As each class comes closer to the others and mixes with them, its members become indifferent and almost like strangers among themselves. Aristocracy had made of all citizens a long chain that went from peasant up to the king; democracy breaks the chain and sets each link apart.

— Alexis de Tocqueville

In an essay titled “Why Read the Classics?” Italo Calvino once said that a classic work is always something that people say they are “re-reading,” never “reading.” By this standard Giuseppe di Lampedusa’s Il Gattopardo (The Leopard) would rank high on my list of classic texts. The novel is one of my favorites. It is a book that I have read and reread continually since high school but have only recently developed the nerve to discuss in public. You might call it my “coming out.” It is a beautiful book, one of the great novels in any language.

But The Leopard is also a deeply political book, although Lampedusa’s politics are far from clear. Was the author a reactionary
lamenting the decline of the traditional ruling class? Was the work a merciless critique of a class in its final state of decrepitude? Or was it, as I believe, a work by a learned skeptic reflecting on the limits of political reform? All these questions have dogged the novel since its original publication.

The action of *The Leopard* takes place at the time of the Risorgimento, the reunification of the Italian peninsula for the first time since the age of the Roman Empire. But it is not just a historical novel; it is a novel that provides a profound meditation upon history. It is a book about the transition from one world to another, from what Alexis de Tocqueville called the age of aristocracy to the age of democracy or, to use Marxist categories, from the world of feudalism to the world of the modern bourgeoisie. It is, finally, a book about the loss of collective memory.

“The Protagonist Is at Bottom, Me”

First, however, a few words about the book and its author. Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, the eleventh prince of Lampedusa, was born in Palermo in 1896. He served in the Italian army during World War I, but was taken prisoner and spent much of the war in a POW camp in Hungary. After the war he returned to Sicily and later married a Latvian aristocrat who shared his passion for books and literary pursuits. The two lived together off and on in Palermo, where they cultivated a circle of friends who together spent their time reading and discussing the great works of European literature in their original languages. They had no children. Aware that the line of Lampedusa would end with him, Giuseppe began a novel that set out to describe the aristocratic world of his ancestors.

*The Leopard* was Lampedusa’s first and only book. It was completed in 1956, and it is now legend that the book was rejected by every publishing house to which it was submitted during Lampedusa’s lifetime. It was considered too traditional and too celebratory of aristocracy to be accepted by the Marxist elite that then held sway over the Italian literary establishment. Lampedusa died at the age of sixty in 1957, and the next year the book was finally accepted for publication. It was an immediate success and has since come to be regarded as a classic of European literature. A
The film version directed by Luchino Visconti and starring Burt Lancaster was made in 1963.

The plot of *The Leopard* is a simple one. The central character, Don Fabrizio Corbera, is a Sicilian prince, a vast landowner, and an accomplished astronomer. The focus of the novel is on the marriage of the prince’s favorite nephew, Tancredi, to the daughter of a member of the nouveau riche merchant class that has come to power along with the new regime. The principal tension exists between the nobles represented by the house of Corbera, whose emblem is the leopard, and the up-and-coming merchants, represented by Don Calogero Sedàra, the father of the beautiful Angelica. Don Fabrizio reluctantly realizes that the only way to ensure the success of his impoverished nephew is to give his blessing to the union; the marriage will provide Tancredi with the money he will need to succeed in the new order, and it will bestow a title of nobility on Angelica, whose parents are only a generation removed from their peasant origins. It is Tancredi who speaks the most famous line in the book: “If we want things to stay as they are,” he tells his uncle, “things will have to change” (all quotations are from the translation by Archibald Colquhoun).

*The Leopard* is a fictionalized biography of Lampedusa’s great-grandfather, but it also contains strong elements of autobiography. In a letter from 1957, Lampedusa denied that the book was a “historical novel,” stating that “Don Fabrizio expresses my ideas exactly.” Like Flaubert, who once said of his most famous creation, “Madame Bovary, c’est moi,” Lampedusa announced in another letter, “The protagonist [Don Fabrizio] is at bottom, me.” Like Don Fabrizio, Lampedusa was something of a brooding melancholic. He lived his life as a provincial aristocrat whose sole luxury was buying books. More than an author, he was a reader. His mornings were spent at a café, where he would sit for hours at a time reading before returning home by bus. In addition to Italian, he read and spoke English, French, German, and Russian. He especially loved English literature – Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* was his favorite – and his wife once said that he always carried a volume of Shakespeare with him so that “he could console himself with it if he should see something disagreeable” on his wanderings.
In addition to the similarity of his own personality to that of the prince, *The Leopard* contains a number of oblique autobiographical asides. The ancestral home where Lampedusa lived was destroyed by Allied bombing during World War II. Late in the book, describing the painted frescoes on the ceiling of one of the aristocratic homes in Palermo, he writes: “From the ceiling the gods, reclining on gilded couches, gazed down smiling and inexorable as a summer sky. They thought themselves eternal; but a bomb manufactured in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was to prove the contrary in 1943.” The prince’s relationship with Tancredi was based upon Lampedusa’s own relationship with his nephew Lanza, whom he adopted and who became his literary executor.

Lampedusa’s denial that *The Leopard* is a historical novel notwithstanding, history and context are vital to an understanding of the book. The action begins in 1860, the year which marks the invasion of Sicily by Garibaldi and the unification of the Kingdom of Naples — also known as the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies — with the Italian peninsula. The movement for unification had come from the state of Savoy, in the north of Italy. The force behind the Risorgimento, a nationalist movement that sought to bring about a kind of modern constitutional monarchy to the divided Italian states, was Camillo Cavour, who served as the prime minister to King Victor Emmanuel of Savoy.

The greatest stumbling block to the dream of a unified Italy was the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies in the South, whose capital was Naples. Sicily remained an outpost of the Bourbon dynasty and was the area with the strongest localist traditions: hence, it was the most resistant to the nationalizing efforts of Cavour. The Bourbons collapsed with the invasion of the island by Garibaldi and his thousand Redshirts, who stormed Palermo and drove out the king, Francis II. Later, Garibaldi sailed to Naples, where he was welcomed as a hero. Although there was bad blood between Garibaldi, a genuinely democratic leader, and the more conservative Cavour, Garibaldi willingly handed power over to Victor Emmanuel. A series of plebiscites around the country was called, and Sicily agreed to join the new kingdom of Italy led by Victor Emmanuel, who was proclaimed king of Italy in Turin. To be sure, not everyone was happy with these changes, and throughout *The Leopard*
we hear the voices of smoldering discontent by those who feel dispossessed by the new regime.

Let us turn now to the book.

“A Shape for Life from Within”

Like all great artists, Lampedusa painted in miniature. The revolutionary and political upheavals of the era are a backdrop to his principal characters. While Garibaldi’s invasion of Sicily may not exactly qualify as a “world-historical” event (it is not Napoleon’s invasion of Russia in War and Peace), it nevertheless provides more than enough material for the author to sketch the great theme of his novel, the decay of the Italian aristocracy. At the center of this story is Don Fabrizio Corbera, prince of Salina.

The first thing to note about Don Fabrizio is that he is a prince. To be sure he is not a Machiavellian prince full of virtù and energy. He is a traditional prince, a member of the nobility who holds his power on the basis of heredity and ancient family ties. Properly speaking, Fabrizio belongs to the class of “gentlemen” who in Machiavelli’s terms “live in idleness on their abundant revenue derived from their estates” (Discorsi, I.55). Fabrizio is a man of great wealth who has three castles: one in San Lorenzo outside Palermo, his town palace inside the city walls, and his vast country estate at Donnafugata. He is a feudal lord who rules over his large family and countless retainers and tenants with the kind of benevolent absolutism that can grow only from the possession of old money. He is a poor businessman, not because he does not have the head for business, but from “a kind of contemptuous indifference about matters he considered low.”

The second thing Lampedusa tells us, however, is that the prince is melancholic. Underneath his “Jovelike frown,” the prince lives in a state of “perpetual discontent,” observing “the ruin of his own class and his own inheritance without ever making, less still wanting to make, any move toward saving it.” Only his dog, Bending, the prince’s constant companion (and a key player in the novel), seems to bring him any joy.

The feature that most distinguishes the old aristocracy, and something that money cannot buy, is a certain kind of refinement and manners. The prince’s tact consists in his ability to put others
at their ease. “There is a deity who is the protector of princes,” we read later. “He is called Courtesy.” There is a delicacy of taste and judgment that distinguishes Don Fabrizio from the other characters in the novel. This is conveyed in a number of ways both small and large. Consider the scene at Donnafugata, in which the prince and his family have invited their future relatives, the barely presentable Sedàra family, for dinner:

The Prince was too experienced to offer Sicilian guests in a town of the interior, a dinner beginning with soup, and he infringed the rules of *haute cuisine* all the more readily as he disliked it himself. But rumors of the barbaric foreign usage of serving insipid liquid as a first course had reached the major citizens of Donnafugata too insistently for them not to quiver with a slight residue of alarm at the start of a solemn dinner like this. So when three lackeys in green, gold, and powder entered, each holding a great silver dish containing a towering mound of macaroni, only four of the twenty at table avoided showing their pleased response: the Prince and Princess from foreknowledge, Angelica from affectation, and Concetta from lack of appetite.

Or consider Don Calogero’s reflection on the prince after he has come to know him. Until then, we learn, Sedàra, a self-made millionaire, had been accustomed to looking on the aristocracy (somewhat in the manner of Plato’s Thrasymachus) as consisting “entirely of sheeplike creatures, existing merely in order to give their wool to the clipping sheers,” but association with the prince has led him to change his mind. What he finds most beguiling about the prince is “a tendency toward abstraction, a disposition to seek a shape for life from within himself and not in what he could wrest from others.” Gradually even Sedàra begins to realize just “how agreeable can be a well-bred man, who at heart is only someone who eliminates the unpleasant aspects of so much of the human condition and exercises a kind of profitable altruism.” We might call the prince a great-souled man.

It is the prince’s tact that allows him to express a generosity toward those below him socially. The people of Donnafugata hold a high degree of affection for their lord, who, we are told, often “forgot” to collect their meager rents. When Father Pirrone, the
family priest, pays a visit to his hometown of San Cono, he is eagerly asked what it is like to live among the nobles. In particular, what are they saying about the recent revolution? Are they for it or against it? Many of the prince’s retainers are strongly opposed to the republic’s new confiscatory tax policies and are looking for leadership from the nobles (unbeknown to them the prince has voted in favor of the new republic at the plebiscite). This is something the priest has clearly thought about but has a hard time explaining, even to himself. The nobles are not like you and me: “They live in a world of their own, of joys and troubles, of their own; they have a very strong collective memory so they’re put out by things which wouldn’t matter at all to you and me,” he explains to the local herbalist. Such men may be occasionally cruel, but never petty or small (“Rage is gentlemanly; complaints are not”).

But despite their inward-looking character — “a sort of obscure atavistic instinct” — the nobles confer benefits on others. They provide shelter for the families of the poor, even if their motives are not easily understood. “When they treat someone badly, as they do sometimes,” the Father admits, “it is not so much their personality sinning as their class affirming itself.”

Don Fabrizio, though, is not a typical representative of his class. He stands apart both physically because of his height and great size, and intellectually. He is, we learn, both the first and last member of an ancient family to have a genuine passion for mathematics and is regarded as an eccentric by his peers largely because of his intellectual and aesthetic tastes. His passion for mathematics and astronomy would have been seen as bordering on blasphemy had he not also mastered the gentlemanly arts of riding, hunting, and womanizing. But the prince, like Lampedusa himself, is a reader. In the evening at Donnafugata he reads to the family, even though the modern literature of Dickens, Eliot, George Sand, Flaubert, and Dumas was prohibited by Bourbon censorship.

Above all, the prince is an aesthete who admires beautiful things for the grace and adornment they lend to life. In his last moments of life, the prince goes over in his mind a sort of “bucket list,” not of the things that he has failed to do, but of what has given him the greatest pleasure in life. It is an extraordinary and revealing list: the few weeks before and after his wedding, the thirty minutes or so after the birth of his first son, the pleasure of his dogs and horses,
the award given him at the Sorbonne for his astronomical discoveries, “the exquisite sensation of one or two fine silk cravats” and “the smell of morocco leathers.”

But what most distinguishes the prince is his passion for abstract mathematical and astronomical investigation. In the opening pages of the book we learn that he had discovered two small planets, one that he named Salina for his family estate and the other Speedy for a hunting dog of which he was especially fond. The prince’s passion for astronomy displays a yearning for eternity, for what transcends the transitory and vulgar. It is not a form of escapism – although it has something of this about it – but an expression of an elevated spirit that seeks consolation in the realm of pure thought. The prince has something of the philosopher about him. He finds in the heavens not the Christian hope for personal immortality but the philosophical quest for autonomy and self-sufficiency. Like Spinoza, he views himself and the world *sub specie aeternitatis:* “The soul of the Prince reached toward them [the stars], 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.”

Contemplation of the heavens always means for the prince an escape from the paltriness of existence, from the worries of family and politics. “Let’s leave the Bendicòs [the prince’s favorite dog] down here running after rustic prey and the cooks’ knives chopping the flesh of innocent beasts,” the prince thinks to himself. Seen from the aspect of his observatory, everything down below seems to merge into a kind of “tranquil harmony”: “The comets would be appearing as usual, punctual to the minute, in sight of whoever was observing them. They were not messengers of catastrophe . . . on the contrary, their appearance at the time foreseen was a triumph of the human mind’s capacity to project itself and to participate in the sublime routine of the skies.”

After an all-night ball where Tancredi and his fiancée, Angelica, have been introduced to Palermo society, the prince has a disturbing conversation with one of the guests, who is bemoaning the
condition of the new Italian state. Rather than take a carriage home with his family, he prefers to walk by himself, claiming he needs some air. “The truth is,” Lampedusa writes, “he wanted to draw a little comfort from gazing at the stars. There were still one or two up there, at the zenith. As always, seeing them revived him; they were distant, they were omnipotent, and at the same time they were docile to his calculations; just the contrary to human beings, always too near, so weak and yet so quarrelsome.” He wonders when Venus, “wrapped in her turban of autumnal mist,” will “give him an appointment less ephemeral in her own region of perennial certitude.”

“He Follows the Times”

In the person of Don Fabrizio, Lampedusa gives us a depiction of the ancien régime at its best. But the abstract and somewhat distant character of the prince will not be a quality valued by the new regime, the regime represented by Don Calogero. If there is to be hope for the older classes, it will only be through an alignment with, rather than resistance to, the new political forces at work. Like Tocqueville, Lampedusa recognizes that the age of equality is here. Can the forces of equality be moderated by some of the habits and manners represented by the age of aristocracy? This possibility is suggested in the novel by the union of Tancredi and Angelica.

Tancredi is the son of the prince’s sister and her spendthrift husband, who have left the boy orphaned. The prince regards Tancredi as his “real son,” even more his own than his actual son, Paolo, who is a nonentity. It is Tancredi’s subtle wit and irony above all that appeal to the prince, along with his shrewd and calculating intelligence. “Unless we take a hand now, they’ll foist a republic on us,” Tancredi warns his uncle. “If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change” – and Fabrizio cannot help but slip a roll of gold coins into his newphew’s pocket as he goes off to join Garibaldi’s army.

Tancredi has inherited the prince’s sense of tact and delicacy, but he does not have the money to inherit the prince’s way of life. Tancredi is the true Machiavellian in the book: he supports Garibaldi’s revolution more out of opportunism than from idealism. Like Machiavelli’s prince, Tancredi knows an opportunity when
he sees one, even if it comes at the expense of disappointing Concetta, Don Fabrizio’s daughter:

The Prince was very fond of this daughter of his. But he was even fonder of his nephew. Conquered forever by the youth’s affectionate banter, he had begun during the last few months to admire his intelligence too: that quick adaptability, that worldly penetration, that innate artistic subtlety with which he could use the demagogic terms then in fashion while hinting to initiates that for him, the Prince of Falconeri, this was only a momentary pastime . . . Tancredi, he considered, had a great future; he would be the standard-bearer of the counterattack which the nobility, under new trappings, could launch against the new social state.

Of course, what Tancredi lacks is money, and this accounts for his ambition. Yet unlike Don Calogero, Tancredi is not just an opportunist. He is a man of subtlety and charm. “It is impossible to obtain the distinction, the delicacy, the fascination of a boy like him without his ancestors having romped through a half-dozen fortunes,” the prince explains to Tancredi’s future father-in-law. Don Calogero is forced to agree. In Tancredi, “he had found himself dealing unexpectedly with a young noble as cynical as himself,” one who is able to strike “a sharp bargain between his own smiles and titles and the attractions and fortunes of others.” Tancredi knows how to tack with the times: each man is able to read into him some of his own admired characteristics.

Tancredi’s only hope for fulfilling his ambitions is to establish a marriage with the beautiful and rich Angelica, even if this means marrying beneath him. But to do this he will need not only his uncle’s support but his complicity. So while Tancredi is away in Garibaldi’s army, he writes to his uncle telling him of his love for Angelica and asking him to request her hand from her father. Tancredi knows that this will be repulsive to his uncle so he offers, by way of a sweetener,

long considerations of the expediency, nay the necessity, of the unions between families such as the Falconeris and the Sedàras (once he even dared write “The House of Sedàra”) being encouraged in order to bring new blood into old fami-
ilies, and also to level our classes, aims of the current political movement in Italy. This was the only part of the letter that Don Fabrizio read with any pleasure . . . because the style, with its hints of subdued irony, magically evoked his nephew’s image: the jesting nasal tone, the sparkling malice of his blue eyes, the mockingly polite smile.

Later, when confiding the letter to his wife, Maria Stella, who is violently opposed to the marriage, the prince says in Tancredi’s defense: “He’s not a traitor; he follows the times, that’s all,” and Stella is consoled at having a husband “so vital and so proud.”

Even though Fabrizio approves of Tancredi’s plan, the idea of welcoming the Sedàras into his family does not go down well: Fabrizio compares it to “swallowing a toad.” One of the prince’s underlings, the organist Don Ciccio, is appalled by the idea of a union between the Salinas and the Sedàras. The prince does not try to convince him of the propriety of the wedding, but when Sedàra actually shows up at the house, Lampedusa describes the scene as a surrender:

As he crossed the two rooms preceding the study he tried to imagine himself as an imposing Leopard with smooth, scented skin preparing to tear a timid jackal to pieces; but by one of those involuntary associations of ideas which are the scourge of natures like his, he found flicking into his memory one of those French historical pictures in which Austrian marshals and generals, covered with plumes and decorations, are filing in surrender past an ironical Napoleon; they are more elegant, undoubtedly, but it is the squat man in the gray topcoat who is the victor.

When we are first introduced to Angelica she is only seventeen years old and already regarded as a great beauty. We learn that she has been sent by her parents to finishing school in Florence where she has been completely transformed. “A real lady she’s become,” says one of Fabrizio’s retainers. She has almost lost her harsh Sicilian accent (except for the vowels) and addresses Fabrizio as “Prince” and not the old-fashioned “Excellency.” But if Angelica’s beauty is what first attracts Tancredi, she has also acquired her father’s shrewdness and ambition. Even the prince has to admit
that his own daughter, Concetta, who had her eyes on Tancredi, is no match for Angelica.

Angelica is a quick study and eager to learn. In the most romantic scene of the novel, she and Tancredi explore unchaperoned the vast palace rooms and apartments at Donnafugata, and nothing is lost on her. Here Tancredi explains what will be required by her new life: “You can be expansive and noisy only with me,” he tells her, “but with all others you must be the future Princess of Falconeri, superior to many, equal to all.” Angelica’s coming-out at the ball at Palazzo Ponteleone – something like Eliza Doolittle’s appearance at the embassy ball in Pygmalion – is a huge success. Her appearance is described as a “highly successful mixture of virginal modesty, aristocratic hauteur, and youthful grace.” From that night on her keen observations and judgments would win for her “the reputation of a polite but inflexible art expert” that would remain with her for the rest of her life.

In Angelica we find a character fully as Machiavellian as Tancredi in her desires and ambitions (“each of them full of self-interest, swollen with secret aims”). We learn that despite all their promise, their marriage was not to be a happy one (“Flames for a year, ashes for thirty” is predicted by the prince). It is hinted that Tancredi will become a successful ambassador and Angelica will be a ruthless political manipulator in the new Parliament and Senate.

“The New Man”

The bourgeois world of the new middle class is depicted in the character of Don Calogero Sedàra, head of the liberal party in Donnafugata. He is a self-made man who was able to acquire a large estate by buying it out of foreclosure. We further learn that he has made other profitable purchases and was something of a war profiteer, making a fortune on the sale of grain during the upheavals of the revolution. He has many tenants who rent land from him on harsh terms, and is on his way to becoming the largest landowner in the province. It is even predicted that once the papal lands go on sale Sedàra will pick them up at rock-bottom prices. A man of boundless energy, he also entertains political ambitions: the mayor of his town, he will become the district’s
representative to the new Parliament in Turin (the capital of the new Italian state until it was moved to Rome). In short, Sedàra is the man of the future, the man of today. What does he represent?

Sedàra is described as the “new man” and the representative of the “bourgeois revolution.” Lampedusa nowhere defines these terms exactly, but for him as for so many artists and intellectuals, they are terms of abuse. Sociologically speaking, to be bourgeois means to be a member of the middle class, but it came to acquire unsavory connotations. Bourgeois would come to mean unpoetic, unaesthetic, devious, and, of course, utterly materialistic. To be sure, the word’s most famous association is with Marx — “some German Jew whose name I can’t remember” is how the prince describes him to Chevalley — who in the Communist Manifesto characterized modern history as a titanic struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. But at this time Sedàra represents the triumphant class, as he first appears in the novel, climbing Don Fabrizio’s stairs in an ill-fitting tailcoat.

Yet not all the descriptions of Sedàra are negative. Despite Sedàra’s inappropriate clothes and bad shave, the prince develops an “odd admiration” for some of his qualities. He is described as a man of “rare intelligence,” energy, and boundless self-confidence: “Many problems that had seemed insoluble to the Prince were resolved in a trice by Don Calogero; free as he was from the shackles imposed on many other men by honesty, decency, and plain good manners, he moved through the jungle of life with the confidence of an elephant which advances in a straight line, root- ing up trees and trampling down lairs, without even noticing the scratches of thorns and the moans of the crushed.”

Sedàra subsequently offers advice to the prince on how he might more efficiently manage his great estate, advice that ultimately turns to the prince’s disadvantage. Lampedusa uses the occasion to make a point about the fundamental incompatibility of the two classes: “But the eventual result of such advice, cruelly efficient in conception and feeble in application by the easygoing Don Fabrizio, was that in years to come the Salina family were to acquire a reputation for treating dependents harshly, a reputation quite unjustified in reality but which helped to destroy its prestige at Donnafugata and Querceta, without in any way halting the collapse of the family fortunes.”
Sedàra is not evil, although three times he is described as a jackal, and when he and Angelica arrive at the ball at Panteleone he is described as "a rat escorting a flaming rose." Although his clothes again lack elegance, this time, at least, Tancredi promises the prince, Sedàra will come with a decent shave and polished shoes. "Angelica’s father lacks chic," is how Tancredi describes him. His only obvious faux pas is wearing a cross of the new order of Italy in his buttonhole, something that is bound to be offensive to his guests and that the observant Tancredi quickly pockets. As he and the prince stand next to each other at the ball, Sedàra’s "quick eyes" are said to be "moving over the room, insensible to its charm, intent on its monetary value." He is something like the man described by Oscar Wilde who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing: "Quite suddenly Don Fabrizio felt a loathing for him; it was the rise of this man and a hundred others like him, to their obscure intrigues and their tenacious greed and avarice, that was due the sense of death which was now, obviously, hanging darkly over these palaces." When last heard, Sedàra is discussing the possible rise in the price of cheese with one of the other guests.

"We Think We Are Gods"

What are the political teachings of The Leopard? A thoughtful aristocrat after the manner of Montesquieu and Tocqueville, Lampedusa is concerned with the transition from the aristocratic to the bourgeois world and what this means. The book might well have been subtitled "The Ancien Régime and the Revolution," after Tocqueville’s great work. The book presents (not always fairly to be sure) the great liberal hopes for the nationalizing and modernizing plans of the Risorgimento against the backdrop of Don Fabrizio’s somber and meditative reflections on the limits of progress and political reform. Lampedusa looks upon the creation of the modern state with a deep sense of classical sadness, not for what has been achieved but for what has been lost.

At the core of the prince’s view of politics is a profound sense of skepticism coupled with a mistrust of reform. The first sense we get of this is in a conversation between the prince and his accountant, Don Ferrara, "who hid the deluded mind of a 'liberal' behind
reassuring spectacles and immaculate cravats.” Don Ferrara greets the prince with baleful warnings about the immediate future (“so many of our fine lads are sure to get killed”) but still predicts that “glorious new days will dawn for this Sicily of ours.” Ferrara, like Sedàra, represents the new class of accountants, merchants, and businesspeople that will soon come to power. The prince refuses to engage in the conversation, but later thinks to himself, “These [changes] have been promised us on every single one of the thousand invasions we’ve had from Nicias onward, and they’ve never come. And why should they come, anyway?”

The reason for the prince’s skepticism is revealed later, during a conversation with his hunting partner, Don Ciccio. Don Ciccio and a few other loyalists to the old Bourbon monarchy have voted no in the plebiscite to ratify the new revolutionary government of Victor Emmanuel. Out of the 515 registered voters in Donnafugata, 512 ballots were cast, and when they were counted there were 512 yes votes. We find out that the no votes had been nullified by Sedàra, leaving those like Don Ciccio to bear the brunt of popular antagonism. The new Italian state has been ratified through an act of willful manipulation, foretelling a regime of corruption and bad faith.

In the course of their hunting expedition the two men stop for a lunch consisting of wine, roast chicken, cake, and some of the local grapes. It is when they doze off that the ants begin their attack, leading to one of Lampedusa’s most vivid and unforgettable metaphors for the new regime:

Nothing could stop the ants. Attracted by a few chewed grape-skins spat out by Don Ciccio, along they rushed in close order, morale high at the chance of annexing that bit of garbage soaked with saliva. Up they came full of confidence, disordered but resolute; groups of three or four would stop now and again for a chat, exalting, perhaps, the ancient glories and future prosperity of ant hill Number Two under cork tree Number Four on the top of Mount Morco; then once again they would take up their march with the others toward a buoyant future; the gleaming backs of those imperialists seemed to quiver with enthusiasm, while from their ranks no doubt rose the notes of an anthem.
The longest political discussion in the book takes place between the prince and Chevalley, a deputy from the North who has come to Sicily to offer the prince a seat in the new Senate. Chevalley is described as “congenially bureaucratic” and “much out of his element,” something like a northern carpetbagger who has come to Sicily with an idea of helping (or forcing) the Sicilians to modernize their ways. Chevalley’s prejudices have only been inflamed by the gruesome stories he is told by the locals about the banditry, kidnapping, and murders indigenous to the area. “This state of things won’t last,” he confidently tells himself; “our lively new administration will change it all.”

Chevalley’s offer to the prince begins with a revealing slip of the tongue. He refers to the recent “annexation” of Sicily and then corrects himself, calling it a “glorious union” with the mainland. He then proceeds in grandiloquent language to offer the prince a seat in the Senate, no doubt to add a measure of legitimacy to the new state by gaining the participation of one of the oldest ruling families. When the prince asks him to explain the function of this Senate – is it like the Roman Senate? – Chevalley explains that it represents “the flower of Italy’s politicians” and is in charge of approving and disapproving laws for the progress of the state. The prince then embarks on his longest political speech, which takes nearly ten pages of text.

The speech outlines Don Fabrizio’s arguments against the possibility of liberal reform. The first argument derives from the temperament or national character of the Sicilians. The spirit of reform, Fabrizio tells Chevalley, goes against the indigenous character of the people. To govern a people one must know their character, and this is what the new administration fails to grasp. “In Sicily,” he says, “it doesn’t matter whether things are done well or done badly; the sin which we Sicilians never forgive is simply that of ‘doing’ at all.” The Sicilians have been exposed to twenty-five hundred years of conquest and colonization, and consequently have little taste or capacity for joining the modern world. Rather than a new society, Sicily is “a centenarian being dragged in a Bath chair around the Great Exhibition in London.”

Don Fabrizio then goes on to connect this decrepitude to political somnolence. That is Sicily’s tragedy. The resistance to moderniza-
tion is a kind of primordial deathwish, a longing for immobility and eternity: “All Sicilian expression, even the most violent, is really wish-fulfillment; our sensuality is a hankering for oblivion, our shooting and knifing a hankering for death; our laziness, our spiced and drugged sherbets, a hankering for voluptuous immobility, that is, for death again; our meditative air is that of a void wanting to scrutinize the enigmas of nirvana.” (The prince’s use of the Freudian term wish-fulfillment is one of the few anachronisms in the book. Lampedusa’s wife, Licy, was a psychoanalyst.)

Not only does the power of history and collective psychology resist the spirit of reform, so, too, does the power of nature. The very geography of the island prevents change. The heat, barren landscape, and “cruelty of climate” is described as “irredeemable”; it has created a sluggishness coupled with “a terrifying insularity of mind.”

Finally, the prince argues that his own family traditions and loyalties prevent him from participation in the new order. The prince, we learn, is not indifferent to the failings of his class and the old monarchy. Early in the novel he recalls a meeting with the present king, for whom he has little respect. “Swung between the old world and the new,” he says, “I find myself ill at ease in both.” Despite their failings, it is only with members of his own class, those with whom he shares certain collective memories, that he can feel at ease. The prince is a realist who cannot (or will not) engage in the type of willful self-deception necessary for political rule.

In a final effort to convince him, Chevalley asks the prince to put his objections aside. Chevalley shares the characteristically liberal belief that obstacles like geography and history can be overcome. If “honest men” withhold their support for the new order, there will be no one to protect it from the Sedàras of the world. The prince takes this argument seriously, but in the end it cannot dispel his reservations. He saves his most revealing answer for last. In an almost Nietzschean moment of self-assertion, the prince says that he cannot accept a seat in the Senate because as a Sicilian “we think we are gods.”

Fabrizio identifies himself with the old ruling class, however imperfect it may be. In any case is there any evidence that a new ruling class will be an improvement? What will be the difference,
he asks himself at one point: “Wouldn’t things be just the same? Just Torinese instead of Neopolitan dialect; that’s all.” The prince’s resistance to change is not the result of world-weariness, but of a profound meditation on history. One ruling class will replace another in a Polybian cycle of descending order of rank. “We were the Leopards, the Lions,” he thinks to himself, “those who’ll take our place will be little jackals, hyenas; and the whole lot of us, Leopards, jackals, and sheep, we’ll all go on thinking ourselves the salt of the earth.”

“Mummified Memories”

*The Leopard* concludes in the year 1910, half a century after the main action takes place. The prince has been dead for many years, and the Salina sisters, now in their seventies, live as spinsters in the faded glory of the family estate. Palermo is preparing to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Garibaldi’s invasion, and Angelica is one of the managers of the event. Tancredi, too, has passed away. She is in charge of finding housing for the veterans of the revolution and has tickets for her and Concetta to sit together in the royal box at the parade. “Don’t you think it’s a good idea,” she asks, “a Salina rendering homage to Garibaldi! A fusion of old and new Sicily!” – although Concetta seems less than thrilled at the prospect. Angelica is in the company of Senator Tassoni, a former comrade of Tancredi’s who has since made a fortune in the new regime as a thread manufacturer. What is Lampedusa’s judgment on the new Italy, on the bourgeois democratic age?

Like Tocqueville, and Nietzsche, Lampedusa regards the new society as flat, ugly, and lacking in nobility or tradition. The world has become small. A manufacturer of thread that sews buttons throughout Italy has become a hero of the new order. The new ruling class represented by Angelica and Tassoni (who had a brief affair years earlier) has shed its humble origins. After forty years of marriage to Tancredi, Angelica has lost any trace of her local accent and manners, keeps up with the latest novels, and is regarded as an authority on French architecture. She has managed to shed her peasant origins as entirely as the bourgeois republic she represents. In one of Lampedusa’s most memorable images he remarks that it is the same process of conversion that “in the
course of three generations transforms innocent peasants into defenseless gentry.”

Most of all what Lampedusa deplores is the loss of tradition. When Father Pirrone earlier tried to explain the way of the nobles he referred to the fact they have “a very strong collective memory.” It is memory that holds a family and a tradition together and ensures their continuity over time. A loss of memory can lead only to a break with tradition. This thought appeared again to Don Fabrizio as he lay dying in a Palermo hotel room, considering the fate of his grandchildren:

For the significance of a noble family lies entirely in its traditions, that is, in its vital memories; and he was the last to have any unusual memories, anything different from those of other families. Fabrizietto would only have banal ones like his schoolfellows, of snacks, of spiteful little jokes against teachers, horses bought with an eye more to price than to quality; and the meaning of his name would change more and more to empty pomp . . . He would go hunting for a rich marriage when that would have become a commonplace routine and no longer a bold predatory adventure like Tancredi’s.

The final chapter of the book, titled “Relics,” well describes the surviving Salina sisters. Only Concetta, alone and embittered, whose father belatedly came to recognize her as the true heir of the Salina line, has a link to a past that has now been lost. As Tocqueville recognized, only an aristocratic society preserves memories; democracies tend to dissolve them. To the extent that tradition exists, it remains “an inferno of mummified memories” locked away in the four massive wooden crates that contain Concetta’s trousseau, collected half a century earlier, or in the remains of Bendicò, now “a heap of mangy fur” embalmed forty-five years ago. It is these memories that will finally be forgotten when she orders Bendicò’s remains to be discarded where “all found peace in a heap of livid dust.”