

Passages from *Among the Lost Souls* by Enzo Fontana (*Tra la perduta gente*, Mondadori, 1996).

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## Chapter VI

Guido Novello da Polenta, mayor of Ravenna, was not by nature a raptor, despite the fact that the family coat of arms bore a vermilion eagle against a yellow background. He had managed to unsheathe his sword, however, when it came to laying claim to his part of the world, asserting the name of the da Polenta family and the rights of Ravenna. One day he overheard his cousin Ostasio say:

“Guido Novello? A dove with talons.”

But Guido, when he saw him, responded:

“Rather than a coat of arms, it seems more like a depiction for a bestiary.”

He would have preferred to take up a pen in life. A connoisseur of the liberal arts and lover of the Muses, he himself endeavored to ascend Parnassus:

My lady, by virtue  
of Love, pain is joy to me when I think  
that this just sorrow is sweet salvation,  
and that he who dies loving lives forever. (1)

He did not have the sanguine disposition of certain of his kin, like his uncles Lamberto and Bernardino da Polenta, striking examples, not to mention his cousin Ostasio. Rather, he had a slightly melancholy temperament. Fiduccio dei Milotti, a physician of Tuscan origin who practiced in Ravenna, discerned in him a healthy balance of moods, with just a droplet more of the black bile. He was generous, but not extravagant. It was not his custom to be immoderate. The tempo and feeling of decline beat within him, certainly not a prelude to the Renaissance. The city of the last of the Caesars could not have had a better custodian.

His severe instructor, in the art of war and politics, had been his maternal grandfather, Guido Minore da Polenta, creator of the family power. As a child, Guido Novello had

admired him; later, as a young man, a sense of awe had prevailed, though he had tried to shun the older man's influence. As a grown man only a skeleton of feeling remained toward his grandfather, clothed in proper upbringing and respect. On the day of his grandfather's funeral, in the basilica of Urso, standing before the catafalque and that iron-jawed countenance, instead of tears a memory sprang forth. He saw himself out strolling again with the old man – who wasn't really old yet, but who seemed ancient to the little boy – in the garden of the da Polentas' castle. The older Guido was trying to teach him a life lesson. Guido Novello was not listening to him, however, distracted as he was by a tree loaded with ripe cherries toward which he reached out his little hands. At that point the elder da Polenta lost his patience and asked him: "Would you like to taste a cherry?" And receiving an enthusiastic reply that was more than just affirmative, rather than picking it for him, which would have been very simple for him to do, he lifted his grandson up with arms that were still robust and set him down a little unsteadily on the lowest branch, at a man's height. So that Guido Novello found himself poised precariously, wavering between a smile and consternation. The desire for cherries had left him. All he wanted was to come down. It was fortunate that the figure of his grandfather stood before him, smiling and reassuring, while holding out his arms to him. And so the boy, full of trust, leaned out toward the old man, who instead of catching him, drew back his hands all of a sudden; the boy fell to the ground, which thankfully was not too hard. Tears of pain gushed from Guido Novello's eyes. But realizing that he was crying more from disappointment than from the fall itself, the elder da Polenta became very angry: "Get it into your head that you should never trust anyone, not even family! This is the first lesson you have to learn, if you want to be a master in this world."

Many years later, no longer magistrate of Ravenna but still master of his spirit, exiled to Bologna because of a family member and by then almost at death's door, he would remember those words, but without second thoughts. And yet he was about to die in exile as a result of the betrayal of his cousin Ostasio, who unlike him had profited from their grandfather's lesson.

In spite of the efforts of his harsh teacher, Guido Novello refused to rise under the standard of suspicion, refining a soul that was by nature already gentle, though not to say weak. But what lay an everlasting sheet of ice over the uncertain feeling of love which, despite everything, he had nourished for the elder da Polenta up to a certain point was discovering how and why he had sacrificed his daughter Francesca for the family cause.

"Perhaps only Iphigenia was sacrificed more cruelly than she," Guido Novello went so far as to think when he had become a man, although the comparison between the elder Guido Minore da Polenta and Agamemnon struck him as exaggerated. In fact

the old tyrant had ordered Francesca to become the bride of Gianciotto Malatesta, a crippled soldier who was lord of Rimini. The marriage, negotiated for the purpose of sanctioning the peace that had been reestablished following the usual skirmishes between the da Polentas and the Malatestas, had been dictated solely by practical reasons. Tears were trampled underfoot and love played no part.

When he imagined Francesca and Gianciotto together, Guido Novello, endowed as he was with feeling and a keen aesthetic sensibility, thought of them as the goddess of beauty and the god of cripples. He would always consider that obligatory union to be an offense against the creed of compassion.

He cherished many sweet memories of his aunt Francesca, but one of them in particular had stayed with him like a drop of premonitory blood. It was the last summer before the dreaded wedding. She, however, was sad and avoided the presence of family members, especially that of her father and brothers. Only the company of her favorite nephew, Guido Novello, eight years old at the time, pleased her. In the garden of the da Polenta castle, the same garden in which the old man had taught him the unforgettable lesson, there were brambles filled with Mother Nature's sweet blackberries. One day he was out picking them with his aunt, though more went in his mouth than in the basket. Francesca smiled at seeing her nephew's fingers and lips stained the color of blackberries. They saw one that was so plump and juicy that it would have made a saintly hermit salivate. To pick it, Francesca delicately slipped her hand into a thicket of brambles, but with a frightened start she withdrew it so quickly that the thorns scratched her. She turned pale but tried to contain her emotion, as a blackberry of blood began to form on the back of her hand. She said to her nephew who was watching her, surprised:

“There's a snake among the brambles.” And when she brought her hand to her lips, the drop of blood fell on her gown.

It was not long after the wedding that the tragedy of Francesca and her Paolo, killed by Gianciotto Malatesta, occurred. Guido Novello did not learn of it through any outcry in the da Polenta households, since the family was gripped more by embarrassment than by grief, but from the whispers of the women who turned silent at his approach. To his young mind words like “lovers” and “betrayal” had almost no meaning. Even the word “death” was after all inconceivable to him, though at least it was transformed into an image. When he surprised the servants talking about Francesca's hands and garments, which once white had turned bloody as a result of the blows she had been dealt, he imagined that the snake from that day in the garden had bitten her. So he got a stick, ran to the garden and, sobbing, began thrashing the brambles.

The elder Guido Minore da Polenta denounced the adulteress, though God knows he mourned his daughter in his heart, and was beside himself. He then imposed silence on the matter, which was respected at all times, at least in his presence.

The years passed. Guido Novello had by then arranged for his own marriage, when one day in a palace in Bologna, where the annual festival of Love was being celebrated as it was everywhere, and where he had been invited together with his wife, he heard a voice reciting these verses:

Love, which in gentle hearts is quickly born...  
Love, which absolves none who are loved from loving...  
Love gave us both one death. (2)

The festival was enlivened by youths in white tunics who represented the spiritelli, genies, of love. At the sound of those words they stopped dancing and almost flew to settle themselves on either side of the man who had recited them. They were like the choral group of a Greek tragedy, except that, unlike the choruses of ancient times, they were silent. He on the other hand was a true performer, caught up in playing the role. He had generated genuine feeling in all those present; even those who were inebriated opened their clouded eyes. Guido Novello came forth among the guests. He had in fact realized that the recital was meant especially for him.

“Troubadour!” he said, “whose verses are these?”

“They are the words of Francesca da Polenta... put into rhyme by a Florentine poet” replied the man who by contrast had the look of a wandering minstrel: in Guido Novello’s eyes he read a strong emotion, even if it was disguised by a firm tone of voice.

Guido Novello did not ask him the name of the poet. He had already guessed who it was, based on what little fame Dante enjoyed at that time. He knew him as the polished composer of ballads and sonnets. But for some months now he had heard a number of rumors that spoke of another work. Even his uncle Bernardino had mentioned it to him. Now his uncle’s words came back to him: “There’s someone I knew at Campaldino who has written a poem about Francesca. In battle I remember him as neither a coward nor a hero, but prudent, almost invisible. He was among the feditori, the avant-garde, of the Florentine cavalry, and was at its baptism by blood, assuming that he had the courage to kill an Aretine, not necessarily a horseman but at least a foot soldier. He did not have the look of a warrior. Frankly I would not remember him – he comes from a family of little worth – if it were not for a

wonderful scene I witnessed the night before the battle. He was at the center of a group of horsemen, friends of his, who were begging him for a love poem. And he did not refuse them. I don't recall the words, just the scene itself, that contrast, or that accord, between love and war. I understand the sword, I don't live and die for poetry, but those who appreciate it have told me that the verses which he has now dedicated to my sister are very beautiful. Even if he imagined her in Hell. Couldn't he have imagined her someplace else? Poets do not lack imagination, what with the things they are forced to invent in order not to miss a meal. At present he has fallen into disfavor, it's been years since he was driven out. As if the enemies he left behind in Florence weren't enough, he's made a few just about everywhere. Because he is a poet who goes around slandering, not even the souls of the dead are left in peace. Even as regards our family, I don't think he shows the respect that is due it."

In later years Guido Novello would come to better understand Dante's opinion about the tyrants of Romagna, but even from the beginning he did not blame him for his scant regard for the da Polentas. What interested him was the poet. So that now he wanted to listen again to those verses which had so impressed him. Except that he would never have imagined that the echo of Francesca's tragedy would come back to him through the mouth of a performer, whose breath whistled between teeth that were like the merlons of a ruined castle. He asked him:

"What is your name?"

"Andrea."

"Andrea, do you know other tercets?"

"The entire canto. Would you like to hear it?"

"Yes, and you will be well compensated."

"It is enough for me that you and your wife appreciate it," said Andrea bowing in the direction of Caterina di Malvicino who was watching him from where she sat at the table of honor. "The invitation to recite at this festival of love is compensation enough for me."

Among the guests was a certain Giovanni del Virgilio, a young grammarian from Bologna, keeper of the Latin creed. He too knew all too well whose verses those were. Perhaps prompted by Bacchus he sighed, but in such a way that everyone was able to hear him:

“That Dante would be an even greater poet, if only he did not follow the vulgar style.”

“Francesca who speaks of love in the Latin tongue?” said Guido Novello with a look of disbelief. “When all is said and done, the language of lovers is only one, that of the heart.”

There was a vague murmur of approval in the hall. Caterina di Malvicino, who on the one hand found it ridiculous that the performer should show off before her eyes (she was convinced that the recital was for her alone), on the other hand was pleased with herself for being able to recognize a gentle soul even beneath the tatters. She ignored the scholar from Bologna and turned to Andrea:

“One can sense that they come from the soul, the verses that you recited.”

Andrea was grateful to her and without further delay began:

O living soul, who with courtesy and compassion... (3)

At the end of the canto, Caterina di Malvicino’s eyelashes glistened with tears. And she was not alone; almost everyone was moved.

“This canto would be enough to seal a poet’s greatness,” Guido Novello said, speaking more to his wife than to the others. “In her grief Francesca says to him: ‘...if heaven’s King bore affection/for such as we are.../then we would pray to Him to grant you peace/for pitying us in this, our evil end’. (4) If Francesca’s prayer cannot reach the heavens, her wish can, however, reach me. If ever Dante Alighieri is in need of shelter and a friend, he will find both one and the other in Ravenna.”

(1) Except where otherwise noted, all translations appearing in the text are those of the present translator.

(2) From the translation of Robert Pinsky (1994).

(3) Pinsky.

(4) Pinsky.