Olive Oil

Next to the brothers’ house, there was an olive crusher, also owned by the family: it was a long, irregular room, dark and yet shiny, as if dug into a mountain of schist. Black, as if greased, was the strong, patient horse that made the wheel spin inside the round tank where the olives were crushed: the purplish paste they produced, poured into dubious, round bags, squeezed the iron press, but in this press, located in a kind of niche dug into the wall, were the men who maneuvered it with a rod: the miller and one of his helpers. The oil fell black and fat into a large pot, and the pomace, after the dough was squeezed, was thrown from a large window down into the garden, forming a sweet mound that was bought by a shopkeeper, who in summer bought the almonds of the family: and it was a fair return, along with that of the oil, which the owners of the olives left in return for handling them. But you had to be very careful, because the miller, a small religious man with the eyes of a true saint, who served the family for years and years, and who was sincerely fond of it, stole from both customers and owners.

The place was always full of people, because in a corner, between the window and the press, there was always a big fire with a pot of boiling water, where the bags were immersed and washed: and around this fire gathered a group
of individuals who, especially in the evening, formed a picture worthy of Rembrandt.

(from the novel Cosima, 1936)

As I mentioned at the beginning, Cosima is a very important novel both for Deledda’s writing activity and for us who, reading these pages, can receive a good approximation of the stages of her adolescence, from the certainty of literary passion to the threshold of Roman marriage.

The first passage brings back a habit dear to all homes, Sardinian and not, of serving breakfast, especially to young schoolchildren who are preparing to go to class. Nanna, the inevitable figure of the servant, prepares milk and coffee, underlining the temporary possibility of enjoying greater “power” and autonomy in a kitchen without a mistress. In fact, Cosima’s mother is in bed, on the upper floors, because she has just given birth. As she used to do in the past, and as many obstetricians still tend to propose today, childbirth was an entirely domestic event, part of the normal rhythm of life of the family.

Thanks to the ritual of breakfast, Deledda focuses her autobiographical novel on the kitchen, whose utensils, furniture, and infrastructure are described in such detail that they are still recognizable today in the house that has become the museum of Deledda in Nuoro.

The brothers are introduced: Santus, the scholar, who, after an accident with fireworks, will leave school and start an alcoholic existence; Andrea, his rebellious brother, the
only one who has accepted the “diversity” of Grazietta, who expresses his tendency to rebellion by refusing coffee and milk to prefer the bread and cheese of the shepherd servants.

Interesting to me is the motivation that refers to the rigid, sexist division of the Barbagian civilization: Andrea refuses milk because it is “weasels’ stuff,” while the balentia of the Sardinian male is precisely in choosing “a slice of red meat half raw” or, failing that, this “hard bread and a crust of cheese.”

Since Grazia is a girl, she does not have to continue her studies as her siblings do; for the education of a woman, who has to stay at home and have children, primary school is enough. So it is Andrea who convinces his parents to have Grazietta take private lessons with a retired high-school teacher who is a relative; it is Andrea who leads his sister to the old shepherds, in parties and countryside, to make her teach as much as possible about Sardinian traditions.

One of these country banquets is described, organized by Andrea and the shepherds of the Deledda’s countryside. The menu is the traditional one, and it is still offered today to those who visit the tancas: lambs, roasted in a lively flame, roasted cheese on a spit, early grapes.

The oil mill owned by his father was another place where Grazietta learned and refined her knowledge of traditional Sardinian culture. Since olive oil is undoubtedly one of the most important ingredients in Mediterranean cuisine, and therefore also that of Sardinia, I thought it appropriate to reprise the passage in which little Cosima describes, fascinated, the pressing of olives. I would add, for the record,
that another great Sardinian writer of the twentieth century, Giuseppe Dessì, in what I consider his best novel, *Introduction to the life of Giacomo Scarbo* (1959), captures the protagonist in the oil mill to listen to the stories of the old Sardinians and together to admire the ancient art of oil.