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beginning with schoolchildren) are free to take greater and greater liberties with it. Don't be pedantic!

Language is our most human possession. Without it we are nothing, poor naked wretches. But language needs care. The linguist calmly settles questions of language by consulting the standard of usage. No sweat. But the writer who wishes to write well must struggle, continue to struggle, and struggle again to get it right. I think of Kafka's "nomads from the North": "There is no speaking with the nomads. They don't know our language, why, they hardly have one of their own. They understand each other the way jackdaws do. Always in our ears are the jackdaw cries they make. Our way of living, our institutions, they care no more about than they understand them."

From the beginning American writing was critical, of the country, of itself. The pre-Civil War "NO! in thunder" of the literary founding fathers, mute for many a year, was heard again after the First World War. When modernism faded, the resounding NO! it had uttered in its own way didn't fade with it, it flip-flopped into declamation and exhibitionism. The middle-class audience enthusiastically cheered on such performers as Norman Mailer and Susan Sontag who entertained it with death-defying feats of dissidence negotiated on a high wire six inches above the ground. The noble American NO! was corrupted in its own name and now survives weakly in a corner, little recognized.

THE LEOPARD RECONSIDERED

RICHARD O'MARA

The Capuchin cemetery in Palermo is awash with light. It flows in beneath the woolly crowns of the ancient cypresses, wet from the night's rain, and splashes over a white concrete walkway that separates the mausoleums—those miniature mansions the color of old bone that house the Sicilian rich and dead—from the more modest graves, one of which holds the remains of the last prince of Lampedusa. The chattering idlers at the entry arch to this necropolis all know where the grave is; they will guide the odd literary tourist right to it, no tip required.

How unexpected that the author of *The Leopard*, an aristocrat with a bloodline said to reach back into the early Byzantine centuries, should lie beneath this modest stone, set apart from a jumble of flowers, fleshy angels, green urns, and other funereal symbols by a low fence of black steel. Unexpected

but understandable, for the author of what many regard as the greatest work of literature to emerge from this island throughout its entire turbulent history, was living in penury when he died; most of the family lands were gone, the wealth squandered, the palaces sold off or moldering in desuetude. Neither the prince of Lampedusa nor any of his kin ever learned how to make a living in the modern world, except one, who became a diplomat. (The name Lampedusa refers to a bleak island in the Mediterranean between Sicily and Africa, which the last prince never visited. The family sold it in the nineteenth century to the Bourbon French.)

Not far beyond the rectangle of marble rises a white wall with a forest of sumac trees behind it waving their dull green fingers above and concealing part of a wooded hill. Visible above the hill are the mountains of western Sicily, so high and wild, so tightly confining that I can almost feel their shadows on my skin. On the stone are these inscriptions:

Giuseppe Tomasi Prince of Lampedusa
Died in Rome, 23 Luglio [July] 1957

Alessandra Wolff Stomersee Princess of Lampedusa
Died in Palermo, 22 Giorno [June] 1982

Extraordinary man with an extraordinary mate: she was a Latvian baroness, a psychiatrist who introduced Freudianism to this island beneath the Italian boot, thinking, perhaps, it might help penetrate the iron-clad Sicilian ego.

A man with a mustache comes down the path with a little girl in a yellow dress. He stares briefly at the tomb to the right of the Lampedusas'. He crouches and whispers to the child, presses his face to hers. The prince's neighbor to the left, a former leader of Italy's Communist Party, came here before his time. A bold sign blares above his stone:

Pio La Torre
Assassinata Dalla Mafia 30 April, 1982

The sign calls to mind a phrase from *The Leopard* that alludes to one of the factors contributing to the social and political inertia that has held Sicily in thrall for generations. They are words that reveal a strategy of political deceit, words upon which the narrative of *The Leopard* turns.

The story opens in 1860 during the Risorgimento, a popular movement that ended the Bourbon monarchy, broke the grip of the ruling aristocratic caste, and unified the Italian peninsula for the first time since the Roman occupation. Tancredi, nephew to the prince of Salina, Don Fabrizio Corbera, has enlisted in Garibaldi's legions—his aim not to further their republican agenda but to subvert it. The prince is trying to dissuade Tancredi from putting himself in danger. Tancredi responds: "Unless we ourselves take a hand

now, they'll foist a republic on us. If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change."

They are prophetic words, specifically with regard to Italy's infamous and overly romanticized criminal organization, the Mafia. But the prince was not to be educated by his nephew. He had already heard the bell toll for his class; he had already seen many among that effete cohort, barons and dukes and their ilk, flee the island, losing their lands, palaces, and all the authority that went with these treasures. The state would later render their titles meaningless in the modern world, if not on the social scene.

Don Fabrizio, instead of fleeing, accommodated himself to these circumstances. He entered into a tacit accord with the mayor of the fictional town of Donnafugata, where the prince and his family summered each year, to foster the marriage of Tancredi to Calogero Sedara's daughter, Angelica, she of the "threatening beauty." Together the prince and Sedara would hoist Tancredi into a "great future" as "the standard bearer of a counterattack, which the nobility, under new trappings, could launch against the new social State."

Lampedusa's biographer, David Gilmour, wrote that Sedara was among "the early Mafiosi, the men who grabbed the common lands and the Church's property and held on to them by force." Don Fabrizio predicted that "jackals and hyenas" would ultimately replace the aristocratic "Leopards and Lions." They did. Mafiosi in the hundreds, maybe thousands, also flocked to Garibaldi's banner, first to support, then to corrupt the liberal state that his movement would bring forth.

Eighty years on, the Mafia smoothed the way for the American invasion of Sicily as it did Garibaldi's. Afterward many of its agents, especially those who spoke English, or had lived and had family in the United States, were rewarded by the occupation forces. Determined to purge local government in Sicily of its fascists, the Americans handed out administrative positions, a mayoralty here, tax collector's job there, to the Mafia's agents, thereby enabling the dark organization to carry on its business as usual.

This self-perpetuation conspiracy remains entrenched to this day, seemingly the most durable institution in Italy after the Catholic church. As recently as October 2007, the pope was in Naples deploring Mafia violence, and the Confesercenti, an association of small businesses, released a report around that time revealing that the activities of organized crime constituted the largest segment of Italy's economy. Tancredi knew what he was talking about.

Though I was captured by *The Leopard* over forty years ago and have read it twice, I have little of the pilgrim's self-engrossed zeal. My wife and I came to see Sicily, to be astounded by the Euclidean perfection of the temples at Agrigento, the cerebral pleasure of their symmetry especially when seen in the pumpkin-colored light of dusk. Merely to absorb the fact that these structures were built twenty-five hundred years ago by Greek colonizers,

and remain intact, induces a touristic inebriation. We went to see and try to decipher the covert messages embedded in the splendid mosaics in the Villa Romano del Casale in the town of Piazza Armerina; we were stunned at the splendor of the blue and gold interior of the Monreale Duomo, built by the Normans in Palermo in the twelfth century. And the image of the white-crested Mt. Etna, drawn up by the restless earth itself, toying with the wind and clouds, will never fade in my mind.

Visiting the Lampedusa graves was an afterthought, but one that became imperative as our taxi approached the cemetery, a short distance outside Palermo's ancient city gate. By then there were two graves on my mind: that of the author, the last prince of Lampedusa, 1896–1957, and that of his great-grandfather, Giulio Maria Fabrizio Tomasi, prince of Lampedusa, 1815–1885, said to be the model for the book's protagonist, Don Fabrizio. I had read that Don Giulio is at rest near his great grandson, but I couldn't find his grave. The loiterers at the gate didn't know whom I was talking about, nor did the two friendly but sleepy friars, one in the Capuchin church beside the cemetery, the other selling tickets to the catacombs beneath it, which hold an interesting if macabre collection of mummies of Palermo's luminaries, religious and secular, thousands of them, going back over four centuries.

Many people, including David Gilmour, believe *The Leopard* is autobiographical, at least in part, because both men, the real and the fictive, lived their lives in similar fashion and faced comparable circumstances: both were engaged in purposeful leisure in grand if crumbling surroundings; both were given to intense lonely contemplation about life, death, and the future before them, which neither perceived as hopeful.

Neither of the two had a genuine vocation, though Don Fabrizio of the novel was an assiduous amateur astronomer (as was, in fact, Don Giulio). Other similarities shared by the author and the protagonist of his novel would encourage the idea of autobiography. Both were uneasy in their lives, uncertain of the solidity of all the institutions surrounding them, and with good reason: two waves of history were crashing down upon them. Don Fabrizio foresaw the disintegration of his class and the loss of his privileges in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Giuseppe di Lampedusa's perspective was even more withering: he lived through two world wars, fought in the first, and did his best to save himself, his family, and his property from the rain of Allied bombs in the second. Don Fabrizio lived and died in the romantic nineteenth century, Don Giuseppe in the first half of the twentieth, the "Century of Total War," as Raymond Aron appropriately named it. To repeat, most of the positive comparisons of the two, author and character, reflect the similarity of the circumstances of life they both faced. Clearly theirs were times of unsettling change. When it comes to personal and physical qualities, divergence appears. The reflective natures of the two seem similar; but other elements, such as the arrogance and princely authoritarianism of

Don Fabrizio, especially his sensuous nature, certainly did not exist in his creator.

Don Giuseppe was a shy man, passive and polite, rarely arrogant. He lived a private life, more cerebral than passionate, married to a woman whose personality was similar to his. For much of their lives they lived apart, mainly because Allesandra could not get along with the prince's mother. They wrote many letters to each other, which led one person to describe their relationship as more epistolary than warm or carnal.

Don Giuseppe had a snobbish side, especially in matters of class. During the early years of Mussolini's ascendancy he favored the fascist movement. But then, so did such people as the conductor Arturo Toscanini, the writer Luigi Pirandello, and the operatic composers Giacomo Puccini and Pietro Mascagni. (Don Giuseppe disliked opera for its melodramatic nature, as he disliked all melodrama for its lack of subtlety; he thought Sicilians were too much taken by it.) Later Lampedusa turned away from the fascists, as many of the others did, having decided they were just a gang of low-class incompetents.

The last prince favored English clothes and French literature. But he was enamored of Western literature in general and never went anywhere without his collection of Shakespeare's plays. Near the end of his life he became, for a while, a teacher of literature for a covey of his friends. He was abstemious, though he had a weakness for cakes and pastries. He was a dilettantish intellectual, who mastered at least five languages—Italian, French, English, German, and Spanish. He was the arbiter and harried leader of the remnants of the Lampedusa clan, ever at war with itself over the unclear inheritance of Don Giulio, who left no will. He described this litigious group as "a smart, remarkable assembly of people, one third fools, one third lunatics, and the rest of them rascals."

As for physical similarities between the two real-life princes, if one can rely on old images and what they might offer to the speculative mind, there was little. An 1860 portrait of Don Giulio shows a hirsute man, faintly frowning, his eyes those of a man incapable of being surprised. One of the later photographs of Don Giuseppe, not long before his death, reveals a weary-looking aristocrat with dull gray hair swept back from a profile that recalls John Barrymore's: a promontory of a nose suspended over a retreating chin, minimized by a mustache on a face unimaginable without it. His eyes reflect a dark portent, like those of his great-grandfather's, as if they had both looked upon the end of civilization—or at least the beginning of the end.

Giuseppe di Lampedusa, owing to his reading, and his ability to identify the more significant streams of history, knew what had been and what was coming. Had he been religious in a pagan way, he would have favored the Roman god Janus, if only because the double-faced deity was "the special patron of the beginning of all undertakings." For surely Janus must have

blessed Lampedusa, who, with a burst “of mysterious scribblings” in the same Palermo cafe where for years he spent every afternoon reading, he entered upon a task that, in the end, would prove blessed, and also would make all of sleepy Sicily wake up and pay attention.

Not long before his death at the age of sixty, he started and finished within two years what a renowned French critic calls “one of the great books of the century, one of the great books of always.” The book was unexpected since the prince had published only a few reviews and short stories during his life before he began to write *The Leopard* in 1955, almost covertly.

Gilmour describes *The Leopard* as “the first ‘best-seller’ in Italian history.” It seemed to catch the world by surprise, unleashing a seismic boom of popularity that rolled through Italy and extended far beyond. It went through edition after edition and remains in print. The book was rejected by several publishers, but finally came out in 1958, eight months after the author died. It was published in English in 1960, and three years later was adapted for a film by Luchino Visconti.

The film stars Burt Lancaster as the Leopard, and it should not be dismissed or denigrated as shallow. Caryn James, a *New York Times* critic, wrote a few years ago that the picture “complements the novel, but cannot capture all the twists and depths of character that Lampedusa put into the novel.” James oddly described it as “*Gone With the Wind*, but with Garibaldi’s red shirts instead of Yankees and Confederates.” I say *oddly* because a professor of Italian literature at the Johns Hopkins University made the same comparison during an interview I had with him on another topic. “I don’t think *The Leopard* is as good as *Gone With the Wind*,” said Pier Massimo Forni. “It is more literary, maybe, but as a narrative it’s not as accomplished.” It could be said without serious challenge that most Sicilians who know anything of *The Leopard* learned of it as a movie. No doubt most Americans came to know *Gone With the Wind* the same way.

The last prince of Lampedusa died of emphysema, and like his great grandfather he died in a hotel room—he in Rome, Don Giulio in Florence. Don Fabrizio, not to be left behind just because he was a fictional character, died in 1888 in the Hotel Trinacria in Palermo. His was a death long awaited; and, being a man with a strong sensuous nature, he desired it to include the comfort and caresses of a beautiful woman. Death was a woman to the astronomer prince: she was the Venus of his mind.

Sitting in an armchair, his long legs wrapped in a blanket, on the balcony of the Hotel Trinacria, he felt life flowing from him in great pressing waves. . . . It was midday on a Monday at the end of July, and away in front of him spread the sea of Palermo, compact, oily, inert, improbably motionless, crouching like a dog trying to make

itself invisible at his master's threats; but up there the static perpendicular sun was straddling it and lashing at it pitilessly. The silence was absolute. Under the high, high light Don Fabrizio heard no other sound than that inner one of life gushing from him.

At the very end, after receiving the last rites of the Catholic church, though quite indifferently, his mind all the while assessing the balance sheet of his life, "trying to sort out of the immense ash-heap of liabilities the golden flecks of happy moments," she came to him, and "raised her veil, and there, modest, but ready to be possessed, she looked lovelier than she ever had when glimpsed in stellar space."

The Leopard generated much confusion, blizzards of questions, hostile and otherwise, praise and rejection. Was it a historical novel or an autobiography? Was it an apology for an archaic degenerate class? Was it an insult to Italian letters for being shot through with Sicilian dialect? Or was it just Giuseppe di Lampedusa's effort to forestall the oblivion soon to enshroud his family name and history?

Out of what literary genre did *The Leopard* spring? Where does it belong? Who did Lampedusa emulate in his writing? Proust, Tolstoy, Pirandello, Stendhal—there are so many candidates they cancel one another out. The difficulty of matching the novel with something familiar to the intelligentsia is perhaps the reason E. M. Forster called it "one of those lonely books." Among other things all this seems to suggest that at least at the time of the book's emergence there prevailed among many intellectuals and critics a deep aversion to originality—or possibly just a deep aversion to Sicily.

I am among the commoner of the common readers, and what I found within the pages of *The Leopard* was a serenade, a lyrical song to and about the rending sadness of Sicily, a place long shunned, ridiculed throughout mainland Italy, repeatedly overrun through the centuries, invaded, and despoiled time and again by people of other cultures, conquerors from here or there, some of whom stayed on for considerable lengths of time: Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Arabs, Normans, Spaniards, the French later, until at last, during Don Giulio's lifetime—and with the assistance of "that fellow Garibaldi, that bearded Vulcan, [who] had won after all," as was conceded by Don Fabrizio at his death—Italy managed to pull itself together into a new nation state.

The last prince traveled on occasion during his life, but not far, nor for long periods. He was of Sicily; and, when he wrote of it through the eyes of his character, one could see and feel the love aglow in his fatalism, the disappointment that weighed on his heart, much as the sun, "the true ruler," weighed upon Sicily: "the crude brash sun, the drugging sun, which annulled every will, kept all things in servile immobility, cradled in violence as arbitrary as dreams."

Don Giuseppe yearned for something solid, something unchangeable to fend off the debilitating uncertainty that plagued his life. Don Fabrizio found it above, in the stars:

The soul of the Prince reached out toward them, toward the intangible, the unattainable, which gave joy without laying claim to anything in return; as many other times he tried to imagine himself in those icy tracts, a pure intellect armed with a notebook for calculations; difficult calculations, but ones which would always work out. "They're the only really genuine, the only really decent beings," thought he, in his worldly formulae. "Who worries about dowries for the Pleiades, a political career for Sirius, matrimonial joy for Vega?"

Don Giuseppe's reverence for his island comes through in the words uttered by the Leopard while in his palace tower, up there among his telescopes and calculations that affirmed for him, time and again, the never-ending perfection of the circling stars:

He opened one of the windows of the little tower. The countryside spread below in all its beauty. Under the leaven of the strong sun everything seemed weightless: the sea in the background was a dash of pure color; the mountains which had seemed so alarmingly full of hidden men during the night now looked like masses of vapor on the point of dissolving, and grim Palermo itself lay crouching quietly around its convents like a flock of sheep around their shepherds.

If you ride through Sicily today in a bus or car from one end of the island to the other, you will pass here and there industrial plants belching smoke that stains the blue-white sky as well as modern farms littered with red tractors, chunks of rusting steel, the detritus of our times. You also will pass through more austere lands, stands of olive trees, some quite ancient, and crumbling houses of stone long abandoned, breathing their loneliness from dry brown fields, ancient houses, and here and there a remnant of a crenellated castle; you will see towns built atop small hills off in the distance, approached by serpentine paths; villages, each with its own necropolis, cities of the dead, white as sugar cubes, side by side with the houses of the living; and you will conclude that, for all that has happened here over the many centuries, little has changed after all.