

FRANCESCO BENOZZO
Leggende di ghiacciai/Legends of Glaciers
La Vela, Lucca, 2022, 50 pp.

Thanks to La Vela publisher, *Legends of Glaciers* appears in a fine-looking, polished and refined editorial layout, which in its physical charming form well embodies its contents, its beauty and power. This intense book, full of grace, collects the legends of glaciers created by the poet, candidate for the Nobel Prize in Literature since 2015, and scholar with 800 scientific publications, Francesco Benozzo, who surprises his readers with yet another enchanting embodiment of his creativity. Not his epic poetry, not his traditional songs with the bardic harp, not his deep ethnophilological study of ancient traditions. This time, he graces us in the form of the ancient traditional fable. Nonetheless, all these other elements of his poetics are the fertile soil where these legends take roots and wings, as Benozzo tells us in his *Premise*, which declares the scientific background, deep and passionate readings that are at the foundation of this precious gem he shares with the world:

the myths of the Tungusians, the oral stories of the Yakutes and the Korjaki's legends. For the same reasons, I carefully reconsidered Tolkien's pages on the fairy tale and his *Book of the Lost Tales*, in particular the *Music of the Ainur*¹.

One of the most significant features of Benozzo's poetry, the epic presence of the landscape, is effused here in a form of poetic storytelling of legends, told and eternally retold and recreated around the primordial fire of imagination, because:

One should listen to the *Legends of Glaciers*, rather than read them: I collected them with this precise intent. The written form is only a feeble trace of the voice that should recount and sing them (Benozzo, 2022, p. 109).

Like Saint-Exupéry's *Little Prince*, these Legends have in mind readers of all ages, the only indispensable feature is to have a youthful, pulsating heart and soul, and be ready to *listen*. As we know, "it is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye"². There we had a Little Prince living alone in a small small planet; here we have apparently huge features of the landscape who tell their stories, and we, as humans, are like tiny ants walking on a tiny planet, lost in the immensity of the cosmos.

In his noteworthy study on *Ethnophilology*, a discipline he founded³, Benozzo stresses the importance of staying in contact with ancestral oral traditions – poetry/song, shamanic healing, dance, demonstrating how traditions are always alive and living. Written texts, which are much more recent, bear "feeble" traces of the singing voice that told them along many many seasons. He suggests we should approach these legends with respect, an open mind and love, in order to perceive and acknowledge their ancestral power and antiquity. We need an open heart and a keen ear not only towards what is being said and done in the narration, but also towards what lies behind or underneath that; strata and strata of minute transformations and adjustments that tune in to their ancestral roots, which are still and always alive. Traditions are continually *traditioned*, or *retraditioned*, as Benozzo says, by those who practice them from time immemorial, orally passing them on. In the eighth *example* he gives in his book on *Ethnophilology*, entitled *Lexicon and*

¹ *Premise*, p. 9. All translations from the Italian text are mine.

See: <https://www.edizionilavela.it/prodotto/leggende-di-ghiacciai/>.

² de Saint - Exupéry, Antoine, *The Little Prince*, Thorndike, G. K. Hall & Company, 1943, p. 139.

³ Benozzo, Francesco, *Etnofilologia. Un'introduzione*, Napoli, Liguori, 2010.

*gestures of traditional healers (ethnotexts and rituals in a prehistoric context)*⁴, he studies the practices of the *stariòuna*, the healer, or she doctor, in the village of San Cesario on the Panaro (in the Modena area). For his ethnophilological study, he interviewed and saw at work three of these healers, who are always and necessarily women, who hand down their knowledge orally and by example only, not through any written text, in ways that are governed by the tradition they live in. At the end of the chapter, he narrates of another visit he paid to one of them - this time simply to *be* together, or take his leave, saying farewell. He spent most of the afternoon talking with the old woman about her life in the country and of ancient nursery rhymes she knew and told. Before he left, she recommended him to come back again:

Turnèe a truvèrem, a m'arcmand. What a wonderful voice, I thought, this taciturn heiress of the great prehistoric shamans. And I imagined the Po plain in the Quaternary, and the May wind after the retreat of the glaciers (Benozzo, 2010, pp. 178-179).

The legends embody this feeling of oneness and continuity in a “wonderful voice”, the voice of Tradition. They lucidly and poetically tell about Benozzo’s Apennine, its landscape, geological formation, ancient history. Benozzo *tells* so eloquently and at the same time with modest simplicity about the natural world and its evolution, its changes and transformations. His approach flawlessly displays how his creative imagination and scholarship move along together in a superb unity. The very same immense oral tradition of storytelling, song, oral poetry, fables and nursery rhymes nourishes Benozzo’s *Legends of Glaciers*. It is true that one feels the necessity (I felt the necessity) to read the legends *aloud* in order to enhance sensory, bodily participation and call for the soul to be present and truly listen. I followed the pauses of breathing, slowing or accelerating the pace and the tone of my voice, sometimes raising my gaze from the book towards the horizon, the mountains nearby, the tulip tree I see from my windows. An excellent practice to remember how to slow down, to open one’s heart with true attention, devotion and consideration. That is how the Bard works his spells, sharing his admirable scientific and poetic/shamanic voice. For the word *stariòuna*, Benozzo tells us, comes from a form **historiona*, giving evidence of an ancient tie with the archaic professional practitioners of the *word*, because, the ancient *histrion*, within an anthropological vision, can be interpreted as: “the custodian of traditional wisdom, the omniscient poet, the pantomime, the funambulist, the musician, the dancer, the actor, the magician”⁵. And, I would add, the coppersmith gypsy, who knows how to render soft with creative fire the sometimes hardened metal of the soul, thus creating magic potions in his copper cauldron. As Meldolesi comments, Benozzo seems to ground his legends in the “animism of the elements, investigating the totemic conceptions still enclosed in dialectal and ancient names that refer to stones, plants, water and, indeed, ice”⁶.

These legends are not told in a human voice because Humanity is absent. The legends deal in a captivating and rhythmical fairy-like tone of stories that happened aeons before the appearance of men. However, the shaman/bard’s voice *translates* the thundering voice of Diànvele. The use of Italics marks the opening and closing of the book. There is an antecedent and some closing reflections to enclose the legends in a sort of treasure chest, highlighting the fact that the narrating voice is that of an element of the landscape, the three-headed scree named Diànvele:

Who brought these legends not wet by the tears of men, profound and eminent, full of many things? It was Diànvele, the long scree with three heads, the grey landslide with lichen similar to faraway islands, with the thunder-like voice. She was the one who made these ventures known, who took them right here from the heights of mountains and epochs. Up there, where the sunny winds pass, the great scree, in comparison with which neither the heights of larch and birch nor the avalanches of the eastern chains hold, there she released her debris, with

⁴ Benozzo, Francesco, *Etnofilologia*. 2010. pp. 162-179.

⁵ Alinei, Mario, Le origini antropologiche e linguistiche della filastrocca, *Quaderni di Semantica*, 2009, 30, pp. 263-289, pp. 285-286. Quoted by Benozzo, *Etnofilologia* 2010, p. 178.

⁶ Meldolesi, Davide, Le Leggende di ghiacciai di Francesco Benozzo, 2022, <https://librieparole.it/recensioni/6758/leggende-di-ghiacciai-francesco-benozzo/>.

the long memory of landscapes.

Imagine her there, this enormous three-headed scree who is intent on telling with her thundering voice about her long memory of landscapes, which, grain after grain, the heart of the country moved and transformed within herself, slowly sinking and rising again into its own ancientness, blending, melting, icing, exploding, descending, disappearing, returning, being reborn. She carries “*a medicine against the three diseases that kill the soul: loss of memory, the inability to draw beauty, and indifference*” (Benozzo, 2022, p. 14).

These diseases that kill the soul affect humanity in a heavy way, nowadays. Humanity has forgotten *com-passion* all taken into egotistic and transhuman mind-trips, we do not see the ‘other’ anymore as a mirror of ourselves but mainly as an enemy. However, the Arch Enemy, for this society of ours is nature and its landscapes, which must be subdued (also inside humans), exploited and controlled. Listening to Diànvele’s storytelling takes us far away from the noise and prattle of *Homo Sapiens*, with his pointless sense of superiority and ego-centeredness. It takes us away from “the sickening chatter of those who cry for the disappearance of the glaciers and, as always, put man at the centre of everything, in this case pointing at him as responsible for an alleged climactic catastrophe” (Benozzo, 2022, p. 10). We have to listen to the legends, instead, to be able to receive wisdom and knowledge of time immemorial in the resounding and resonating rocks:

Diànvele is there, with her profiles reddened by the sunset, and she recounts these remote legends. And the word of rock resounds, and the soul of the one who is ready to listen and remember opens to knowledge.

Listen to the legends, then. (Benozzo, 2022, p. 14)

The invitation to *listen to the legends* recurs through the book as the ringing of a bell calling us to attention and care, to presence and openness, to the flow of life in the exact moment when it happened and continues to happen. We need to recognise and be recognised by these forms of the landscape that are our ancestral progenitors, like in the Australian Aboriginal *Dreaming*, where, while singing and walking the *Songlines*, we meet our Ancestors in the landscape and ourselves. We create the world anew with and through them in the natural landscape we traverse together (or even remember together, or simply *tell*), each time, every time we sing wholeheartedly and perfectly centred, absolutely open, ready to dance the dance of Life in togetherness, in joy or sorrow, longing and satisfaction, no matter what. Together, even in our solitude, which is not aloneness or aloofness, but simply a manifestation of what we truly are, as Benozzo, the poet-bard tells us here. *Listen to the legends.*

These legends tell about Fiòidhun, that we now know under the name of the Apennine. He had been an archipelago of green islands rising from the sea full of long waves. He had been a territory of low and reddish mountains overlapping down to the beaches covered with seaweeds. In the transformations happening in a *considerable number of years* (Benozzo, 2022, p.15), what was a lush landscape slowly becomes a glacier. Fidhèlm appears, the glacier that would modify our story, the protagonist of the first legend, in IV parts:

Fidhèlm of the blue reflections, the glacier of the three valleys of the Fiòidhun. He was longer than the two long valleys put together, taller than the mountains which are found today in the Apennine. Seen from above, his form was similar to an immense vine leaf. Fidhèlm soon occupied the three valleys of the Fiòidhun where the great coconut trees had lived (Benozzo, 2022, p.17).

While the glacier grows and transforms the landscape, after many many years, a hot wind starts to blow from afar, it is Kitnìa, the hot wind, the high fire, who “always seemed to agitate, crackle, fill the air with sparks. It spread into invisible tongues and hissed” (Benozzo, 2022, p.21). Kitnìa melts Fidhèlm into rivulets, and small waterfalls and lakes:

The streams that descend into the three valleys, the Làmola, the Dragon and the Scoltenna, are three names of the blue Fidhèlm. And the Apennine is another name of the Fiòidhun, the

territory of palm trees and the glacier, the Land of the Beech where hawks fly (Benozzo, 2022, p.25).

After every part of the legend is told, the rocks of Diànvele become silent and quiet under the luminous stars above, being submerged by the great waves of the night: “Above them, as on the thousand rivulets of the night, the shamanic howl of the storm takes place” (Benozzo, 2022, p.25).

The second legend is that of Bàikale, the small moraine of green and orange lichens which slowly become stones and mountains again. “Listen to the legend. It has no end. Like life, like the earth: there is always a sequel” (Benozzo, 2022, p.25):

This legend full of wondrous things is true. Bàikale is still there, under the mountain of the Apennine that today is called Rondinaio. The beeches grew among its rocks, and it dams the waters of a small lake called Baccio (Benozzo, 2022, p.31).

The next part, entitled *Diànvele and the Legend* is an invocation to Diànvele herself to help the legend to be continued and supported:

Oh, Diànvele, who brought those voices from the mountains of distant times, help the legend, make sure that her enemies do not have the upper hand over her, so that everything she collects in the Fiòidhun is brought to future generations in the days and years to come!

And the legend rose as one of the great white eagles, flew farther, reached the sea and the continent beyond the sea (Benozzo, 2022, pp. 33-34).

The legend brings with her all the knowledge and wisdom accumulated over the ages and places she traversed. Now she rests on Diànvele, who came down towards her so that things can never be lost, so that: “wisdom may shine in the word, so that the heart may warm up in the song, and so that the memory of the landscapes may help the man who inhabits the earth” (Benozzo, 2022, p.36).

And the Legend is carried on with Dun Bulvéa, which rose as a big mountain, while originally she was a small hailstone. Now she is known as Monte Cimone (Benozzo, 2022, p. 37):

And the blue and green of those ancient landscapes survive even today in the woods of the three valleys. You can see them just before sunset, among the bright beech trees that live in the Apennine. These were the very colours of the Fiòidhun when the wind was cool, the reindeer were running and the sun was rising on the horizon.

This is not a fairy tale. This is the truth. (Benozzo, 2022, p. 41).

Now we listen to the Legend of Íliniut, a crevice in Fidhèlm the glacier, which became larger and larger, but also stayed hidden until the ice melt:

Listen to the legend. It is dark and bright. She is scary and warm. The legend has multiple aspects. When she falls at night from Diànvele, she makes the larch and the birch tremble. When she reclines on the long scree, she probes into the men who go up to listen to her so that they can know about life and death, and reap a meaningful image (Benozzo, 2022, p. 45).

When the glacier dried out, Íliniut reappeared, now a thundering waterfall: “You can still see her, in the second of the three valleys of the Apennine, where she is called nowadays Doccione waterfall” (Benozzo, 2022, p. 47).

The Legends, we know, still continue to tell themselves and be told, for:

Diànvele, the long three-headed scree, came down from the mountain bearing these legends. Her lichens are like distant islands, her voice is like thunder.

Diànvele turned her three faces downstream. The first face is the past, the second is the present, the third is the future, and all three in the movements of the grey landslide become one face.

For a long time the men did not go up to the rocky scree to look at her, listen to her and walk across her. Some have passed by without noticing the legends.

But now that the word of the rock resounds, let the mind of those who are ready to listen and remember open to knowledge. (Benozzo, 2022, p. 49).

Djånvele's voice resounds crystal clear in her message. Let's all hark and remember and open to her knowledge and wisdom, to *become* human, to stay candid, truthful and free in our caring friendship among ourselves and all creatures, stones, trees, flowers, rocks, lichens. To *be* with the speaking landscape, uttering silent words and whispering to our souls. Be well, fare well, listen to the legends that always echo inside the hearts of those who can recall and see beauty.

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