Homemade Bread

Making bread at home, as still happens in many houses, even in bourgeois provinces of Italy, is not an easy thing, but it is only half as complicated as you might believe. However, the fatigue and patience, as well as the responsibility necessary for the success of the work, are alleviated by the almost religious sense with which our good housewives perform the rite. It is enough to observe the spontaneous, yet conscious signs of the cross with which they accompany it. My mother, in our house in Nuoro, when the time had come to begin the matter, took on a more attentive, serious, almost priestly aspect than usual. She could have charged the servant with the most difficult tasks; but she looked at them well. She was, one might say, jealous of her prerogative, of her ancient initiation. She tied a handkerchief on her head, like a monk’s hood, and entered the pantry and drew, that’s the right word, the wheat from the sack. With the measure of metal, duly stamped and recorded, she drew the quantity of it. A quarter, two quarters: twenty-five and twenty-five liters, half of a hectoliter. Sometimes even three. She poured the wheat into the corbels, the flexible and resistant baskets of asphodel, and she carried it under the canopy of the courtyard: in a shining and capable copper pot shone the clear water, also just drawn from the family well. Sitting on a stool, my mother washed the grain: little by little she
washed it, inside a sieve of rushes, carefully dipping it in the water, mixing it with her thin, agile hand, used to very fine embroiderries of silk and gold as in all sorts of domestic work; then she lifted the sieve, made it drip, and shook it, with an art that clearly divided the content from the stones and waste. And she made them jump on one side, while on the other side she poured the damp wheat into a wide basket, which was also made of asphodel. And so on, until all the wheat was washed and put to dry. Once dry it was cleaned again, almost grain by grain, on the large kitchen table, carefully cleaned. (…)

Then the yeast came out from the closet where, in a golden bowl that looked like a sacred vase, it was kept from one bread baking to another, and above the pile that welcomed and buried it, dissolved like lifeblood, the white hand of flour marked a cross: a cross that was repeated on her face, as if to be reflected in the circle of the precious dough.

Night passes: the housewife sleeps and watches at the same time: at the first chant of the rooster, she jumps up, calls the subdued servant, asks her to call the girls. (…)

In the meantime, one or two fresh loaves were sent as a gift to relatives and neighbors, who in turn returned them on the days of their baking: if a friend or even a hidden enemy, and especially a poor person or a beggar, the offer was repeated; and if the beggar came by chance from afar and was unknown, my mother and the women, and perhaps even some of the unscrupulous ladies, thought, with a secret thrill,
that they could hide him. Him! The only one who can take thousands and thousands of forms to experience the heart of others. He who chose bread for his communion of love with man.

(from the novel *Il pane casalingo*, from the collection *Ferro e fuoco*, 1895)

As I have already written, Grazia Deledda describes a world of traditions and cultures in which she herself had first lived and then studied. Even the custom of making bread at home, described here, is related to the agropastoral society to which she belongs. In fact, the bread, still consumed today and known as “pane carasau,” is a typical product of the family economy for the shepherd and the farmer who stayed away from home for many days. They had to carry non-perishable products, such as leavened and “toasted” bread with them, the consumption of which was possible even months after being prepared. The close connection, the affective compromise between the world narrated and its narrator, in this novel is very visible precisely because of the autobiographical declaration at the beginning of the book.