheer the heart of man by chasing away the troubles (Horace: “*Nunc vino pellite curas*”; Psalms: “*Vinum*

laetificat cor hominis"). But I would not overlook a fragment of the Athenian playwright Cratinus (he knew it!) who, speaking of poetic or artistic deliveries, reads verbatim: "If you drink water you cannot give birth to anything good". As for the "fuse of the imagination", he considers it, quite rightly, indispensable to light up, to animate the story ("In saying, in telling things, in order to flavor them, one uses a flower, some smiles, some distant horizon"), knowing full well that without doing so it makes no sense to narrate and would only give a scrappy sequence of facts: "If these elements are missing, one wonders who could benefit from our saying and who might like these stories without purpose and flavor. I try to flavor them. It can be embroidered on facts, as once embroidered on sheets and pillows".

In the meantime, I am going to look for some of these embroideries to show a specimen, a small evidential sample, and also a sort of classification. Here is the first, very short but significant, caught at the opening of the book, where the writer is intent on describing the ancient urban physiognomy of the town: "In the fifties almost all the streets were paved with stones smoothed by time and by the iron of the donkeys and mules running through them. Even now the houses are attached to each other, like a crowd in which no one pushes. Doors and windows seem to be on the verge of telling stories but silence surrounds them".

Here the strength of the embroidery lies entirely in the closure of the sentence, that is, in that kind of dowsing of the desire, secret and profound, of doors and windows to speak. In those houses peasant lives took place, there were simple joys and sufferings but they all passed over in silence. Only the literary word can and will give them face and voice. This is an

embroidery (one of the many in which the story is dotted) – how can I say? – of lyrical kind.

The second, which I propose to the reader's attention, has a plot that I do not hesitate to define as civil because it was born from the sincere regret felt in the face of the injustice perpetrated against an animal that in all rural societies, before the motorization, has played an important role, which fell into oblivion without any recognition: "Then the donkeys went away, they were sold almost in bulk at the Maddaloni slaughterhouse and the people said, which is not true, that they made mortadella. The whole community had had a great affection for these docile beasts but, in the end, the animal's bad luck, no administration took the initiative to erect a monument to the donkey or at least fix a plaque in the waiting room of the Municipality".

On his own, Raffaele Di Santo remedies this guilty forgetfulness by recalling Gelsomina, the donkey of his paternal grandfather, to whom he dedicates this affectionate epitaph in hendecasyllables that cheerfully mix echoes of famous verses by Foscolo with the Greek mime: "Here lies Gelsomina, donkey, / she was, in her life, a friend of paesants; / equipped with a symphonic jaw, / adorned with mosquitoes and flies, / deeply believed, after having brayed, / to spread harmony among the hills. / It is not true? It is a beautiful thing to sing, / together with a donkey, a poem. / Honor of tears Gelsomina you will have / as long as these suns shine, / until the workers are milked, / until the peppers mature".

The real and definitive monument to the donkey – as the author of this book knows – was erected by the great Spanish poet Juan Ramón Jiménez who in 1914 published *Platero and I*, an unforgettable prose poem whose absolute protagonist is precisely the donkey Platero.

The third embroidery, with which I close this small collection of examples, is linguistic and emerges from the pages dedicated to the relationship of the boys of the 1950s with the countryside and wild animals, among which the one with birds stands out: “[...] with the sun or with the clouds, all the sounds of the countryside offered sensations. The thunder frightened us and the wind sang stories it drew from distant fields and countries. The first part was played by the birds. They used trees as a stage. They took the branches at the top by swing. It is known that sparrows peep and make the farmer’s toil easier. If one puts imagination into it, he can hear a nightingale whispering these words as a love proposal: *‘Allons enfants de la Patrie!’* And, from the opposite tree, the lover, chest out, saying: *‘Le jour de gloire est arrivé!’* This happened when we were meditating on our first notions of the French language, in sixth grade. The sounds of this language seem like chirps”.

In short, the embroideries have to do with writing, or rather with the way of conducting the story that is essential for its success. In short, they help to “bring the story” as Leonardo Sciascia writes in a passage of *Nero su nero*, where he remembers that the poet Vann’Antò “once he was collecting folk tales” came across an old lady who told him: “The story is nothing, everything is in how it is carried; and that is in the way of telling”.

Crescit Eundo

The book grows, gains more and more strength going forward, reaches its climax in the sixth glass – chapter, where

the author, speaking of the olive trees and their firm roots, makes some considerations that are worth quoting broadly: "All trees have roots, those of the vine go in depth while the shoots rise in height. The oak crouches on its own and the branches are like the leafless canopy of that tree in winter. Men have no roots. To say that men have roots is a questionable old metaphor. Clearly questionable. Abele De Blasio [...] says, in one of his books, that this area of Sannio was, during the Middle Ages, one of the most invaded areas in Italy. Our predecessors are descended from various parts of Europe. If someone comes from outside, we shouldn't look at them with suspicion. Coming from outside was the story of our ancestors. We move. Many are those who leave, cross dramas, let themselves be led by the hand for a long time by hope. Only after time and between new events do the efforts become joy. Those who left the country, after years, come back happy with teenage children looking around. They now enjoy a situation that is different from the one they left. And they tell us things of distant countries and we tell them things of our old town. Traveling or leaving can generate men. Those who come from afar, more than others, may want to become a man. He lives with one foot in two shoes, he knows two cultures. Our choice is between burying ourselves like a potato in the dark among the roots of trees, or acting like a branch that stretches up to see beyond the field".

There is, in these words, a clear awareness that the encounter between multiple cultures, mutual knowledge and exchange can be experienced as an enrichment and a necessary goal to be achieved. Stated with different images, here is the same acquisition that the writer Carmine Abate, with a very dense met-

aphor, called “living by addition”. A strong idea that for some years has been the highest point of his vision of the world and which can be summarized as follows: opening up to others to get to know each other and be known; learn to look at the meeting and mixing of cultures with eyes free from prejudices; considering identity in dynamic terms as an ever-changing element, a process of growth and not something given once and for all and planted in the blood and soil. In short, living including humanity, adding relationships, adding experiences, welcoming changes, broadening horizons.

The six glasses are about to finish, there are only a few sips left, the final ones of the sixth glass, which reserve a great surprise but about which I will not say anything, so as not to deprive readers of the ease of enjoying them on their own. I only observe that here the author, keeping the “fuse of the imagination” increasingly lit, closes his narration with a very dense and bitter (very bitter) ecological fable centered on the symbolic figure of Alandra Satta. And, again, that this fable is not a body in itself but is an integral part of this book and indeed constitutes its exemplary conclusion because no page of it lingers on an ideal past to be contemplated with nostalgia. The peasant world is recalled here with affection and participation, but also with the necessary distance, to grasp, together with its strengths, its limits, shortcomings and defects. Raffaele Di Santo writes “after” and not “inside” that world; having been there and having lived it does not prevent him from exercising his critical spirit. The subtle irony that innervates and runs through all the chapters of this work, played in a wide range of intonations, is the main tool to keep away any trivially retrospective and calligraphic temptation.

Post Scriptum: I know who Alandra Satta is and I also know, for sure, that many, reading, will not be long in recognizing her. And that's good. Drink, drink my friends!

Giuseppe Colangelo

THE FIRST GLASS

*There is a taste in fruit juices that
those who have climbed trees know.*

1 PRESENTATION

The memory of past things almost helps to live more lives. The stories of the elderly have made us live several times, next to the table or the lit hearth. They were often made wrapped in fantasy spikes, bound by the love of our places, houses and fields. The birthplace is almost always dear to those who move away in life, to those who have happy memories of it, perhaps more to those who did not have a wealthy childhood. The soldiers who returned from the wars, when they saw their homes again, had their hearts filled with happiness. There was the intention of starting a new life and healing one's wounds. The emigrant who has returned after years has had a disturbed soul. Is my country the same as before, is it the same as the one I left?

This is how feelings and comparisons emerge, we remember the face of adventure, the tribulations faced and consider the well-being acquired, the prejudices left and the new horizons. In the past many left for poverty or injustices suffered, we would like to know what happened to them, their fortune, but time is inexorable and erases. This short essay consists of a collection of personal memories. I chose as companions a bottle of wine, a glass and the fuse of fantasy. It describes the period from 1955 to 1970. It also talks about things that hap-

pened before, along with tales of popular attitudes towards religion and imaginary stories that are lost in the mists of time. They are memories not ordered chronologically and are inspired by the agricultural experience I had up to twenty years, in my community particularly dedicated to the cultivation of vines and olives. I also talk about some aspects of the lives of my two grandfathers and paternal grandmother. They are sincere memories and would have been reflected in people who are abandoning us over the years.

Memory is made in her way, apparently it flows and feels secure, but then in speaking, for intimate reasons, she repaints past things. With the memories of different people, comparing them with each other, material can be put together for an objective reconstruction of past events, and it would require all the patience of a scientific approach. That is not my intention; what I say I have artfully recalled to mind and, since the past can sometimes disturb, I have tried to put harmony in memories. Bad memory and good digestion give long life, and the bad memory of the proverb I think has a peculiar characteristic: the ability to spur the oblivion. She trashes the bad things that poison our thoughts and puts the good things before our eyes to keep us going and softened. I did, and I'm satisfied, like when you train to cultivate a virtue. Choosing what to say wasn't easy: beautiful memories often sink into oblivion and deeply disconcerting stories emerge. Each person, during the selection, carefully draws from the basket of his past, discards the superfluous and retells what he deems appropriate. In saying, in telling things, to flavor them, we arm ourselves with a flower, a few smiles and above all some distant horizon. These elements cannot be lacking. One wonders who can ben-

efit from our saying and who might like stories without purpose and flavor and, in doubt, I tried to flavor them. You can embroider on facts, as it was once embroidered on sheets and pillows. And, as we know, certain descriptions take the hand and sometimes invent.

I accompany the enterprise with this homemade wine and, from time to time, the words are enveloped in the scent and aroma of what the glass offers me. Excuse me if some words get out of hand. They are wine tantrums. Wine, whatever people say, is not traitor, it can, on the contrary, soothe the pain of every wound. I've known its ways for a long time. With drinking, sometimes one thinks and sometimes not. Once the reasoning goes wrong and once it goes right. However if it is crooked it can be straightened. It's about fixing the foundations. I will try to follow the path of those who knew how to become a lover of the good and bad things in life with wine. At times irony appears in the company of satire which, almost unbeknownst to me, dive into wine and change the exaggerated praise into its opposite.

Should the reader come up with the idea of accompanying the pages with a bottle of wine, I recommend following two slownesses, in drinking and reading. Especially slow reading, since I gradually wrote. I love roses so much. I apologize if I stop to contemplate fruits and flowers, and if the glass will push me to say things a little crazy. It is the wine that leads me.

2 URBAN DESCRIPTION

Guardia has a beautiful piece of sky and a bunch of stars that appears at night. Until a few decades ago it had few farms in

the countryside. They have increased in recent decades, but not by much. Still, visiting the castle, if you take a look towards the river, you notice that Castelvevone has houses and farms scattered in the fields, as well as Telese and Solopaca. The castle is a thousand years old. Until the sixties houses were almost all clustered around it and we were divided, with relative feelings of belonging, into four districts. Over time, new houses were built in the upper part of the town, while the population, due to various factors, decreased. The old houses of the Portella district embrace more than others what remains of the castle. The Fontanella district is at the beginning of the town, for those coming from Castelvevone. It is where the sanctuary of the Assumption is located and is almost completely inhabited. The Piazza district, the least populated, is the center of the medieval village. Next to it there is the Croce district, the largest, located northeast of the ancient village: the Ratello stream flows in a long cave under its houses. We know that the first houses in this ward were built after an epidemic, a few centuries ago.

Currently many old buildings are empty. From the castle you can see that most of the roofs are intact. When the roof collapses, part of the house is lost in the air. The function of the tiles is a bit to retain the past events of those who lived below; they look a bit like the shells of the sea that tell the ear the sound of the waves.

Of these roofs of mine
of being a tile I dreamed:
a tile similar to a sea shell
that remote facts narrates,
and of the ravines every secret.

Over the last decades new houses have been built in the upper part of the town, towards the border of the municipality of San Lorenzo Maggiore, at the foot of the mountain and, going towards Cerreto, on the climb of Sant'Antonio Abate. From the old building, when inhabited and for those who had windows, you could see the valley of the Calore river with its olive groves in the hills and the extended vineyards. Every evening the peasants came home with the donkey, sometimes loaded with wood for the fireplace. They brought home, placed in the saddlebag dangling on both sides of the belly of the animal, fruit and vegetables and always the utensils tied to the saddle. The children often received bunches of anemones and daisies collected by their older sisters or their mother. During the night the donkeys slept next to the manger and, when it was May, scattered in the fields, you could hear their braying at every hour, since May is the month that expands all things of love.

In the fifties almost all the streets were paved with stones polished by time and by the iron of the donkeys and mules that walked them. Still the houses are attached to each other, like a crowd in which no one pushes. Doors and windows seem to be on the verge of telling stories but silence surrounds them. Many still retain the façade of a dark gray color like the skin of mice; some, in summer, were whitewashed with lime around the door and on the inner walls and, for a while, you could not hear the smell of the pigsty and chickens. There were also those who could afford wallpaper, not many. The poet says that there are towns with balconies adorned with vines and wisteria in bloom, we had balconies and windows with vases of basil, some geranium to ward off flies and mosquitoes,

parsley seedlings, hot peppers, celery and some pots of verberna. The vines were in the fields and wisteria were rare. Almost on every window or balcony there was a miniature vegetable garden, punctually watered and cared for by women. On late summer afternoons the old women sat together in front of the most comfortable door, knitting in the shade, on stone steps or on straw chairs. When some stranger or a pregnant woman appeared, they covered their mouths halfway with their hands, as if holding back unspeakable words, and whispered among themselves in a low voice. If they recognized the newcomers, in some cases they stood up to embrace them. They were distant relatives or relatives of relatives. Those who returned to the town and said that they were on vacation and had a permanent job in Milan aroused benevolent envy.

3 THE FLIES

In the old days, in our parts, there were rows of courteous spiders. They weaved cobwebs with silver threads with which they caught the few flies around that, shy, were afraid to come out of hiding places. The armor of the cobwebs was made to produce melodies, spiders used it as a harp and instructed crickets to sing. In the evening there were concerts and singing rehearsals along the fields. Then came a generation that had no sense of music. Not only that, hygiene also began to be neglected. The harmony of the harps ended and the dirt came. There was a multiplication of flies. They grew stronger, became legion and invaded the sweet, the anointed and the gross. It is known that, in these cases, it is God himself who encourages them; with them he stings and persecutes tired

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