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Renato Papale

La fiasca

ovvero: la parte giusta dell'Umanità

The Flask

or, the Right Side of Humanity

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La fiasca
ovvero: la parte giusta dell'Umanità

A mia madre.

Ebraica per discendenza;
Valdese per scelta convinta;
per matrimonio accolta in una famiglia
di caparbie tradizioni cattoliche.

Da lei ho imparato che l'orgoglio di appartenenza
può non essere escludente.

Un ringraziamento a *Massumeh Farhad*, curatrice della collezione d'arte Islamica della Freer Gallery of Art, Washington D. C. , ed a *Giulia Davì*, dirigente del Servizio Beni Storico-Artistici della Soprintendenza di Palermo, Italia, per avermi assecondato nelle mie farneticazioni.

In nome di Dio, Misericordioso e Clemente, il Re, il Santo.
Su di te sia la Sua Pace.
Che possa sempre accompagnare la tua vita,
illuminare la tua mente, guidare il tuo braccio.

Valoroso amico mio,

ieri il tuo messaggero mi ha raggiunto nella casa natale. Ne sono rimasto turbato: mancavo da anni da questo perduto paese; e qui speravo poter restare per tutti, per sempre (ed anche ai miei occhi), nascosto.

Per tutta la notte la tua lettera è rimasta sullo scrittoio, a fissarmi immobile; a scrutare dal buio la tenebra della mia coscienza.

Adesso la scorrono i primi raggi del sole che, infine, ha deciso di spuntare. Ed io di risponderti.

Con fatica, con pena profonda.

Inizio col dirti che non posso esaudire la tua richiesta: non ho più con me l'oggetto che mi fu affidato, e che adesso tu mi chiedi.

Dover ammettere questa mancanza mi procura dolore; ma non è il più grande. Ti narrerò le circostanze in cui me ne sono disfatto, e potrai osservare il peso che opprime la mia anima.

Sei il primo, dopo tanti giorni, col quale mi apro. Per l'amicizia che mi dimostri. E per quella che anch'io, non meritevole, devo pure a me stesso.

Tu sai che io ero nella Città, quando avvenne l'attacco. Di quella catastrofe, l'immagine che mi resta viva sono le nuvole di fogli scritti che si spandevano, insieme alla polvere, nel vento. Vagavano senza meta per le strade, sospinti senza vita, come gli spettri di noi sopravvissuti. Usciti dagli Archivi, le carte pellegrinavano disperse; e questo rendeva irrimediabilmente illeggibile, insieme alla vita di migliaia di persone, anche la memoria delle loro storie.
Di più: ciò che vedevo cancellarsi era la Storia della civiltà (o, almeno, una sua preziosa parte) che quegli scritti raccoglievano, raccontavano. Vicende di grandi persone che furono vive, ed ora morte per sempre, anche nella possibilità di un ricordo.
Brandelli della nostra Storia finivano nei fiumi che racchiudono la Città come in un'isola; e, galleggiando, premevano sui ponti. Paralizzato, stavo contro la spalletta a vederli accumularsi.
Non avrei mai creduto di vivere per guarda-

re lo spettacolo del crollo di ciò che era stato il luogo centrale del Mondo e dei Commerci. Invece assistevo alla caduta; e ne registravo i dettagli.
Questo lutto, per me uomo di legge e di lettere, che fino a quel giorno aveva vissuto nell'ambizione di poter contribuire a scrivere "la" Storia (o almeno scrivere "di" Storia), era immensamente più grande del mio lutto per gli uomini uccisi.
Me ne vergogno!

Dunque, tu sai che ero a Baghdad, nei giorni dell'invasione.
Avevo lasciato la reggia della Madre di Kalil (ed i compiti di precettore) per offrire al Califfo i miei servigi di magistrato, portando con me da Alessandria la fiasca di Fakhr ad-Din.
Credevamo che le alte mura bianche di al-Mansur ci avrebbero per sempre difeso. Sciocchi! Più alte le mura, più distante si attira il nemico…
Quando arrivò l'attacco, non corsi a difesa della Città, come tu hai fatto col tuo esercito a Damasco, ricacciando indietro Kublai Khan (vittoria luminosa, di cui solo adesso mi rallegro con te).

Non sono uomo d'armi. In quei giorni di terrore ho cercato solo un sicuro riparo, fuori dalla residenza del Califfo; e poi, di fuggire oltre il fiume.

Avevo scelto di trasferirmi nella Città, non perché aspirassi a qualcosa per me, ma ancora a motivo della fiasca.
Fidavo di trovare nella grande Biblioteca copia degli appunti del geografo al-Idrisi che, speravo, avrebbero dissetato il mio desiderio di comprenderne fino in fondo il senso, l'origine, di cui mai non ti rivelai prima.
Ciò che tu sai di essa è che anni fa l'Emiro Fakhr ad-Din suggerì al Re al-Salih Ayyub farne regalo al suo buon amico, Federico Imperatore dei Rumi, e ne curò personalmente la realizzazione, recandosi a Damasco per ingaggiare i migliori orafi. E che poi quel regalo non fu mai inviato; restando, alla morte dell'Emiro, in mia custodia.

Scrivi che, sul finire d'estate, Manfredi sarà incoronato a Palermo. Trovo saggia la tua decisione di inviare un'ambasceria e doni per confermare amicizia. Ed è naturale tu abbia pensato a

quanto fu già disposto per suo padre: sarebbe stata offerta ben degna di Re!
Dovrai invece accontentarti di spedire una coppia di veloci ghepardi a rallegrare i giardini di Genoard: io ho scambiato quel raro gioiello per la mia vita (baratto poco equo, ne convengo).
Fu il venerdì dopo l'entrata dei Mongoli in Città; poco prima che calasse la sera, nei vicoli del Suq dietro la Grande Moschea; nei quali mi ero addentrato nascondendo in un sacco l'ingombrante fiasca e, sotto un dimesso caffettano, a darmi coraggio, un pugnale.

"*…Colui che mi tiene è il Difensore, la Guida, il Condottiero della Frontiera…*"; era insostenibile ascoltare oltre quel mercante, mentre leggeva ad alta voce l'iscrizione che io avevo riguardato così tante volte, cercando notizia oltre le parole.
Avvicinandosela agli occhi, sporgendola verso la luce, faceva finta di esaminare la fiasca, di cui senz'altro si era già fatta alla prima occhiata una precisa idea.
Ero certo che stesse prendendo tempo, per valutare non l'oggetto, ma il venditore che gli stava davanti. Cercava di capire quale urgenza

avessi di vendere; per stimare l'entità del sicuro affare che concludeva quella sera.
Si sforzava di trascinarmi in qualche discorso. Io evitavo; o più spesso sviavo; tentando di blandirlo. Il tempo che passava mi rendeva sempre più inquieto, contro ogni mio vantaggio.
Così infine lo interruppi, e pretesi tre pezzi d'oro.
Molto meno del giusto valore; ma era la somma richiesta per un traghetto sul fiume, per lasciare nottetempo la Città.
Era stato un grave errore aver posto un tetto alle mie pretese.
Lo sapevo; ma nella condizione in cui ero, sentivo insopportabile il rito della contrattazione.
Avevo paura, e di sicuro non lo nascondevo.
Il mercante non diede risposta, e cominciò invece a denigrare l'oggetto, a sminuirne l'esecuzione. Disse che se l'avesse comprato non sarebbe riuscito a rivenderlo, perché il momento era grave, perché la fattura modesta, perché le raffigurazioni del Profeta Gesù (Dio lo benedica e l'abbia in gloria) non avevano alcun mercato fuori da Damasco; perché, perché, perché…
Sfacciato truffatore!

Si girava tra le mani un'opera d'arte che in altri tempi non avrebbe avuto occasione neanche di guardare. E a me negava tre miseri pezzi d'oro, sola speranza di conservare la vita.
Nella mia agitazione evitavo di fissarlo, e gli occhi vagavano attorno.
Una vasta ed alta scaffalatura avvolgeva i quattro muri della bottega, negando ad una piccola finestra di portarvi luce. Centinaia di oggetti di metallo stavano accatastati, ordinati per colore, per forma, per dimensione. Dalla parte opposta al portone aperto sulla via, una tenda interrompeva la disciplinata linea di quelle mensole. La volta bianca del soffitto rifletteva e concentrava sul banco centrale il poco chiarore di quel tugurio. Per terra, in un angolo, stracci e sacchi di merce non ancora disposta.
Mi era stato indicato come esperto mercante di arte orafa; ma non sembrava fosse artigiano: nessun desco per cesello nella sua bottega. Era uomo unicamente capace di vendere e comprare.
Adesso le sue dita vedevo esplorare una per una al tatto quelle Sante figure sulla corona esterna. Le conoscevo tutte per nome: Gabriele l'Arcangelo, Myriam la Vergine e Madre, Giuseppe, Giovanni, e poi le altre, fino alla venti-

cinquesima: il misterioso Difensore; mano alzata in segno di pace, l'unico armato di spada.
Non mi faceva idea che quello ne riconoscesse i nomi, che sapesse leggere i simboli. O intendere i numeri degli oggetti: 3, 7, 9, 25…
Tagliare un circolo in parti che non fossero multiple delle Case del Cielo, spezzarlo in cinque parti uguali, e poi dividerlo ancora per cinque non è competenza di orafo, ma di un sapiente che sappia di matematica. Il Disegno era opera dell'Emiro, non di un seppur valente artigiano di Damasco.

Eccoti svelato il Disegno di quella fiasca: Federico, nell'urgenza determinata dal Re Franco Luigi, che andava riunendo contro di noi la sua flotta alle Acque Morte, era chiamato dal Re al-Salih a tornare, senza armi come un pellegrino, sul trono che dieci anni prima al-Kamil gli aveva consegnato, perché fosse garante di Pace.
Questo era per l'Imperatore l'insospettato regalo: non un semplice dono recato da ambasciatori, ma l'ambasceria stessa.
Il Disegno indicava in dettaglio un cammino difeso per raggiungere La Santa, la Città che il Re David si compiacque di chiamare in sua lin-

gua “luogo della Pace”; e che ancora una volta era oggetto del desiderio di guerra.
Un Disegno complesso, che per mia (piccola) parte partecipai a tracciare, ma che non fui mai ammesso a conoscere del tutto.
E che il Siciliano, in sua sapienza, avrebbe certamente decifrato, confrontandone le eloquenti tracce con quelle che gremiscono la rappresentazione del Mondo in suo possesso.
Intendo, il planisferio d’argento realizzato da al-Idrisi per Re Rujari, al termine dei suoi numerosi viaggi; che anche a me era accaduto di vedere, in visita a Palermo, ornare la Sala del Cielo Stellato, sulla sommità del Palazzo di al-Aziz.

Questa era adesso la mia condizione: mi ero trovato nel mezzo di quella guerra per il desiderio di conquistare un segreto, che con giusta intenzione non mi era stato interamente svelato. I libri che mi avrebbero dovuto illuminare, erano arsi e ridotti in cenere.
Che sciocco! Nonostante le violenze a cui avevo assistito, credevo ancora saldamente che nella Storia dell’Uomo si dipanasse un Disegno di Dio.

L'Umanità mi era sempre apparsa divisa in due parti. Ovviamente io dimoravo in quella Giusta, perché benedetta da Dio.
Nel definire quale fosse l'altra, io mi trovavo d'accordo con il pensiero del buon Emiro che volle darmi istruzione, e con quello di tutte le persone sapienti con cui ho avuto piacere e fortuna di confrontarmi.
Non mi raffiguravo un Mondo spartito tra Rumi e Veri Credenti, come appare alla maggior parte degli stolti, che sono persuasi di operare il volere di Dio sopprimendo altre Sue creature.
Bestemmia!
Il Mondo nel quale mi figuravo di vivere era difeso da un Muro; ed oltre quello, noi avevamo confinato gli uomini che chiamavamo "di Deserto". Gente violenta, aggressiva; con l'aridità di sabbia nel cuore. Uomini spietati, primitivi, rozzi, chiusi.
Che essi siano d'Islam o di Rumi poco importa, perché nella fede cercano identica certezza e giustificazione a se stessi.
Dalla nostra parte del Muro stava "la Gente del Fiume".
Una comunità ideale, senza frontiera di lingua o credenza; un popolo che apre nuove vie, dove scorrono merci ed idee.

Che all'osservanza di liturgie vuote preferisce piuttosto il Bazar. Perché anche mercanteggiare richiede atteggiamento ugualitario, disposto ad arrivare a un compromesso.
Per questo comune sentire, due saggi dalla mente aperta e nobile, Fakhr ad-Din e Federico, potevano riconoscersi alleati, discutere come amici di astronomia e matematica, elaborare insieme un Disegno di Pace e progresso per due popoli che a cagione di fede si ritenevano a torto nemici.
Da questo comune sentire nacque l'idea della fiasca.
Che non ebbe fortuna: in Italia Federico subiva contrasti.
Per guadagnarsi la benevolenza del Califfo di Roma, nemico della Gente del Fiume, i Rumi del deserto che prima gli erano alleati, si rivoltavano contro l'Imperatore.
Fu più veloce il Re Franco ad arrivare a Damietta, di quanto non fosse Federico nel tornare a Palermo.
E prima di poter vedere la nostra vittoria, in un vile agguato il coraggioso Emiro incontrò la sua morte.

Così rimasi custode di un segreto, anche a me in parte ignoto.
E del quale, adesso, provavo per viltà a disfarmi.



Così, riversavo il disgusto che provavo per me sul commerciante che avevo davanti.
Lo consideravo con disprezzo.
Ogni oggetto in quella bottega, per ciò che era o per come fosse disposto; ogni parola che lui pronunciava; ogni suo gesto. Tutto mi era malevolo, e lo collocavano oltre il mio Muro. Un uomo del deserto, un rozzo, che meritava meno di me di essere in vita.
Con mio sollievo le sue dita avevano smesso di scorrere sulle Sante figure. E con quel pretesto prese a vantare la sua perfetta fede, che non venerava un sì folto Olimpo politeista.
Non gradivo discutere con lui sul primato tra credenze. Così troncai, dicendo di conoscere bene come la pensassero gli arabi.
Di certo lui lo era; ma capì che dicevo "arabo" per offesa.

Le nostre voci si alzarono, si sovrapponevano. Provai desiderio di colpirlo.

Fu allora che sentii un gemito, come di animale ferito. Sobbalzai; un sudore freddo rabbrividì la mia schiena. Mi volsi; e non vidi.
Poi, una sacca di tessuto si contorse.
In un angolo buio della bottega stava rannicchiata nel suo abito scuro una donna, che fino ad allora, pure con l'intenzione di perlustrarmi attorno, il mio sguardo non aveva incontrato: gli occhi guardavano, ma la mente non avvertiva; impegnata ad inseguire la sola idea di salvezza, per unico mezzo di miserabili tre pezzi d'oro, che quel porco beduino mi negava.
Questi parlò, rivolgendosi a quella. Il sole scendeva, ed a momenti sarebbe partita la preghiera: che stesse zitta! Che andasse piuttosto a prendere qualcosa da mangiare.
La matassa si svolse, si alzò in piedi, sparì muta dietro la tenda.

Quella nuova presenza mi aveva d'un tratto rasserenato. Del resto, non era mio interesse perdere l'occasione di vendere.
Ed anche il mercante mi sembrò parlare più

quietamente. Per lui, l'affare era più redditizio di quanto non fosse per me.
Riprendevo fiducia nella mia stessa filosofia. Il dialogo tra persone per comporre i conflitti, la possibilità di scambio commerciale come robusto fattore di composizione degli interessi. . .
Mi sembrò per un momento intravedere l'eventualità di un accordo su quei tre pezzi d'oro che avevo richiesto.

La tenda si mosse, e la donna riapparve da quella stessa opaca apertura nella quale prima si era infilata. Portava un piccolo vassoio con due piattini e sei datteri in tutto, ripieni di latte e di miele; cibo rituale, prima della preghiera serale del Venerdì.
Era giusto arrivato il tramonto, ed una lama di luce del colore del sangue entrava ora dalla strada, colpendo nel viso la donna.
Il chador nero che stringeva indosso ne disegnava la figura, giovane e perfetta. La sua mano teneva uniti i lembi della veste; al di sopra di quella, due occhi neri profondi mi guardavano.
Occhi innocenti, ma che conoscevano paura e follia.

La stavo fissando con insistenza maggiore di quanto fosse civile. Ed il mercante sentì il dovere di accennare una presentazione.
Era una serva di recente acquisto – proprio così disse. Pazza. Proveniva dal Palazzo del Califfo, e lì cantava per il diletto dei potenti, ma (precisò, con un disgustoso ammiccamento) senza che nessuno potesse guardarla.
Raggelai.
Tornai con vergogna negli occhi di quella povera preda, di cui il porco andava fiero. Stavo ammirando non una serva, ma (per la prima volta) il volto della principessa Jasmine, la fanciulla di credenza Rumi, della cui bellezza il Califfo era talmente geloso da impedire a chiunque di osservarne anche solo l'aspetto. Ed il cui canto riempiva il Palazzo, accompagnato da un'orchestra di cinque musicisti ciechi…
Cane! Cani! Tutti cani!
Ora capivo perché, con l'invasore in Città, molte botteghe del suq erano aperte; e colme di merci.
Il Califfo non era ancora morto (l'avrebbero massacrato tre giorni dopo davanti alla Moschea) e restava prigioniero di Huglai Khan.

Mezza città bruciava. E nell'altra mezza quei disgraziati se ne stavano spartendo i beni! Questa la verità: più che i Mongoli, fu il popolo fetente a saccheggiare, a distruggere Biblioteche, a depredare giardini e Palazzi.
E la canaglia che avevo dinnanzi si vantava di aver trafugato una donna, di cui non sarebbe mai stato all'altezza, di cui nemmeno conosceva le qualità.
Non era uomo, la bestia che stava parlandomi. La mia mano era tornata a stringere l'elsa del coltello che occultavo sotto la veste.
Cane! Cane! Fremevo di schifo, ma il mio urlo non trovava ancora il coraggio di uscire dalla gola.
Il sole una volta per tutte spariva, e in quel momento fu un altro, l'urlo che udii. Il muezzin aveva attaccato la sua cantilena dall'alto del vicino minareto, richiamando alla preghiera.

"Dio è Grande, Dio è Grande, Dio è Grande", urlò tre volte.
"Dio è Grande" ripeté con un gemito Jasmine, fissando i miei occhi. Lasciò cadere sia vassoio che veste. La leggerissima seta nera scivolò tenue sui neri capelli disciolti, sulle spalle

scoperte; mostrò la bianca camicia schiusa sul seno e le brache riccamente colorate.
Con entrambe le mani stringeva il mio polso, come avesse capito ciò che impugnavo.
"Dio è Grande, ma l'Amore è più grande".
Quel che accadde dopo, mi sembrò avvenire tutto in un attimo; e di quell'attimo non ebbi alcun controllo.
Il negoziante si scagliò sulla donna, urlandole di tacere; le gridò sfacciata, pazza, blasfema; strillò (perché lo sentissero anche di fuori) che lui non voleva passare guai per le sue bestemmie.
Una verga era apparsa nella sua mano. La colpì sulla faccia.
Vidi il sangue sulla guancia sfregiata di quella creatura celeste che un istante prima mi stava parlando d'amore.
Persi il dolce contatto delle sue mani sulla mia che, libera, scattò verso l'alto e ricadde precisa.
Il maiale adesso rantolava per terra; macellato con un taglio alla gola che si era guadagnato.
Occhi sbarrati; la mano sul collo non tratteneva la rabbiosa fonte di sangue, che invadeva il negozio.
Prima che il getto raggiungesse i miei calzari,

ero già oltre il bancone, addosso a quell'uomo, a rivoltargli il caffettano, a cercargli la borsa legata alla vita. La trovai. Gliela strappai.
Monete si sparsero numerose per terra; parte sul liquido, parte rotolarono nel buio. Afferrai tre pezzi d'oro: la cifra che mi sembrava onesta, ma anche gli unici denari non ancora affondati nel sangue.
Feci per afferrare un braccio alla donna, come fosse cosa naturale doverla portar via. Quella si sottrasse alla presa. E tornò a chinarsi sull'uomo morente. Piangendo, cercava di fare argine al sangue.
Tra i due, compativa quell'altro e mostrava terrore di me. Abbandonai lei e la fiasca, senza voltarmi: sarebbero stati entrambe d'impaccio.
Fuori, nessuno aveva inteso. Fortunatamente nessun grido era uscito. E comunque, il muezzin continuava a cantare.
Una donna alla finestra ritirava il bucato. Ogni portone spandeva odore di cucinato. Fondaci e magazzini si chiudevano in fretta; e gli uomini procedevano svelti. Gente, come un fiume, scorreva verso la cupola verde, affrettandosi nei lavaggi rituali per pregare.
Di quel fiume, ero già un'indistinguibile goccia.

Riuscii a fuggire, quella notte. Viaggiando mescolato con una carovana, tornai come ladro alla mia casa.

Dopo di allora ho avuto tempo per rivivere, uno per uno, i miei sentimenti di quella sera; e di me ho provato terrore.
Riflettendovi, ho appreso molte cose.
Non ultima, di aver deformata la frase ritenuta blasfema di Jasmine, che invece, probabilmente, recitava dal Libro.

Ti sono grato. Per avermi dato modo, in principio di questa nuova giornata, di confessare a te tutto quanto.
Ma ciò non mi allevia dell'orrore compiuto, del quale non sono riuscito, né riuscirò, a perdonarmi.
O soltanto, a capirne i motivi.
Guarda agli effetti provocati dalle mie emozioni: ho disperso, forse per sempre, l'opera di ingegno di un vero uomo di Pace.
Ed io, che tale mi ritenevo, sono fuggito; lasciando alle mie spalle un morto, ucciso con gesto vigliacco, ed al suo fato una donna divina, che avevo pure sognato parlasse a me del

suo amore, chiedendo difesa.
E che invece, tentava di difendere me da me stesso!

A lei ripenso spesso. Che le sarà accaduto?
Vivrà, ridotta come schiava?
O sarà stata piuttosto lapidata, incolpata del mio proprio delitto?



Valoroso Baybars, amico mio,

tu hai responsabilità su molti uomini, e certamente un giorno sarai Re.

Quanto a me, ho smesso di scrivere di Storia, alla quale più non credo. Essa per me è finita, insieme all'ultimo Califfo.

Ho deciso che raccoglierò la memoria dei viaggi compiuti, per descrivere invece la bellezza del Creato, delle meravigliose cose che esistono per volere di Dio. Ed anche per raccontare dei luoghi che l'Uomo ha edificato.

Perché sono persuaso che non è nel ripetere il racconto delle azioni dei governanti che se ne perpetua la gloria. Ma è verificando l'armonia (laddove c'è) degli spazi abitati, che si leggono le durature Conseguenze del loro Buon Governo.

La stessa fiasca è un esempio di ciò che dico: spero che queste note, e gli schizzi che ne feci (e che ti invio con la mia lettera) ti diano un'idea della sua bellezza, dell'armonia della mente di chi ne concepì il Disegno.

Questo infine ti dico: accetta un ultimo ammaestramento, come io l'ho ricevuto col tormento.

Ti giunge da questo piccolo uomo, dal tuo vecchio amico Zakariya, rintanato per vergogna nella piccola Qazwin.

Il Muro, non divide l'Umanità ma il cuore di noi tutti; e nessuno è certo di non caderne mai dalla parte sbagliata.
La vera Guerra Santa dell'Uomo è contro l'Odio.
Non intendo quella combattuta da uomini che odiano, contro altri uomini che odiano: credere che esista una porzione del Creato preferita da Dio, è fargli profonda offesa.
No! La nostra Guerra Santa è invece la lotta di ogni giorno e di ciascuno, contro la parte sbagliata della propria anima.
È lì, nel cuore e nella mente, il luogo dove abita la nostra stessa umanità divisa.
Perciò, amico mio, nel dirigere con il coraggio che sempre dimostri la tua futura condotta, non domandarti mai se esista una parte giusta dell'Umanità.
Se hai tale dubbio, sei già dalla parte sbagliata della *tua* umanità.

Note dell'Autore

La fiasca, inanimato ma eloquente protagonista di questo racconto, è un manufatto in ottone con figure sbalzate in argento, realizzato verosimilmente a Damasco negli anni '40 del 1200 per conto del Re al-Salih Ayyub, ultimo della discendenza di Salah ad-Din (Saladino).
La sua aggraziata fattura è simile a quella di altri oggetti islamici dello stesso periodo, realizzati per uso quotidiano; come quelli esposti a Palermo, nel Palazzo di al-Aziz (la "Zisa"). Tutti testimoni di un periodo, nel tardo medioevo, di interscambio culturale, di arti e relazioni diplomatiche tra le due vicine sponde del Mediterraneo. Una cordiale familiarità, in periodo di crociate, quando Palermo era la Capitale da cui regnava l'Imperatore dei Cristiani.
Ma la fiasca di questo racconto non ha eguali.
La sua forma è quella di uno strumento da viaggio, una borraccia, come quelle all'epoca usate dai pellegrini in visita a Gerusalemme. Le geometrie del suo disegno nascondono complessi e non decifrati segnali. I soggetti raffigurati e le scene rappresentate appartengono alla tradizione cristiana: santi, scene della vita di Cristo; uno dei pochissimi oggetti del mondo islamico con questa qualità.
E ancor più straordinaria è la sua ubicazione: questa fiasca (insieme ad un bacile proveniente da analogo corredo), è conservata a Washington, nella Freer Gallery of Art, uno dei musei della Smitsonian Institution, a pochi passi dall'edificio del Congresso e dalla Casa Bianca. Pellegrinando per il Mondo, due oggetti quasi unici sono approdati in un Paese giovane e ignaro, non certamente e non altrimenti ricco di memorie dell'arte medievale.

Io l'ho incontrata nell'estate 2001, senza sospettarne l'esistenza.
Un incontro fortuito, inatteso; ed assolutamente intenso.
In un luogo così lontano dal Mediterraneo, quell'oggetto affiorava da un preciso periodo storico col quale avevo qualche familiarità: la breve pace in Terrasanta costruita con fatica e diplomazia da Federico II e Fakhr ad-Din.
Una pace cancellata con la VII Crociata organizzata dal Re Luigi IX dei Francesi, deciso a conquistare la santità per sé, al prezzo del martirio di molti.
Ebbi la sensazione che l'arnese avesse funzione diversa da quella di trasportare acqua; che fosse parte di un omaggio, preparato da un islamico per un cristiano, che per qualche motivo non aveva raggiunto il destinatario. Fabbricato per conto di al-Salih Ayyub, il dono doveva essere per un sovrano di pari dignità. Chi, se non Federico II, che una "leggenda" tramandata dagli storici islamici vuole autore di un "messaggio" di preavviso dei preparativi militari di Re Luigi?
I rovesci politici di Federico in Italia, sul finire degli anni '40, bastavano a darmi motivo per la mancata consegna del regalo…
Iniziai a fantasticare sul significato di quelle figurazioni, di difficile interpretazione. Mi convinsi che l'oggetto avesse la funzione di messaggero: uno straordinario e muto ambasciatore, portatore non di acqua, ma di piani diplomatici segreti per una duratura pace in Medio Oriente.
Prendeva forma un racconto di fantasia e di avventura, ambientato tra i campi di battaglia ed i giardini nelle corti di Alessandria e Damasco; tra i mercati di Baghdad e le ricche sale mosaicate di Palermo. Una storia, nella quale muovere figure storiche (uno scienziato persiano, un generale egiziano) nell'ombra di maggiori eventi epocali: lo scontro tra differenti fedi e civiltà; l'incoronazione di

Manfredi nella Cattedrale di Palermo; la morte dell'ultimo Califfo davanti alla Moschea di al-Mansur.

Pochi giorni dopo l'appassionato e creativo incontro, una colonna di fumo si alzava oltre il fiume Potomac. Da New York, la televisione trasmetteva immagini del crollo delle due torri, sede del Centro Mondiale dei Commerci. Inutile attendere in aeroporto, quella mattina: il mio volo di rientro in Italia era stato annullato.
Ed anche il mio racconto rimase muto.
Mi sembrò inutile dar voce al messaggero: nessuno l'avrebbe ascoltata.

Provo oggi a buttar giù i miei appunti; in atto di immodesto saluto alla persona che si insedia nella odierna Capitale d'Occidente. Anche lui, come Federico, figlio di molteplici discendenze.
"Lavorare per un sogno" è impresa assai dura: il nuovo Presidente dovrà riempire d'acqua la sua fiasca ed iniziare un difficile pellegrinaggio attraverso i deserti del Mondo.

Pisa, 20 gennaio 2009

The Flask

or, the Right Side of Humanity

To my mother.

Jewish by descent;
Protestant by choice;
accepted by marriage into a family
of stubborn Catholic traditions.

From her I learned that pride of belonging
need not ever be exclusive.

Thanks to *Massumeh Farhad*, curator of Islamic Art collection of the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington DC, and *Giulia Davì*, manager of the Historical & Artistic Heritage Service at the Superintendence of Palermo, for helping me, despite my extravagant theories.

In the name of God, Most Compassionate and Merciful.
May the peace of our King, the Holy One,
be with you always,
enlightening your mind, guiding your arm.

My Valiant Friend,

Yesterday your messenger reached me at home. His unexpected appearance stirred me deeply. I'd missed this dear place for so long, and hoped to remain hidden here forever, from everyone and everything, even from my own eyes.

The letter he delivered lay untouched on my desk all night, staring from out of the darkness into the shadows of my conscience.

But now that the first rays of the morning sun are moving across its pages, I too am called to rise and respond. Though tired and deeply sorrowful, I will try to give you what you seek.

I must begin by saying that I cannot satisfy your request. I no longer have with me the object that was put into my safekeeping, and that you ask me now to return to you. Having to confess this gives me great pain, but far greater is the pain of having to remember the circumstances

under with I lost what you most desire; you will soon understand why the retelling of this sorry tale so burdens my soul.
Know that you are the first person to whom, after so long, I am opening myself. Your friendship enables me to do so; that and the thought that I owe this effort to myself as well, however unworthy I may be.

You know that I was in the City when the attack began. The images that still remain alive within me of that disaster are the clouds of written pages rising into the dust and spread by the wind.
Those of us who survived the onslaught wandered aimlessly, driven like lifeless ghosts through the streets. The papers released from the Archives scattered too, becoming hopelessly illegible, together with the lives of the thousands of people whose stories they told, the dust and dampness eradicating even their memory.
But there was more: What I saw scratched out that day was the History of Civilization, or at least a valuable part of it, the part that those writings preserved. Great men who were once alive are now dead forever, for even the me-

ans by which we might have been reminded of their deeds are lost.
Shreds of our history ended up in the two rivers that surround the City and make it an island. I watched, paralyzed, as they pressed against the bases of the bridges, the tides and wind heaping them up into swollen mounds of tattered rags.
I never thought I would live to see such a thing, that I would witness the collapse of what had once been the Centre of the World and of Trade. On the contrary, I was not only watching the fall, in my mind's eye I was even recording its details.
I, a man of Law and Letters, a man who, until that day, had harboured an ambition to write the History of the World (or at least to write "of" that History), felt immensely greater grief for those tattered pages than for the men lying dead all around me.
Oh, how ashamed I am of that!

Well then, you know that I was in Baghdad during the first days of assault. I had arrived from Egypt, leaving behind the palace of Kalil's mother (and the tasks of tutor) to offer the Caliph my services as a magistrate. I carried with me from Alexandria the flask of Fakhr ad-Din.

What fools we were, believing the high white walls of al-Mansur would always defend us! The truth is, the higher the wall, the more it attracts the enemy from afar.
When the attack came, I did not rush to defend the City, as your army defended Damascus, driving back Kublai Khan – a clear victory, for which I am only now congratulating you!
No, I'm not a man of arms. In those terrible days, my first and only thought was to find a safe shelter outside the residence of the Caliph, and then try to flee across the river.

I had chosen to move to Baghdad in the first place, not because I aspired to something for myself, but for the sake of the flask. I had hoped to find the key to its meaning in the notes of the geographer al-Idrisi, copies of which were stored in the Great Library.
I trusted that, once found, those notes would satisfy my fervent desire to understand entirely the reason for the flask's existence, and the meaning of its message.
But I realize now that I have never before revealed to you the Flask's origins.
So let me start at the beginning.
What you do know is that years ago the Emir Fakhr ad-Din suggested to the King al-Salih

Ayyub that he create a gift for his good friend, Frederick, Emperor of the Rumi. King al-Salih assented and the Emir personally supervised the making of the object, going to Damascus to hire the best goldsmiths.
But then that gift, a magnificent flask, was never sent, and at the Emir's death it was entrusted to me.

You write that Manfred, Frederick's son, will be crowned in Palermo's Cathedral at the end of summer. I think your decision to send an embassy and gifts to confirm your friendship with him on that occasion is a wise one. And it is natural you thought of what had already been prepared for his father, an offering worthy of a King! Alas, I regret that you will have to be satisfied with sending a pair of fast cheetahs to gladden the Genoard gardens. For the sad truth is that I exchanged that rare jewel for my very life – a most unworthy trade, I agree!
But I now must tell you exactly what happened.
It was the Friday after the entry of the Mongols into the city, just before sunset. I was wandering the alleys of the bazaar behind the Grand Mosque.

I had hidden that huge flask in a bag and, to boost my courage, concealed a dagger under my poor caftan.

"…Who keeps me is the Defender, the Guide, the Leader of the Frontier…" The merchant was reading the inscription on the Flask, an inscription I had read over to myself many times before, seeking some clue to its deeper meaning, some hint of its true import. How unbearable to hear those same words flowing now from the mouth of a man who was even more unworthy of proclaiming them than I!

Though I had no doubt that he had already decided on a price, he still insisted on examining the Flask further, drawing it closer to the light. I was sure that he was using this time not to examine the object for sale, but to evaluate the seller standing in front of him. How urgent was my need? How valuable a bargain would be secured that evening?

He tried to engage me in conversation, which I avoided, though not altogether. I succeeded only in offering harmless pleasantries to disguise my distress. For the more time that passed, the more tormented I became, against all my advantage.

So, finally, I stopped him, and demanded three pieces of gold. This was far less than the flask's value, but enough to pay the ferryman for a trip across the Tigress that very night. I knew immediately that telling him my price was a mistake, but I also knew that I couldn't bear more haggling. I was afraid, and incapable of hiding it.

The merchant didn't reply, but immediately began finding fault with the object and its workmanship. He said that if he bought it he would not be able to sell it, because the times were difficult, the workmanship poor, because anything bearing likenesses of the Prophet Jesus (may God bless and glorify him) drew no buyers outside of Damascus, because, because, because… Shameless crook!

He was turning over in his hands a piece of art that he would have never been able even to approach in happier times. And yet he would deny me three poor gold pieces, which were my only hope for preserving my life.

In my agitation, and to avoid staring at him, I began to look around.

The four walls of the shop were lined with long shelves rising from ground level to high above the floor, blocking a small window through

which daylight might have passed. They were stacked with hundreds of metal objects, all arranged according to color, shape, and size. Opposite the door that opened to the street was a curtained passageway that interrupted the disciplined line of the shelving.

What little light there was in that hovel was focused by the white ceiling onto a bench in the middle of the room, around which we were standing. Heaps of unsorted rags and bags of goods lay sprawled in one corner. The man had been recommended to me as an expert goldsmith and art merchant, but he did not appear to be a craftsman himself: No table for carving was in his shop. This was a person capable only of buying and selling.

Now I saw his fingers exploring one by one the saintly figures on the flask's outer ring. I knew them all by name: Gabriel the Archangel; Myriam, the Virgin Mother; Joseph and John; and then all the others, ending with the twenty-fifth, the mysterious Defender, his hand raised in a sign of peace, the only figure armed with a sword.

I had no idea if he could recognize the names, read the symbols, or understand its numbers: 3, 7, 9, 25…

To cut a circle into sections that were not multiples of the Houses of the Sky; to break it into five equal parts, and divide those again by five, is not something a goldsmith could do, but a task for a mathematician. The Emir, himself, must have designed the flask, not some talented craftsman in Damascus!

What al-Salih Ayyub wished to do was this: Persuade Frederick to return to Jerusalem as a pilgrim, without weapons, before King Louis of France could gather his fleet against us at Aguas Mortas. He intended to offer Frederick the same throne that ten years before his father, al-Kamil, had given to him, to be a Guarantor of Peace.
So it was that the throne of Jerusalem, not a simple gift presented by ambassadors, was the true and unexpected present planned for the Emperor!
The design of the flask was clear. It showed in detail a fortified route to the Holy City, the same city that King David decided to call in his own language the *Place of Peace*, even though it was so often the object of men's desire for war. It was a complex design, in which I played only the smallest part, for I was never permitted to entirely understand it.

But that the Sicilian in his wisdom would have certainly deciphered it, is sure. He would have been able to compare its eloquent tracks with those that filled the representation of the world in his possession. I mean the Map of the World, the silver "planisphere" produced by al-Idrisi for King Rujari after his many travels. Yes, I saw it once myself, during a visit to Palermo, decorating the Starry Sky Hall, on the top of the Palace of al-Aziz.

So this was my situation: I found myself in the middle of a war but with a secret to decipher, a secret my superiors, with the best of intentions, had not permitted me to know. And now the books that might have enlightened me were burned and reduced to ashes.
What a fool I was! Despite the violence I had witnessed, I still firmly believed that in the History of Humanity one see drawn out the design of God. Humanity had always appeared to me as divided into two parts. Obviously I thought of myself as dwelling on the Right Side, because of God's blessings towards me.
But as I struggled to determine the nature of the other side, I found myself more and more in agreement with the good Emir who had educa-

ted me, and with all the other wise people whom I have had the good fortune to encounter in my life. Their wisdom led me to refrain from representing the World as a place divided between Rumi and True Believers. How foolish to think that we fulfil God's will by removing His other creatures from this Earth.

What blasphemy!

Still, the world I imagined living in could only be defended by a Wall. Beyond it were confined those we used to call "men of the desert", violent and aggressive people, their hearts dry as sand. Ruthless men, primitive, rough, and closed – it didn't matter whether they claimed to be Muslims or Rumi, for in their faith such men seek only one thing, which is their own self-justification.

Those of us on our side of the wall I called "People of the River". This was an ideal community, undivided by language or creed, a vital nation that forged new paths, along which goods and ideas could flow. We preferred the bazaar to the empty rites of mosques and cathedrals, because the business of the bazaar fosters liberty and compromise.

Fakhr ad-Din and Frederick were both People of the River, open-minded, noble, and clever. Drawn together by their mutual love of astro-

nomy and mathematics, they eventually saw themselves as allies destined to forge a peace between their peoples.
For while the world saw them as enemies because of their faiths, they saw themselves as friends whose love of science and the arts transcended religious differences.
The idea of the Flask was the product of their common vision of Humanity and of God.
But good fortune did not bless their aspirations.
Frederick suffered severe reverses. His Italian allies, the Rumi of the Desert, turned against him in order to earn the goodwill of the Caliph of Rome, enemy of the People of the River. This gave the French King time to take Damietta, before Frederick could get back to Palermo. No embassy was sent to him. And then the brave Emir met his own death in a cowardly ambush at al-Mansurah, before news of our victory at Fariskur could reach him.

So it was that I alone remained to guard a secret that was then only half-known to me, a responsibility I now found myself trying to escape in the most cowardly way.



Turning back to face the merchant, my heart turned from distain to disgust. Every item in the shop, every word he spoke, his every gesture, were all odious to me. I felt I was facing someone from the other side of that great Wall, a rough man of the desert whose life was worth even less than my own.

To my relief, he had stopped running his fingers over the saintly figures. But then he turned to boasting of his purer faith, which refused to honor as gods the Olympian panoply depicted on the flask.

I did not want to argue with him about the primacy of any religion. So I cut him off, saying I knew "how Arabs think". Of course, he understood that I was using the term "Arab" as an insult.

Our voices rose, overlapping. I wanted to hit him.

It was then that I heard a groan, as from a wounded animal. I jumped; a cold sweat broke out on my back.

I turned, but saw nothing.

Then, a tangle of rags spilling over the floor seemed to wriggle.

It was a woman hunched down in a dark corner of the workshop. I hadn't noticed her before, even though I'd scoured the place. Yes, my eyes had been searching, but my mind remained numb, focused as it was on saving my own neck by means of those three pieces of gold that that Bedouin pig was even now denying me.
The merchant turned to her and spoke. The sun was setting and in minutes prayers would begin. She had to shut up! Better that she go and prepare us something to eat. The skein of rags wound off its spindle, rose, and disappeared silently behind the curtain.

That new presence calmed me at once. Moreover, the merchant himself seemed to be speaking more quietly now. Certainly the affair was more profitable for him than it was for me. In any case, this new calm brought me back to myself. I regained confidence in my belief that the dialogue that business requires can reconcile competing interests. For a moment at least I glimpsed the possibility that we could reach an agreement about those three pieces of gold that I had asked for.

The curtain rose and the woman reappeared from the same dark opening through which she had disappeared minutes before. She carried a small tray with two plates and six dates in all, filled with milk and honey, a ritual food before evening prayer.

It was the precise moment of sunset now, and a blade of light the colour of blood bounced off the street, hitting the woman in the face.

The black chador she wore was drawn loosely around her perfect figure. Her hand was holding together the edges of the vest and, over that, two deep black eyes were looking at me; innocent eyes that knew both fear and madness.

I was watching her more insistently than was polite, obliging the merchant to introduce her.

He had recently purchased her from the House of the Caliph. She had been a servant there, or so he said, and crazy, too. She'd sung to the powerful, delighting them even though – and this he added with a disgusting wink – no one was allowed to look at her.

I was astonished. Ashamed, I returned the gaze of the poor prey of whom the pig was so proud. I realized that I was looking not at a servant but into the face of the Princess Jasmine. She was a

Rumi believer, a spoil of war, of whose beauty the Caliph was so jealous that he forbade anyone to look upon her simple figure. I myself had never seen her before, only heard her voice fill the Palace, accompanied by an orchestra of five blind musicians…

Dog! Dogs! All dogs!

Now I understood why, despite the fact that invaders roamed the city, many shops in the *suq* were open, and full of goods. While half the city was burning, the other half had been looted by mobs who were now buying and selling the Caliphate's treasures! Huglai Khan would murder the Caliph three days later on the steps of the Great Mosque; but it was at this moment that I realized that it was the mobs more than the Mongols who were destroying the Libraries and plundering the gardens and palaces of the great City.

And it was a part of the mob, this rogue standing in front of me now, who was boasting about owning a woman of whom he was entirely unworthy.

This was not a man but an animal who was talking to me! My hand reached under my robe, tightening around the hilt of the knife hidden there.

Dog! Dog! I was filled with disgust, but my

scream stuck in my throat. The sun disappeared once and for all, and at that moment I heard another scream.
The muezzin had started his chant from the nearby minaret, calling the faithful to prayer.
"God is Great, God is Great, God is Great", he cried three times.

"God is Great" repeated Jasmine with a groan. She was looking straight into my eyes. The tray she was holding fell from her hands. The black silken kerchief slipped from her tresses which then fell loose over her shoulders, framing a white shirt opened at the breast and her richly coloured slacks.
She gripped my wrist with both her hands, as if she understood what it was I held in my covered one.
"God is Great", she cried, "but Love is Greater!"
What happened next happened in a moment, a moment over which I had no control.
The shopkeeper threw himself upon the woman, screaming at her to keep quiet. He called her *shameless*, *crazy*, *blasphemous*. He shouted, at a volume sure to be heard in the street, that he would not tolerate her blasphemies or the

bad fortune they would bring upon him. A rod appeared in his hand, and he began hitting her on the face.

Blood sprouted from the frightened cheek of that heavenly creature who only moments before had been talking of love.

The gentle touch of her hands no longer restraining mine, I raised my weapon and plunged it precisely on its mark.

The pig lay gasping, his throat cut, his eyes bulging. Grasping at the wound in his neck, he could not stop the flow of blood streaming onto the floor of the shop.

Even before the pulsing jets of blood hit my shoes, I was beside the man draped over the bench, looking for the purse under his robe.

I found it and pulled it toward me.

A stream of gold coins scattered onto the floor; some of them were lost in the darkness, others in the blood. I seized three pieces that had landed clear of both. The amount seemed honest and the coins themselves were clean.

I tried to grab the woman's arm, as though it were the most natural thing in the world to try to take her away. But she avoided my grip and went back on the dying man. Weeping, she tried to stop the bleeding.

Of the two of us, only she had the heart to pity him.
I had become an object of horror. I left, abandoning both her and the flask without once looking back.
Outside, everything was quiet, except for the muezzin who was still singing. How fortunate I was that no one had heard our cries!
Women pulled their washing from window sills. The smell of dinner cooking rose from every gate. Men were quickly shuttering their warehouses and shops and moving like a swiftly flowing river towards the great Mosque's green dome. There they would pray after hastily performing their ritual washings.
Of that great river, I was only one undistinguishable drop. And so I succeeded in escaping that night.
Mingling with a travelling caravan, I returned home like a thief.

Since then I have had time to relive, one by one, each feeling I experienced that night, and the terror they produced in me.
On reflection, I have learned many things. Most important, I realize how my actions betrayed Jasmine's words which, deemed blasphemous

by some, were probably recalled from the Book itself.

I'm grateful to you that at the dawn of this new day I have had the opportunity to confess all this. But confession does not undo the crimes for which I am unable to forgive myself. I must be content with understanding, only that.
Look at the consequences of my rage and fear! I lost, perhaps forever, a work of genius, created by a true man of peace. And, equally odious, I left behind a dead man, killed by my cowardly act, and a divine woman, resigned to her fate, a woman who I imagined spoke to me of love, asking for my protection, while the truth was that she was trying to defend me from myself.

I think of her often and wonder at her fate
Does she live even now, reduced from servanthood to slavery?.
Or was she instead stoned to death, blamed for my own crime?



Baybars, My Valiant Friend,

You are responsible for many men, and one day you will certainly be King. As for me, I have stopped writing History altogether; I no longer believe in it. For me it is finished, along with the Caliphate.

I have decided instead to write the memoirs of my travels, and to describe the beauty of Creation, bearing witness to the wonderful things that exist by the will of God. I also intend to tell about the places that Man has built. For I am convinced that it is not by repeating tales of the heroic actions of Rulers that we perpetuate their glory, but by verifying the harmony (if any) of the spaces which they designed for us to live in, spaces in which we may find the lasting Effects of their Good Government.

The flask, too, is a design for how we might live.

I hope the few notes and sketches I am sending with this letter give you some idea of the beauty, wisdom, and harmony envisioned by its creators.

Finally, I ask you to accept from me a final teaching, one I learned at great cost. It comes from this small man, your old friend Zakariya, hi-

ding for shame in this small Qazwin. The Wall I spoke of before does not divide Humanity, but the heart of us all, and no one is certain that they will never find themselves on the wrong side.

For the real Holy War of Mankind is a war against Hate, not a war against men who hate. For to believe that God prefers one part of his Creation over another is to deeply offend Him.

No! Our Holy War is the daily struggle of each of us against the wrong side of our own soul. It is there, in our hearts and minds, where our own divided humanity lives!

So, my friend, conducting yourself with the courage you have always shown, you will never have to ask if there is a Right Side of Humanity.

If you do doubt, know you are on the wrong side of your *own* humanity.

Author's notes

The flask, the inanimate but eloquent hero of this tale, is a brass handmade masterpiece, with silver carved figures, probably made in Damascus in the 1240's on behalf of the King al-Salih Ayyub, the last descendent of Salah ad-Din (Saladin).
Its graceful manufacture is similar to that of other Islamic art made in the same period, such as those for daily use displayed in Palermo, in the Palace of al-Aziz (the "Zisa"). They all bear witness to a period, in the late Middle Ages, of cultural and artistic interchange and the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two shores of the Mediterranean. It was at time of pleasant familiarity, even during Crusades, when Palermo was the Capital from where the Christian Emperor reigned.
But this flask has not equals.
Its shape is that of a travel tool, a canteen, such as those used by pilgrims visiting Jerusalem. The figures depicted and scenes represented belong to the Christian tradition; it is one of the few items from the Islamic world that displays such a quality. The geometry of its design appears to hide complex (and not yet decrypted) hints of deeper meaning.
And even more extraordinary is its present location: this flask, together with a basin from an similar set, is in Washington DC at the Freer Gallery of Art, a museum of the Smithsonian Institution, a few steps from the Congress and from the White House. After wandering across the World, the two objects landed in a country young and unaware, and certainly not otherwise rich in memories of Antiquity.

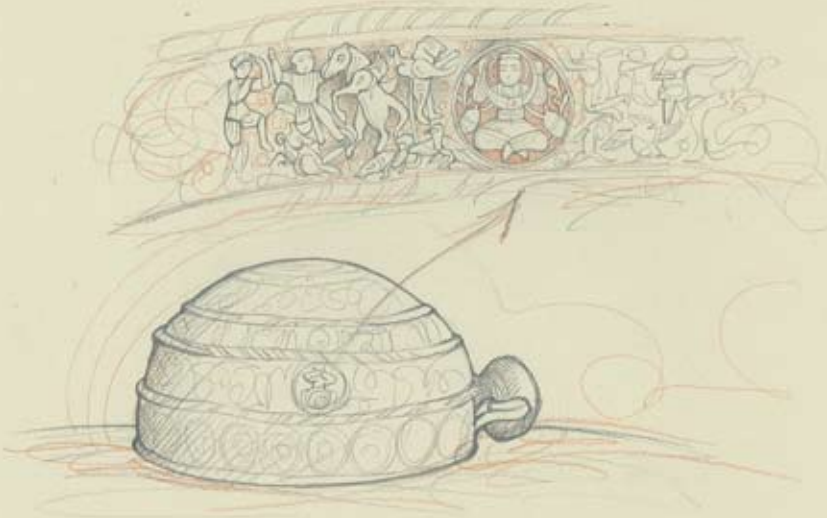
I encountered it in the summer 2001, without suspecting its existence. It was an accidental and very intense encounter.
In a place so far from the Mediterranean, that object emerged from a definite historical period with which I had some familiarity: the short peace in the Holy Land built with hard work and diplomacy by Frederick II and Fakhr ad-Din, and broken by the Seventh Crusade organized by King Louis IX of France, whose aim was to gain sainthood for himself at the price of martyrdom for many.
On first seeing it, I felt that the tool's function was something quite different than that of carrying water; I imagined that the utensil was part of a rich present, prepared by a Muslim for a Christian; a present that for some reason had not reached its final destination.
Made on behalf of al-Salih Ayyub, the gift had to be for a sovereign of equivalent majesty. Who could that be, but Frederick II, a sovereign who some Islamic historians say was the author of a "message" warning al-Salih King of Louis' military preparations!
Frederick's political setbacks in Italy of at the end of the 40s was a ready explanation for the failure of al-Salih's emissaries to deliver the gift.
I was further intrigued by the specific geometric arrangement of the figures and the enigmatic presence of objects and characters that make it difficult for even experts to decipher.
So, my imagination went to work. That by means of those mysterious images of it, I convinced myself that the flask was both message and messenger; an extraordinary and mute spokesman, bearer not of water, but of secrets plans for a lasting peace in the Middle East.
In short, I accumulating found myself material for a tale of

fantasy and adventure, set between battlefields and gardens in the courts of Alexandria and Damascus; between the markets of Baghdad and the affluent mosaic roofs of Palermo's Palaces. A story in which historical figures (a Persian scientist, an Egyptian general) move in the shadow of more momentous events: the conflict between different faiths and civilizations; the coronation of Manfred in the Cathedral of Palermo; the death of the last Caliph at the al-Mansur Mosque.

A few days after that passionate and creative encounter, a column of smoke rose from the other side of Potomac River. From New York, the television broadcast images of the collapse of the twin towers, once quarters of the World Trade Centre. It was useless to wait at the airport that morning: my flight back to Italy was cancelled.

And so, my draft tale remained silent. It seemed useless to give voice to a messenger that no one would listen to. But now I throw down my notes, in an immodest act of greeting to the person who is establishing himself today in the actual Capital of the West. He, like Frederick, is the son of diverse ethnicities.
"Working on a dream" is a very tough job. The new President has to fill his flask with water, and begin a hard pilgrimage through the deserts of the Earth which are, in truth, deserts of the Heart.

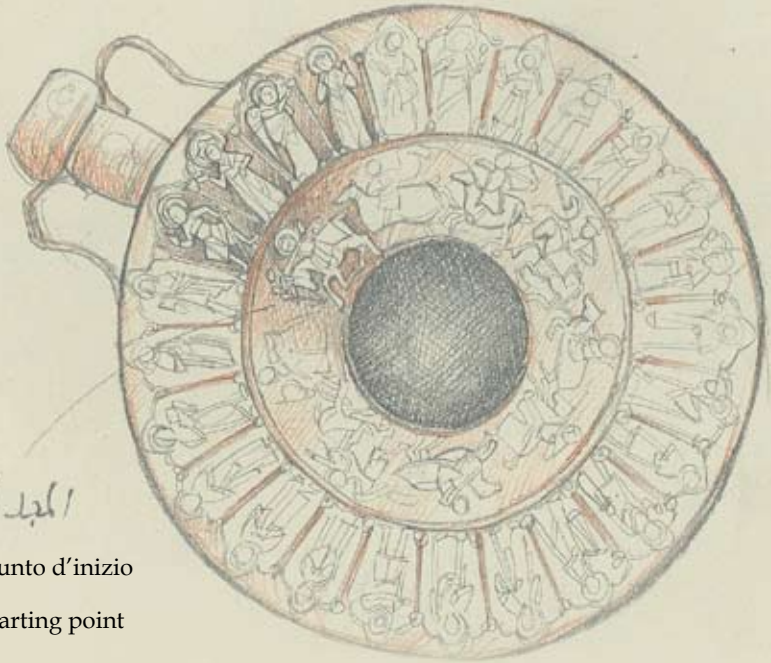
Pisa, January 20th, 2009



هل تكمن في الصور الانسانية والحيوانية كتابة
لا يمكن القراءة

Figure fantastiche, uomini e animali… nascondono una scritta?... Non leggibile!...

Fabulous figures, men and animals… do they hide an inscription?... unreadable!...



punto d'inizio

starting point

تسعة فرسان مسلحين للصيد ام القتل
عدد الشخصيات في الدائرة الخارجية ٢٥ وهذا غريب

9 cavalieri armati… a caccia oppure in guerra?...
nel cerchio superiore 25 figure! Raro!...

9 armed knits…hunting or fighting?...
in the upper circle 25 figures! infrequent!



المدافع
يسلم بيمينه - و هذا حامل
وسيف مودع في يسراه

Il Difensore?... con la destra saluta... nella sinistra un'arma reclinata…

The Defender?... he greets with the right hand… the sword in his left is lowered





جبرئيل ومريم
البشارة

Gabriele… Myriam… L'Annuncio!...

Gabriel… Myriam… The Announcement!



العز الدائم والعمر السالم و
الجد الصاعد والدهر الباقي
والسلامة الغالبة والـ...الم

تُعنى مراحل السفر
كتاب الإدريسي

Sette punti… tappe di un viaggio?... devo consultare al-Idrisi

Seven items… steps of a Road Map?... must verify on al-Idrisi's notes…



Il Bambino viene fuori dall'acqua… perché c'è un terzo animale?...

The Child is moving from water… why there is a third animal?...



في الهيكل
وجدت صور مثيله في قبة مارقورانا في بالبرمه

Nel Tempio… le stesse figure viste sotto le cupole della Martorana…

In the Temple… the same figures I saw under the Domes in the Martorana…



A Gerusalemme!

To Jerusalem!

شعرتُ أن وظيفة تلك الأداة ليس حمل الماء فقط، بل قد تكون جزءًا من هدية قدّمها مسلم لمسيحي، ولم تصل إليه لسبب ما. وإن صُنعتْ بإيعاز من الصالح أيوب، فلابد أن الهدية كانت لملك يضاهيه منزلةً. ومَن، إن لم يكن فريدريك الثاني، الذي روى بعض المؤرخين المسلمين أنه بعث رسالةً تخبر عن تحضيرات الملك لويس؟

كانت المشاكل السياسية التي واجهها فريدريك في إيطاليا أواخر الأربعينيات تكفي حتى أعلّل عدم بلوغ الهدية.

بدأتُ أتأمل معاني تلك الرسوم الصعبة لتفسيرها. اعتقدتُ أن وظيفة تلك الصناعة بمثابة الرسول: سفير صامت وعجيب لا يحمل ماء بل مخططات دبلوماسية لسلام دائم في الشرق الأوسط.

كانت قصّة خيالية ومغامرة، بيّنتها ميادين الحروب وبلاطات ملوك، في الإسكندرية ودمشق، وأسواق بغداد وقاعات المباني الفسيفسائية لمدينة باليرمو. في تلك القصّة تحضر شخصيات تاريخية - عالم فارسيّ وقائد مصريّ - تحت ظل أهمّ الأحداث: تواجُه الحضارات والأديان، تتويج الأمير منفريد في كاتدرائية باليرمو، وفاة الخليفة الأخير أمام جامع المنصور.

بعد أيام قليلة من ذلك اللقاء المثير، طلع عمود دخان وراء النهر بوتوماك. من مدينة نيويورك بثّ التلفزيون صور انهيار البرجين ومركز التجارة العالمية. كان الانتظار في المطار أثناء ذلك الصباح عبثًا: أُلغي موعد انطلاق طائرتي نحو إيطاليا.

وكذلك ظلّت قصتي صامتة.

بدا لي صوت ذلك الرسول الذي لن يسمعه أحد باطلاً.

اليوم لُحاول أن أدوّن مذكراتي، بمثابة تحية متواضعة لمَن يُنصّب في عاصمة الغرب الحديثة، وهو ينحدر من أنساب مختلفة، كشأن فريدريك.

إن "العمل من أجل إنجاز حلم" هو مجازفة صعبة: عليه أن يملأ قنّينته ماءً والانطلاق في رحلة حجّ طويلة عبر صحارى العالم.

بيزا، 20 يناير 2009

القنّينة من الجمادات لكنها تلعب دور البطل في هذه القصّة، أنجزت من معدن صُفر موشّى برسوم فضّية، يحتمل أن تكون مصنوعة في دمشق خلال أربعينيات القرن الثالث عشر، لفائدة الملك الصالح أيوب.
تضاهي صياغتها الجيدة مصنوعات إسلامية كثيرة تعود لنفس الحقبة، أُنجزت لغرض الاستعمال اليومي، شبيهة بتلك الأعمال المعروضة في قصر العزيز بمدينة باليرمو. كلها تشهد على فترة التبادل الثقافي والفنّي وعلى متانة العلاقات الدبلوماسية بين ضفّتَي المتوسط أواخر العصور الوسطى. تشكّلت أُلفة ونّية، رغم أن الفترة تميزت بالحروب الصليبية، كانت حينها مدينة باليرمو تحت حكم إمبراطور النصارى.
لكن هذه القنّينة ليس لها مثيل.
شكلها شكل عدّة للسفَر، مثل الدنّ، كالتي كان يستخدمها الحجاج القاصدون مدينة القُدس. لكن هندسة رسوماتها تخفي إشارات معقّدة مازالت مجهولة. المواضيع والمَشاهد المصوّرة عليها تنتمي إلى التقاليد المسيحية: قدّيسين ومشاهد من حياة المسيح. إنها من المصنوعات النادرة في العالم الإسلامي بهذه الصفة.
الغريب أن تحفَظ هذه القنّينة، مع مغسل من نفس الصنف، فهي مودَعة في مدينة واشنطن، في رواق "فريير" للفنّ، أحد متاحف معهد "سميثسونيان"، على مقربة من مبنى الكنغرس والبيت الابيض. طافت المصنوعتان الفريدتان أرجاء العالم حتى وصلتا إلى بلد حديث تعوزه الذكريات الفنّية ذات الصلة بالعصور الوسطى.
عثرت عليها خلال صائفة 2001 وما كنت أتوقع ذلك. كان اللقاء صدفة وغير منتظر، كما كان مثيرًا.
في مكان بعيد عن المتوسط، ظهرت تلك المصنوعة من عهد تاريخي لي أُلفة به، أعني فترة السلام القصيرة التي ساد فيها حكم فريدريك وفخرالدين في الأرض المقدسة، بدبلوماسية وشُقّة.
ألغَتْ ذلك السلامَ الحملة الصليبية السابعة للملك الفرنسي لويس التاسع، الذي قرّر حيازة القداسة على حساب استشهاد كثيرين.

فاعتقاد المرء أن الله يفضّل جزءاً من خلقه ليس فيه مراعاة لله.

لا! فجهاد كل واحد منا يومي ضدّ الجانب الخطأ في أرواحنا. ففي قلوبنا وعقولنا تسكن إنسانيتنا المشتّتة.

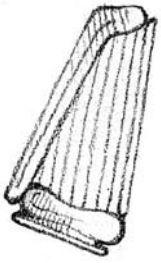
لذلك يا صديقي، حين تسلك طريقك بالشجاعة التي تظهرها باستمرار، لن تسأل البتّة أين يمكث الصواب في البشرية. إن كان لك ريب فاعلم أنك في ناحية بشريتك الخاطئة.

يا بيبرس يا صديقي الوفي،

عليك مسؤولية أناس كثيرين ومن المؤكد أن تتوّج ملكًا يوما.
بالنسبة لي توقّفت عن كتابة التاريخ، فما عادت لي ثقة فيه. فقد توارى التاريخ مع رحيل الخليفة الأخير.
قررت تدوين ذكريات أسفاري لوصف روعة الخلق والعجائب التي شاء لها الله أن تكون. وأيضًا لرواية قصة الأماكن التي شيّدها الإنسان، فليس ترديد أعمال الحكام ما يخلّد مجدهم بل تحقيق انسجام المساكن، الذي جعل نتيجة حكمهم الباقية قابلة للقراءة.

وكانت القنّينة بذاتها مثلاً لمَا أقوله. آملُ ان المذكرات والعُجالات التي خططتُّها – أَبعثها إليك مع رسالتي هذه – تساعدك على ادراك جمالَ القنّينة وانسجام العقل الذي ابتدع خطتها.

في الأخير أقول لك هذا: تقبّل هذه الإشارة الأخيرة التي وصلت إليّ بعذابٍ وتصل إليك من هذا الرجل البسيط، من صديقك القديم زكرياء، الذي أوى إلى مدينة قزوين الصغيرة.
لا يفصل السور بين البشر بل بين قلوبنا جميعا. ولا أحد موقن ألاّ يسقط في الناحية الخطأ.
إن الجهاد الحق للإنسان في وقوفه ضدّ البغض. ولا أعني الجهاد الذي أتاه أناس بغضوا غيرهم بمثل ما بغضوهم.



لم يتفطن أحد في الخارج لشيء، لحسن الحظ لم يتفطّن أحد للصراخ، فمازال صوت المؤذّن عاليا.
ثمّة إمرأة تسحب الغسيل من النافذة، بينما تنبعث من الأبواب رائحة الطبخ، وكانت الفنادق والمخازن تغلق أبوابها على عجل وكان الرجال يحثّون الخطى، في ما يشبه النهر جرى الناس إلى القبة الخضراء مستعجلين الوضوء تأهّبا للصّلاة، صرتُ قطرةً من ذلك النهر.
تمكّنتُ من الفرار في تلك الليلة، وسافرت مع قافلة، راجعا إلى بيتي كأنني لص.

بعد ذلك كان لدي الوقت لأستعيد ما شعرت به ذلك المساء، تملكتني رهبة من نفسي. بعد تفكير، تعلّمت أشياء كثيرة، منها أني شوهتُ حقيقة الجملة التي تلفظت بها ياسمين والتي اعتبرتُها مجدّفةً، بينما من المحتمل أنها ذكرتها من كتاب نصراني.
أشكرك للفرصة التي أتحتها لي، في بداية النهار، لأعترف لك بهذا. لكن ذلك لم يخلّصني من الرعب الذي يجثم عليّ لأسباب لا أدركها.
أُنظرْ إلى ما أثاره انفعالي: فقدتُ، وربمّا للأبد، صنيع رجل سلام حقيقي، هربتُ وكنت أحسب نفسي مثله، مخلّفا ورائي قتيلاً مسكينًا وفتاة ربانية توهّمت أنها تبوح لي بغرامها وتطلب مني الحماية، والحقيقة أنها حاولت أن تحميني من نفسي.
أفكر فيها كثيرا. فما الذي حلّ بها؟ هل مازالت كما تركتها جارية؟ أم لعلّها رُجِمتْ متَّهَمة بجريمتي؟

والسروال الملون أيضا. أمسكتْ معصمي بكلتي يديها كأنها أدركت ما قبضتُه.
قالت: "اللّه أكبر، ولكن الحبّ أكبر".
الذي حدث حينها، بدا لي كأنه وقع في لحظة واحدة، لم أتمالك نفسي.
هجم التاجر على المرأة صارخا وهو يشير إليها أن تصمت. قائلا لها: يا وقحة يا مجنونة يا مجنّفة. صرخ حتى يُسمَع في الخارج، فهو لا يريد أن يتأذّى جرّاء تجديفها. طلع مصحوبا بعصى في يده ولطم وجهها.
رأيت الدم يسيل على خدها، مخدوشة تلك الخليقة السماوية التي كان تغازلني قُبَيل ذلك.
فقدتُ لمس يديها الحلوة، اهتزت بعجلةٍ ثم سقطت في التوّ. على الأرضية حشرجة خنزيرٍ ذبح بجرح غائر في الحلق، ويده على عنقه لا تسدّ ينبوع الدم المتدفّق منتشرا في الدكان. قبل أن يمسّ الدم حذائي، كنت خلف الطّاولة عند الرجل ولامست جلبابه باحثًا عن كيسه، عثرت عليه فأمسكته. تناثرت عدة نقود على سطح الأرض، سقط بعضها في الدّم وبعضها تدحرج في الظلمة. أخذتُ ثلاث قطع نقود ذهبية، المبلغ الذي قدّرت أنه مناسب وأيضًا النقود الوحيدة التي لم تتلطّخ بالدم.
أمسكتُ ذراع المرأة لأحملها معي إذ بدا لي فعل ذلك طبيعيا. ولكنّها ارتدّت وانحنت ثانية على الرجل المحتضر، وحاولت أن تكفّف الدم. بين الاثنين، خافت منّي ورحمت الآخر.
غادرتها لا أبالي: فقد تكون عائقةً لي.

كان غناؤها يملأ القصر، ترافقها فرقة من خمسة عازفين عميان.

يا كلب! يا كلب! جميعهم كلاب!

الآن أدركتُ لم كانت جلّ الدّكاكين مفتوحة ومملوءة بضاعة، رغم انتشار الغزاة في المدينة. لم يمت الخليفة بعد بل سجنَه هولاكو خان، فقد قُتل بعد ثلاث أيام قدّام المسجد. كان نصف المدينة يحترق، بينما في نصفها الآخر، كان الملاعنة يتقاسمون أملاكها! تلك هي الحقيقة: لقد نهبت العامّة القذرة ودمرت المكتبات وسلبت القصور والحدائق، فعلت أكثر ممّا فعله المغول.

يفخر الوغد الذي أواجهه بسرقة امرأة، ليس جديرًا بها ولا يعرف قيمتها. ليس بشرا، كان وحشًا وهو يتحدّث معي.

عادت يدي تتلمّس مقبض الخنجر الذي أخفيه تحت ردائي.

يا كلب! يا كلب! ارتعشتُ بتقزّز ولكن صراخي لم يجد الشجاعة الكافية للخروج من حلقي.

توارت الشّمس نهائيًا، سمعت لحظتها صراخًا مختلفًا. بدأ المؤذّن برفع الآذان من أعلى الصومعة القريبة.

"اللّه أكبر اللّه أكبر اللّه أكبر" ردّدها ثلاثا.

فردّدت ياسمين "اللّه أكبر" بأنين وهي تحدّق في عينيّ. أسقطتْ الصينية والكساء، فانزلق الحرير الخفيف الأسود عن شعرها الفاحم الطليق، وهو ينساب على كتفيها العاريتين. أظهرت القميص الأبيض المفتوح على صدرها

التجاري عاملاً لترتيب المصالح... وظهرت لي في الحين إمكانية إرساء وفاق بشأن قطع النقود الثلاث التي طلبتُها.

ارتفع الستّار فطَلّت المرأة من نفس الفُتحة التي نفذت منها قبل. كانت تحمل صينية صغيرة عليها صحنان صغيران فيهما ستّ تمرات حُشيت لبناً وعسلا، أكل شعائري يسبق صلاة المغرب في يومِ الجمعة.
كان وقت المغيب، دخل من الشارع شعاع نور دموي اللّون وتكسّر على وجه المرأة. كان النّقاب الأسود الذي تشدّه بيدها يرسم ملامحها الشابّة والبهيّة. أمسكت بيديها طرفي الرداء، ومن فوق نظرت إليّ عينان سوداوان، فيهما ملامح البراءة، لكنهما تعرفان الخوف والجنون.
كنت أتابعها بإلحاح يتجاوز اللّياقة. رأى التاجر أنه من الواجب الإدلاء بتوضيح: إنها جارية تم اقتناؤها حديثا - هكذا قال - جاءت من قصر الخليفة حيث كانت تغنّي لإدخال البهجة على السّادة، وكان لا يمكن لأ حد أن يراها، ردد قائلا بغمزةٍ ماكرة.
صُعقتُ.
عدتّ باستحياء إلى عيني تلك الغنيمة المسكينة التي يفخر بها ذلك الوغد. ما كنت أتأمّل وجه خادمة، بل - وللمرة الأولى - وجه الأميرة ياسمين، الفتاة الرّومية، التي كان أمير المؤمنين يغار عليها، بلغ حدّ منع الجميع التأمّل في ملاحمها.

كفّت أصابعه عن تلمّس الرسوم القدُسيّة، وذلك أراحني. وبدأ يفخر بإيمانه المُتعالي لأنّه لا يعبد مجمعًا مزدحمًا بالآلهة.
تجنّبت الحوار معه بشأن أسمى العقائد وقاطعتُه قائلاً: كنت أعرف جيدا فحْوى فكر الأعراب. فمن المؤكّد أنه عربي. أدرك أنّ ذكر كلمة "عربي" تستبطِن إهانة.
علت أصواتنا وتداخلت وراودتني رغبة في ضربه.

عندئذ سمعت أنينًا يشبه أنين حيوان جريح. ارتعدتُ وهزّت ظهري قشعريرة عرق بارد. إلتفتّ فلم أر شيئًا.
ثم تلوّى كيس نسيجي.
في زواية مظلمة من الدكّان إمرأة ملتَفّة في ردائها الأسود، لم تصادف بصري رغم استطلاعي فيما حولي. عينيّ تحدّق غير أن عقلي لا يدرك. كان ذهني منشغلا بفكرة النجاة فحسب، أي بقطع النقود الثلاث التي يرفض تسليمها ذلك البدوي القذر.
ردّد هذا ملتفتًا إليها –بينما كانت الشمس تميل للغروب وقد حان وقت صلاة المغرب– وطلب منها الصمت والذهاب لتناول شيء من الطعام.
قامت ومشت، حتى اختفت بصمت خلف الستار.
في لحظة ما طمأنني ذلك الحضور الجديد، فضلا عن انشغالي ألاّ أفقد فرصة البيع تلك. بدا التاجر لي أكثر هدوءً في كلامه. بالنسبة له تدرّ العملية عليه ربحا أوفر مما تدرّ عليّ. من جديد اكتسبتُ ثقةً بفلسفتي، أعني بالحوار لتجنّب الخلافات بين الناس، فقد يكون التبادل

يشقّ طُرُقًا جديدةً تعبر فيها البضائع والأفكار. شعب يفضّل السّوق على صراع التقاليد الفارغة، فحتى المساومة تحتاج إلى التساوي بغرض الوصول إلى وفاق.
على أساس هذا التآلف المشترك استطاع الحكيمان فخرالدّين وفريدريك، بعقل مفتوح، إرساء تحالف بينهما، فقد تناقشا كصديقين في مسائل علم الفلك والرياضيات، ورسما معا مشروع السّلام والرّقي، لشعبين، اعتبر كل منهما الآخرَ عدوّا تحت مبرّر الدّين.
من هذا التآلف المشترك نشأت فكرة القنّينة. لكن لم يحالفها الحظّ: في إيطاليا تعرّض فريدريك لمنغصّات. وللفوز بنعمة خليفة روما، عدوّ "أهل النهر"، ثار روم الصّحراء على الإمبراطور وقد كانوا حلفاءه. كان ملك الفرنجة أسرع في وصوله إلى دمياط من رجوع فريدريك إلى باليرمو. وقبل أن نشاهد نصْرنا، لا قى الأمير الشّجاع حتفه في كمينٍ غادر.
هكذا بقيت حافظ السرِّ، الذي كنت أنا أيضا أجهل جزءا منه. فقد كنت حينها أحاول إفشاءه.



وأصبّ النقمة التي أشعر بها على التاجر المواجه لي. عاملته باحتقار. بدا لي كل شيء سيئا، البضاعة في الدكّان، أيا كان نوعها وكيفما كان ترتيبها، وكلّ كلمة كان يلفظ بها، وكلّ حركة من حركاته، فقد كان الكلّ وراء سُوري. كان من أهل الصحراء، فظّا وغير جدير بالحياة.

رسم العالم الذي كان عنده، أعني الخريطة الفضيّة التي أنجزها الإدريسي للملك روجاري، عقب الإنتهاء من أسفاره العديدة، والتي رأيتها بأمّ عينيّ، أثناء زيارتي إلى باليرمو، تزيّن قاعة سماء النّجوم في قصر العزيز.
تلك حالي حينها، وجدتني في خضمّ تلك الحرب من أجل كشف سرٍّ لم يكشف لي بكماله، بينما الكتب التي قد تكون ميسّرة لي لإدراك كنهه، احترقت وصارت رمادا.
كم كنت غبيّا، برغم العنف الذي شاهدته، فمازلت على يقين أن ينبسط خطّ من اللّه في تاريخ الإنسان.
بدت لي البشرية دائما موزّعة بين قسمين، وقد كنت طبعًا أسكن في الناحية الصّواب لأن الربّ باركها. وفي بيان الناحية الأخرى أتوافق مع رأي الأمير الصالح الذي يودّ تلقيني معارفه، وآراء كلّ العارفين الذين تشرّفتُ بمقابلتهم.
ما كنت أتصوّر أنّ العالم مقسّم بين الرّوم والمؤمنين الأبرار، كما يبدو لسائر الأغبياء الذين يعتقدون أن عملهم بمشيئة اللّه حين يزهقون مخلوقاته الأخرى.
أفًّا!
العالم الذي أتصوّر أني أعيش فيه يحيط به سورٌ، عزلنا وراءه من نعتناهم بأهالي الصّحراء. أناس غلاظٌ وهمَجٌ، قاسية قلوبهم. قساة وبدائيون، تميّزهم فظاظة وغلظة. لا فرْق أكانوا مسلمين أم مسيحيين، لأنهم يستمدّون من دينهم يقينا يبرّر أعمالهم.
من ناحيتنا خلف السّور يتواجد "أهل النهر"، الجماعة المثالية التي لا تحدّها حدود اللغة أو الدّين. إنّه شعب

ويوسف، ويوحنّا, وآخرين إلى الخامس والعشرين: المدافع الغريب شاهرا بيد إشارة السلام والسيف في اليد الأخرى.

ما خطر ببالي أن التاجر قد يعرف الأسماء أو يدرك الرّموز، ولا يفهم أرقام الصور: ٣ و ٧ و ٩ و ٢٥... فتقسيم دائرة إلى أجزاء غير تعدّد دور البروج السماوية، ثم تقطيعها في خمسة أجزاء متساوية، وتقسيمها من جديد إلى خمسة أجزاء، ليس هذا في مقدور صائغ بل عالم رياضيات. كان الرسم من صنع الأمير لا حرفي من دمشق.

ها قد كشف سرّ رسم تلك القنّينة!

نادى الملك الصالح فريدريك، كي يعود، متخلّيا عن أسلحته كأنّه حاجّ، نحو مدينة القدس التي سلّمها له الملك الصالح قبل عشر سنوات من أجل ضمان السلام، لأنّ ملك الفرنجة لويس كان يحشد أسطولاً ضدّنا.

هذه الهدية ما كانت في الحسبان لدى السلطان: ليست هديةً بسيطةً يحملها سفير، بل بلاغ السفارة ذاتها. كان الرسم على القنّينة يشير بالضبط إلى مسلك أمين يهدي إلى القدس، إلى المدينة التي رضي النبيّ داود نعتها بـ"أرض السلام"، والتي صارت من جديد دارا للحرب.

كان الرّسم معقّدا، شاركت من جانبي في تخطيطه، وإن لم تُتَح لي فرصة معرفته بالتمام. بالعكس كان السّلطان الصقلّي، بعلمه، قادرًا على فكّ طلاسمه وبمقدوره أيضًا المقارنة بين خطوطه البليغة وبين الخطوط المجموعة، في

لم يجب التاجر، بل شرع في ذمّ المصنوع وتبخيس فنّيته. قال إن اشتراه فلن يتيسّر له بيعه، لأن الظرف سيّء، ولأن الصّنع غير متقن، وأن رسم النبي عيسى (عليه السّلام) متعذّر بيعه خارج الشام؛ وهكذا دواليك...
يا خادع يا سفيه!
مازال يدير بين يديه العمل الفنّي، الذي ما كانت لتتيسّر له فرصة رؤيته في غير هذا الظرف، وأبى أن يعطيني ثلاث قطع نقود ذهبية فقط، وهي أملي الوحيد للنّجاة.
جرّاء قلقي، كنت أتجنّب أن أحدّق فيه وأرحل بناظريّ بعيدا.
كانت رفوف عالية وواسعة، تغطّي جُدُران الدكّان الأربعة، تمنع النور المتسرّب من النافذة الصغيرة. كانت ميئات المصنوعات المعدنية مخزّنة ومرتّبة بحسب اللّون والشّكل والحجم. في الجهة المقابلة للباب المفتوح على الشارع ينزل ستارٌ يقطع خطّ الرفوف المنتظم، بينما تعكس قبّة السقف إضاءة الكوخ الخافتة وتركزها على الطاولة وسط الغرفة، وفي ركن على الأرضية أكياس بضاعة لم ترتّب بعد.
قيل لي إنه تاجر خبير بالمصوغ ولكن لا يبدو حرفيّا ماهرا. لا توجد مائدة النقش في دكّانه ولا أدوات، إنه رجل قادر على البيع والشّراء فقط.

الآن أراه يتلمّس بأصابعه كل رسم من الرسوم المقدّسة المنقوشة على الطرف الخارجي للقنّينة. أعرفها كلّها وبأسمائها أيضا: الملاك جبريل، ومريم العذراء أم عيسى،

فبادلتُ ذلك الجوهر بحياتي، بالتأكيد بدل غير مناسب.
كان يوم الجمعة على إثر اقتحام المغول المدينة، قُبيل المساء، في أزقّة السوق التي وراء الجامع الأكبر، حيث كنت مارّا، أخفيت القنّينة في كيس وخنجراً تحت جلبابي لأزداد إقداما.

"من يحتفظ بي هو المدافع والهادي والمرابط على الحدود".
ما كان من المحتمل الإصغاء إلى التّاجر وهو يقرأ النّقش المدوّن على القنّينة، وقد تمعنت فيه عدة مرات مستفسرا عن المعاني التي تتخفّى وراء الكلمات.
عرَض التاجر القنّينة في النور وأدناها من عينيه متظاهرا بفحصها، مع أنه قد ثمّنها بدقّة منذ اللحظة الأولى. لم يراودني شكّ أنه لا يتفحّص المصنوع، بل البائع الذي مقابله. فقد كان غرضه إدراك الحاجة الملحّة للبيع، وبهذا يقدّر المصلحة التي سيبُتُّ فيها ذلك المساء.
كان يجهد ليجرّني للتّخاطب، في حين كنت أتجنّب وأماطل. كلما مرّ الزمن ازددتُ غمّا فليست لي فائدة بهذا.
قاطعت كلامه في النهاية وطلبت منه ثلاث قطع من النقود الذهبية. إنه أقلّ مما ينبغي، ولكنّه يساوي الثمن المطلوب لعبور النهر بالسّفينة ومغادرة المدينة ليلاً.

كان تحديد مطامعي خطأ فادحا. أعرف ذلك؛ لكن المساومة في الحالة التي كنت فيها، كانت مما لا يُحتمل حينها. كنت خائفا وهذا كان جليّا.

وأثناء الهجمة، لم أسعَ للدّفاع عن المدينة كما سعيتَ أنت لذلك في الشام، لتردّ قوبلاي خان - نصر مبين أفرح به اليوم.
لست من حملة السّلاح، ففي تلك الأيام العصيبة كنت أطلب مأوى آمنًا بعيدًا عن قصر الأمير، لأنجوَ بنفسي عبر النهر.

كنت قد قرّرت أن أسكن في المدينة، لا لغرض شخصيّ بل لأجل القنّينة. كما كنت أرجو أن أعثر في المكتبة الكبرى على نسخة من مذكّرات الإدريسي الجغرافي الكبير، وكان رجائي أن أطّلع على معنى القنّينة وأصلها، الذي لم تبح به من قبل.
فما تعرفه عن القنّينة، أنّ الأمير فخرالدين احترق على الملك الصالح أيوب أن يهبها منذ سنوات لصديقه إمبراطور الرّوم فريدريك، ولهذا حرص بنفسه على صنعها وتحوّل إلى الشام ليكلّف بها أمهر الصّائغين. ولكن تلك الهدية لم ترسل وبقيت بعد وفاة الأمير في حوزتي.

كتبتَ لي أن الأمير مانفريد سيتوَّج في آخر الصيف في مدينة باليرمو. أجد إرسال سفارة وهدايا له، لتمتين عرى الصداقة، رأيا سديدا. من الطبيعي أن ما خطر ببالك كان قد أعدّه والدك لأبيه: إنّه عطاء جدير بملك!
في حين كان يكفي أن ترسل له زوجين من الفهود يُدخِلان عليهم المسرّة في جنان "جنوارد".

رحلت الأوراق الخارجة من المكاتب شريدة، بهذا صارت حياة أُلوف البشر وذكريات أحاديثهم متعذرّة القراءة.
فضلا عن هذا، ما كنت أعاين تلفه هو تاريخ الحضارة، أو على الأقلّ تاريخ جانب قيّم منها، تضمنته تلك الكتابات وروته، أحاديث عظماء عاشوا ورحلوا إلى الأبد ولا تتيسّر حتى ذكراهم.
كانت خِراق تاريخنا تنتهي في النهرين المحيطين بالمدينة، كأنها جزيرة تطفو مزاحمة الجسور، كنتُ مشدوهًا، مستندا على عضد الباب، وأنا أنظر إليها في تكوّمها.
لم يخطر ببالي أني سأشهد في حياتي انهيار ما كان مركزا للعالم ولشتى أصناف التجارة، سأدوّن تلك التفاصيل.
بالنسبة لي -كرجل قانون وأديب عشت على أمل أن أساهم في تدوين التاريخ، أو أكتب شيئا على الأقلّ- كان مساحة الحزن حينها أكبر من عزائي للقتلى. كم أستحي من ذلك!

تعرف أني كنت في بغداد أيام الغزو. فقد غادرت قصر أُمّ خليل (وتخليّت عن عملي كمعلّم هناك) حتى أقدّم خدمتي لأمير المؤمنين بصفتي فقيهًا، فأتيت من الإسكندرية وجلبت معي قنّينة فخرالدّين.
كنّا جميعا نظنّ أن أسوار المنصور العالية تحمينا إلى الأبد.
لقد كنّا أغبياء! فقد نادت الأسوار الشاهقة العدوّ البعيد..

بسم اللّه الرّحمان الرّحيم الملك القدّوس
السلام عليكم،
ليرافقك عبر مشوار حياتك وينير عقلك ويهدي يمينك

صديقي الوفي..

أمس حلّ لديّ رسولك في البيت الذي ولدتُ فيه، فشغلَني الأمر: مع أني غبت عن هذا البلد النّائي سنوات، كان رجائي أن أتوارى عن الجميع، حتى عن نفسي.
بقيتْ رسالتك على المكتب طوال الليل محدّقة فيّ وفي غموض ضميري في ظلمة الغرفة.
الآن تزحف على الرّسالة أشعّة الشّمس الأولى التي رأت أن تطلع أخيرا، فقرّرتُ أن أجيبك بجهدٍ وشقّ أنفس.
بدءًا أقول لك: إني عاجز عن تلبية طلبكَ، فما سلَّمَ لي وما طلبتَه مني لم يعد ملْكي.
يحزّ في نفسي الأمَر، لكن ينبغي أن أقرَّ بذلك، ولكن ليس هذا أكبر همّي. سأحدّثك عن الظروف التي ألَمّت بهذا الأمر، فتعاين الكدَر الذي لا طاقة لي به. بعد أيام عدّة، كنتَ أوّل شخص أفتح صدري له، نظرًا للصداقة التي أبديتها نحوي، فضلا عن الصداقة التي ألتزم بها.

تعرف أني كنت في المدينة أثناء الهجمة. صورة تلك الكارثة ما زالت حاضرة في ذهني: غيوم الأوراق المكتوبة المنبَثّة في الريح مع التراب. كانت تلك الأوراق الهائمة مدفوعة في الطُرُق، تفتقد الحياة، كأشباح الناجين من بيننا.

أشكر **معصومه فرحات**، الراعية لمجموعة الفنّ الإسلامي في رواق "فريير" في مدينة واشنطن، و**جوليا دافي**، مديرة خدمة الثروات التاريخية والفنّية في مدينة باليرمو، على مساعدتها لي في تخيّلاتي.

الترجمة الإنجليزية: **ليا كاليغاريس بارك**،
The Bindery at the Well، سان فرانشيسكو، كاليفورنيا.

الترجمة العربية: **عزالدين عناية** (جامعة روما "لاسابيينسا") و**دانييلّي ماشيتيلي** (جامعة بيزا).

الرسوم: **ماريا كوفييلّو**.

إلى والدتي

يهودية النسب
بروتستانتية عن قناعة
رُحّب بها بعد الزواج في عائلة كاثوليكية التقاليد
تعلّمتُ منها أن الإعتزاز بالإنتماء لا يمكن أن يستبعد.

القِنِّينة

أو الناحية الصائبة للبشر