

FLAMES

*Translation by Graziella Sidoli
Modern Languages Department*

Francesca fell in the well of her garden on a summer afternoon. She was sitting on its stone rim dangling one foot over the grass while looking at the weeping-willows at the end of the field; and she thought about the harvest approaching and about the wine which this year would be better than ever; and she followed the flight of the magpies over the fields; and in the blue air of the afternoon she seemed to be floating also. She noticed that she was smiling, and this was the beginning of the misfortune; because, surprised at her own blissfulness, she felt like looking at herself.

She leaned forward over the void and gazed admiringly at herself twenty feet below, remembering the game she played as a child. Like then, this time also she did not see much. The bluish surface sent back an uncertain outline; and as she was returning to her earlier position, a reflection appeared, in the water below, of a frightening figure. Two enormous wings were whirling over her head, and she heard a fierce cawing behind her. Instinctively, she closed her eyes and swung a hand towards the back of her head to protect herself from the unknown and feathered invader. With that movement she lost her balance and collapsed on the part of the body that rested near the opening; and unfortunately her elbow slipped on the stone. In an instant she tumbled down into the well.

As Francesca goes back in her mind to the incident of just a moment ago, she is amazed to find herself thinking of it as if it were a very distant and somewhat irreversible episode - much like a childhood disease, or the death of a loved one - moments which quickly become eternal and flee from the usury of time.

But the fact is that she cannot reach eternity, because what is happening has not yet finished. During the fall she has managed not to hit against the interior wall of the well; she has ended up in the water head first, like a diver. She has also

swallowed some of that water, whose flavor she is well acquainted with because it is served every day at her dinner table.

After rising up to the surface, Francesca gropes methodically to keep afloat. The well is at least nine feet deep, and there is nothing to rest on. She feels out with her feet every nook of the circular wall that surrounds her, searching for something jutting out or deepset; and she finds nothing. She cannot even float on her back, because there is not enough space. The only thing left is to wave her arms and legs in a steady way.

I must do this, Francesca tells herself. But ever so slightly! I have to move slowly.

In the meantime, she has determined that calling for help would be useless. Her husband will not return before eight in the evening, and now it's two in the afternoon. The maid and the gardener left a quarter of an hour ago and they will not be back until the next day. Francesca's daughter is visiting her grandmother and she will also return tomorrow. Screaming would be of no use. And Francesca does not scream; she learned long ago to control herself. It was just another accident, more stupid than the others.

For about an hour she managed not to think too much. She moved as if she were at the beach or in a pool, between laps; and she maintained an almost ironic detachment. What a nuisance, she repeated to herself; life is full of unnecessary nuisances.

She realized that she was not wearing her watch on her wrist and that she would have to roughly calculate the time. She recalled that in the past she had thought of time as a highly mysterious entity, and she had even fancied a definition. In the end she had reached the conclusion that time was only space which in its movement created a perfect illusion of duration. Without us there would be no time, she had concluded: in order for time to be, someone has to be there to think it. Otherwise, it is just matter changing place. Perhaps time is space falling in-love with other spaces and dreaming of a way to reach them. She had forgotten all about these observations which were now coming back to her by surprise.

She began to count, as children do before falling asleep, and she snickered once or twice as she was counting; but when she got to one thousand her voice faltered. This would not in itself have worried her, had it not been for the strange numbness which, at one and the same time, invaded her body. It was neither cold nor hot; it was a completely unknown temperature to her. I must know whether this is hot or cold, Francesca said to herself; it has to be one or the other. Life is hot or cold, and a third climate cannot be of any concern to us. Clearly it would be easier if I could ignore it. But how can I do that? I am at the bottom of the well in my garden.

She looked up and noticed that the sky was becoming cloudy. Perhaps it would rain, and the rain would be good for the vineyards. She wondered if her daughter had taken along an umbrella or the raincoat, and she decided to cross that off. In the middle of the Summer? And anyway they both liked to get wet in the rain. Once, mother and daughter had stayed in the field during a downpour, with their arms wide open and their eyes shut, like two trees. She remembered that they had screamed all the time, like those women who somehow are always screeching.

This last sentence, intruding abruptly into her memory, had her husband's voice. At that moment she realized that she was afraid; and maybe the hot-cold temperature was only fear. Of course I'm afraid, she whispered. When I am finally out of here I will tell everyone that I was scared. She thought that she truly deserved this admission.

If Francesca only knew that her husband is right here now, close by, she would certainly yell out with all her might. But she cannot know nor suspect it, since at that time of day he is never back. This evening he thought he would surprise her, so he left work and went home to take her out to dinner to a restaurant by the sea, near Nervi. When he sees his wife's car he wonders where she is; he pauses at the edge of the field, and looks at the cluster of weeping-willows, down there, by the well; and he seems to be overtaken by a certain anxiety. Then he remembers that a friend of his wife often comes to pick her up and they go shopping together or visit friends. So

he stops worrying and decides that it's better to go back to work. From Francesca's depth it is not possible to hear the sound of the car leaving.

An hour later Francesca's fear has grown so much that it is no longer a feeling, and resembles more an animal. She feels it walking on her legs and climbing up her sides and mounting up her back, and once there it goes back down, without ever leaving the water. She tries to treat it as one does an annoying dog; she ignores it and once in a while sends it away. But it comes back. Francesca's legs move very slowly, and her arms are becoming stiff at her sides; but this is not enough to keep her afloat, thus she swings them again, but too quickly. I'm tired, she says abruptly. It is possible - and finally the thought came to her - it is possible that I won't make it. It is possible that I may die in here and that they will find me in a few days, after having looked for me everywhere. The idea struck her as grotesque and lacking any sort of presentability. If it happens, I hope that they don't find me, she said to herself. I will be as swollen as goatskin. She glanced at the water that was around her and waiting to enter into her.

It was then that she quietly started to be delirious. Her delirium consisted of a very tight chatting, going back and forth between her daughter her mother or her husband, who was not coming to save her. In reality, she had no idea of what she was saying. Then she was forced into silence because something else was happening.

Her fantasizing had become visionary. The wall of the well, dark grey as it was, was filled with reddish flames. But they rose from within her, and she knew that each flame was a memory. They burned for an instant and then they extinguished themselves in the water. They insisted upon coming out, as if looking to escape. There were events that she was not aware of having retained in her memory and which now burned before her in a flash. She saw herself as a child eating a caterpillar; she had picked it up from the ground and had eaten it alive, and surely she had wanted to forget this story. But right after that the memory of the day that she planted the weeping-willows in the field was aflame, and that evening

she and her husband made love in a way that seemed as if they were growing roots. This vision ended in ashes like the others; and finally the flames stopped altogether. Francesca found herself without memories, like an abandoned ship.

Then she had a thought that brought the word end to all her cataloguing: she saw clearly that the future did not exist! And in fact, now that the time spent had left her entirely, she felt as empty as a bubble of air; and everything that she had expected to happen was only a reflection of what had already happened. The future streamed into the present and there it died quickly, becoming a ghost that ran about in the emptiness before her. To hell, whispered Francesca, surprised to hear herself speak that way.

Suddenly she realized that it was raining. The water drops fell to the bottom of the well, and some fell on her face. Now I will let myself go, she said to herself; but first I must not feel afraid. Then she made a great effort and succeeded in shaking off the animal on her shoulders. She saw it climb quickly along the side of the wall, and it seemed to her to be a bird, more than anything else, but a water bird? When it reached the top, it sat on the edge, showing off; and for a moment it turned to her. Then it left her to her destiny, and flew away.

It's gone, said Francesca; then I am also going. She closed her eyes and slid under the water, more docile than Ophelia.