

VISÃO

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Three sisters, the grandmother and a bottle of grappa

At the ceremony for the delivery of the Nonino Prize, Lobo Antunes was enchanted by the beauty of the three sisters that promote a millionaire business with the most sophisticated marketing, he was bored for the “intellectual” discussions of figures of international prestige, he told Italian journalists embarrassing funny stories and he even sang ...

By Ana Margarida de Cravalho (text) and Lucilia Monteiro (photos), in Udine

There was a spot that advertised precooked food in which two chefs – Italian of course – started to discuss: one insisted that the secret was in the pasta, the other asserted that on the contrary it was in the sauce. In the case of grappa (a typical distillate of Northern Italy) Nonino, the secret lies in a rare combination of alchemies and distillations of extremely selected grapes, in more than a century of refinement (since 1897); no, the secret is in the bottle, in the design of female inspiration thanks to which the bottle seems more suitable for a perfume than for a distillate; no, the secret is in an intelligent and clever marketing that has been able to turn a drink traditionally associated to poverty, taverns and rustic places into a sophisticated and expensive product that is consumed in elite circles; no, the secret is in the matriarchal family (otherwise we wouldn't be in Italy), a grandmother, three daughters, Cristina, Antonella and Elisabetta and seven grand-daughters (there is only one grand-son) who manage the business, the image and the brand; no, the secret is in the creation of an international prize (the Nonino Prize was established 39 years ago) that is awarded to some of the most prestigious names of literature and international science, some of whom later were awarded also with the Nobel Prize (like V.S. Naipaul, Tomas Tranströmer, the Chinese Mo Yan or Peter Higgs) and which adds to Nonino grappa an extra taste of elegance and refinement, with a content that is as much alcoholic as of high culture (only this event that mobilizes entire worlds and much – but really much – money is worth more than any spot); no, the secret is in each of these things, put all together.

And this is how António Lobo Antunes (one of this year's prizewinners) came to Udine, in the Northeast of Italy (a rural and industrial area), not highly touristic, as close to the sea as to the Alps with the snow on the mountain tops, better known for its grappa (there it is), for an age old tradition at producing chairs (exported all over the world), for San Daniele raw ham and whose typical dish is *frico*: cheese melted in a pan with potatoes. This is how Lobo Antunes, who was swinging between satisfaction and his usual *negligee* air, a mixture of studied indifference and provocation, was seen in the halls of magnificent receptions, served by famous chefs, among tables where dishes of high cuisine and even a giant fish, triumphantly showed, were served (comment of the writer: “Look, Hemingway's fish”), surrounded by wonderful women in gala dresses (“They are so nice, have such good perfume, and an always new outfit; each dress would be enough for us to live a year, you just have to touch the tissue with your hand to realize it ...”).

“If Claudia Cardinale wrote ...”

At the ceremony for the delivery of the prizes (last Saturday 25th January), with an audience of over 600 guests (many of whom famous figures of the country) – Lobo Antunes's comment: “it would be

Cent'anni della Famiglia Nonino

so beautiful if all these people read" – at the presence of the most important media, among choruses and traditional dances, the stills and the omnipresent bottles of grappa, the prize to the Portuguese writer was delivered by Claudio Magris, with an enthusiastic eulogy. Together with the Portuguese writer the prizewinner were the French philosopher Michel Serres (awarded by Edgar Morin), the Italian psychiatrist Giuseppe Dell'Acqua (awarded by Antonio Damasio) and the Palestinian activist and writer Suad Amiry (awarded by Adonis), who dedicated the Prize also to her puppy: her passport allows them to enter Jerusalem.

And if the Nonino family has managed to disarm all the reluctances and the light-hearted coolness of the Portuguese writer ("they distilled" exuberance and liking, with a luxury that, without being discreet, did not show bad taste or any provincial exhibitionism), the journalists on the contrary ... were disconcerted. The reporters investigated on his relation with Italian writers, like Tabucchi, and António Lobo Antunes diverted the conversation and quoted Portuguese politicians: "Never lie to friends. To PIDE [the political police at the times of Salazar's dictatorship] and women always lie". He prefers to speak about Salgari, "I had the luck of reading him at the right moment", about Italo Calvino, "his death was a loss for all those who like literature", about love "which is made of delicate attention", about sex, "sex without love later requires an inner shower" and about women, "there aren't easy women: either they are very difficult or impossible". I would have hated being a woman, he comments a little off the point, "I should have stood a fool who tells lies, certain of being able to conquer a woman when, actually, they are the ones who choose. And the men, made fool of, have already been chosen but don't understand, because women are generous and let us be convinced of this". He rejects the idea that the narrative structure of his books, in which many times the times and the voices intersect, is a literary technique, better the "technical feat" irritates him ("a book must be a fist, it must take the reader by the neck"), and he is more and more convinced that there isn't a present, a past or a future: "There is a huge present where we never abandon the people we love. If still today I perceive the smell of my grandparents' house, is it possible that they do not exist anymore?". He prefers not to speak about writers, "because we always confuse passions with ideas, and we aren't able to abdicate our ideas", and, on the contrary, he addresses to those who have never lost quotation in his stock exchange of personal values: Ovid, Horace and Virgil. And he quotes the general of the seventeenth century, Montecuccoli, "who, unaware, did more for the theory of literature than any academic", saying that "it is necessary to grab the opportunity by the hair, even when you know it is bald". Because of an intestine cancer, two in each lung, an operation and aggressive chemotherapy, Lobo Antunes acts like Socrates who wanted to learn to play the lyre, even if he was already condemned. "What do you need it for?" his friends asked him: "I need it to play". "Why should I be interested in equestrian statues? My only chance is to use a pen. May be there is within us a hope of eternity and that something may save us, and that ... well that there is another tomorrow ...". And again Hemingway: "Death can destroy me, but it doesn't kill me."

He feels the pain of the loss of his friends, "I've always found myself with older men", he wakes up crying for his brother Pedro, who's recently died, "It looks as if the family has been mutilated" he confides, he is tormented by having lost part of his physical beauty – "now I'm just a man with a little charm" -, but he is sure that Paul Newman's beauty "prevented the people from understanding what a great actor he was". He declares, in front of some puzzled journalists, "that if Claudia Cardinale wrote, her books would be epic." But he pities female writers "poor, men feel intimidated and see conjectures in all they write". He says he is still able of doing crazy things, of changing his life completely, of feeling sudden joy when he learns that his books are translated in Iran or Ethiopia. "He is conservative and populist, because he says things the others weren't able to do, and as we all have this sensation of not being loved in the right way, we have the illusion that the Pope will change the things ... but he won't do it."

Cent'anni della Famiglia Nonino

After three days, Lobo Antunes gives signs of restlessness. Too much attention, and also too much tenderness and cheerfulness at the end tire. "Women hug me" he admits, "but they aren't tight hugs." He is tired of dining with learned people, of existential conversations. He wants to quote Walt Whitman: *"I like animals because they don't discuss the existence of God"*. He's tired of being kind, but he seduces the locals when he sings a few notes of Italian songs he knows by heart. They ask him a fado, they say that Portuguese is "very beautiful", it really sounds like "a song". Lobo Antunes will not concede the favor, but then in the airport 8he loves spending hours at the departure gates looking at the people, he loves the handrails of pedestrian crossings, he loves the mini lunches served on the plane "it's like playing mini dinners, they should open a restaurant just of these things") he confesses that jazz, which his father made him listen to, helped him to "learn how to compose". When he gave his first book as a present to his father, he defined it "a beginner's book": "and besides it was the only one I gave him as a present, there were no others." He is impatient of going back home, that region makes sad childhood memories come back to his mind: when he was 9 he went to Padua for his First Communion, and as he had lost his parents in St. Mark's Square in Venice, he abandoned himself sitting on the lions: "I walked along the calli alone, crying, a terrible anguish. Night came and I still remember my parents' face when they found me, they were so sad they didn't even get angry with me." He feels homesick. "I miss Lisbon, I miss bad taste, I miss hearing 'that girl is really beautiful.' Have you noticed the capacity of synthesis of this sentence?"

Legend page 1:

Awarded. During the gala lunch of the Nonino Family, at the presence of over 600 people, Lobo Antunes was happy of meeting the trainer Fabio Capello, to whom he autographed a book.

Legend page 2:

Dance. With one of the three Nonino sisters. The family distils grapes, luxury, exuberance and liking. Below, shop windows in the streets of Udine, decorated with the photographs of the prizewinning writer and a bottle of grappa.

"If Claudia Cardinale wrote, her books would be epic"

ANTÓNIO LOBO ANTUNES