Nobility and Literature. Questions on Tomasi di Lampedusa*

Eduardo Saccone

I am afraid that the topic I have chosen for this paper may seem obvious, and hence somewhat unpromising with regard to exegetical and interpretive novelty. Obvious and rather banal. On the other hand, let me add at once, I hope not too obvious. And for this reason I have cautioned myself with the general nature of my title, its extension, that includes not only The Leopard but all the other texts of Tomasi di Lampedusa, particularly Lighea, as this story seems to me essential for the understanding of the novel. The risk of saying things that are obvious and that should go without saying, of repeating observations and judgements already formulated on the work of the Sicilian writer, is much greater today on account of a vast bibliography—if not always excellent, certainly difficult to master—that has accumulated in many languages, to which have been added in recent years notable critical and biographical contributions. Among these contributions let me mention at least the studies of Nunzio Zago published between 1983 and 1987, the impressive biography by Andrea Vitello and

* This paper was read at the colloquium “Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa. The impact of Il Gattopardo thirty years after the English edition.” The colloquium, held on March 30-31, 1990 in New York, was sponsored by the Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, the Graduate Center of City University of New York, and The Program in Italian Studies of New York University.

that of David Gilmour published in London in 1988 and now also in Italy.¹

Observations, judgements, and interpretations of a literary output that is certainly not extensive have multiplied and intertwined—partly on account of the notorious “case” with its journalistic complications and simplifications—to form an ever more intricate and confusing web from which it is difficult to extricate oneself and easier to believe one has been successful. However, let me begin by attempting to rid myself of a problem that has been too much in evidence in the criticism of our author: namely the division—the separation—of the two libraries of the prince of Lampedusa, to be found, according to the testimony of Francesco Orlando,² on two different storeys in the house on Via Butera: the historical library on the second floor, the literary library on the first floor. This separation seems to me symbolic of a parallel distinction that must be firmly maintained in the work of Tomasi. This belief is sustained to-day by an explicit declaration of the writer, brought to light by the publication of letters written between 1956 and 1957 to his friend Guido Lajolo.³ These letters are all interesting, but particularly illuminating in their vehement denial (see the letter of the 2nd of January 1957) of The Leopard as an historical novel. “I would not like you to believe that it is an historical novel! [. . .] The setting is in 1860; the protagonist, Don Fabrizio, expresses my ideas exactly, and Tancredi, his nephew, is a portrait of Giò as far as looks and manner are concerned; as regards morality, Giò fortunately is much better than he is.” In the letter of the 7th of June 1956 we read: “Because the protagonist is, at bottom, me” (p. 230). And in that of March 31 1956: “Friends who have read it say that the prince of Salina bears a damnable resemblance to me.”

To insist that only the setting is the year 1860 is equivalent, in my opinion, to definitely subordinating history to the novel. In other words, without denying a relatively persuasive historical re-

² F. Orlando, Ricordo di Lampedusa (Milano: All’ingegna del pesce d’oro, 1963), p. 16.
construction, the representation of a particular historical period in a manner true to life, the invitation is to look for the subject of the writing, that which is of true importance, elsewhere. Undoubtedly it has to do with a present and not with a past: the present, evidently, of the person writing. And we have arrived at a first reiteration of the obvious, as I feared and anticipated, and for that I apologize.

“The protagonist is, at bottom, me.” Few readers, I believe, would have doubted this; yet this affirmation must naturally be qualified: and not only on account of the—again obvious—distinction between character and narrator, a distinction of which such an attentive and subtle researcher into narrative techniques was well aware. Even if “Don Fabrizio wholly gives voice to my ideas” (p. 230), it does not follow that these same ideas, the ideology of the author are immune to the deconstruction to which they are subjected by the fictional elaboration, thereby allowing the truth of the novel to emerge.

In the letter of January 7 1957 Tomasi affirms still more, within the scope of further clarification and distinction: from a text that, in the critical fortunes and misfortunes of the novel, will not fail to give rise to further confusion, namely I Viceré by Federico De Roberto. The quotation is as follows: “In the case of the Viceré the point of view is totally different: The Leopard is the aristocracy as seen from within, without complacency but also without the libellous intentions of De Roberto” (p. 230). Aristocracy, nobility as seen from within: this, according to the author, is the true subject of the novel. And it is likewise the thesis I would like to propose. The Leopard or “Of Nobility.” But one must clarify.

The writer, in that same letter of June 7 1956 spoke of “the progressive decaying of the aristocracy” ostensibly portrayed by the original five “stories” of the book: in a manner however “only hinted at and symbolized.” “Nothing explicit”: “It could seem as though nothing were happening. Instead many things are occurring, all unpleasant.” To this may be added an impression, worthy of comment, of an uncle of the author, the ambassador Pietro Tomasi Della Torretta who declared to Luigi Barzini: “My nephew

---

4 Already in the letter of March 31 1956 there is a hint that should be interpreted accordingly: “Tutti ne escono male: il Principe e il suo intraprendente nipote, i borbonici e i liberali.” This means that nothing and nobody escapes criticism in the text, the criticism of the text.

5 A. Vitello, p. 230.
described the acceptance of the new life in Italy without rancor, without fuss, without nostalgic regrets, like a . . . ’ He stopped, embarrassed. Then he said what he was going to say, but first he apologized thus: ‘I want to use an unsuitable word, an improper word . . . ’ He said: ‘My nephew described these things like . . . a gentleman.’

The “decaying of the aristocracy,” “nothing explicit,” “like . . . a gentleman.” These three points are closely interrelated as I will try to show, in more ways than one. Let us begin with the first, the “gradual decaying of the aristocracy,” seen by many as the evidence itself, the obvious theme of the book. An intelligent critic, author of the most extensive study of the writer’s work, Giuseppe Paolo Samonà, specified opportunely thus: “Don Fabrizio heard the preceding rumbles, but it was Lampedusa who lived in the time of the full social avalanche.” Hence a first sfasatura, a certain disjunction and diffraction, that is both origin and effect of the ambiguity pervading Tomasi’s text. A kind of double vision, corresponding nicely to the technique of the “‘two columns’ (the one explicit, the other implied) described [by Tomasi] in his Lezioni su Stendhal”: a technique that also well describes the situation of The Leopard. To put it another way, the ‘historical’ representation is doubled—and complicated—by allusion to that of the present: and not only in the sense in which Gadda, in reference to I promessi sposi said of Manzoni that he wrote “of daughter-in-law (Spain) so that he might be understood to mean mother-in-law (Austria).”

The distinction between character and narrator, or better the difference, the split-levelling between the two—and not only in the temporal sense—is certainly the necessary prolegomenon to any interpretation of the text that aspires to a minimum of correctness. The renunciation itself of the classical mode of continuous narration of the 19th century novel in favour of a narration by “leaps and bounds” (as already noted in 1959 by one of the first reviewers of the novel, Luigi Blasucci) revealed an anti-organicist

---

decision, more precisely one in favour of both allegory and irony. A decision which, without precluding for itself the privilege of portraying mimetically the passing of time in the single sections or episodes, still recovered a level of reflection—essayistic, as it was also, perhaps inadequately, defined\(^\text{11}\)—thanks to the temporal dis-articulation (1860, 1861, 1862, 1883, 1910) witnessed in the succession of these same sections. A further diffraction, evident manifestation of the ironical consciousness presiding over the assembling of the work.

It is this ironic consciousness to the power of two—to be distinguished from the other, no less ironic but certainly more intermittent, namely that of Don Fabrizio Salina—that prevents us first and foremost from reading *The Leopard* as the narrative of the “decadence of an illustrious family”\(^\text{12}\) and, by extension, of one class that is being supplanted by another. Or also, to quote another critic, as the account of the protagonist’s gradual awareness of “the inevitable historical superseding of his own class, with the resultant decline of certain traditional values of the aristocracy, caused by the insurgence of a new middle class that has risen out of the struggles of the Risorgimento, embodied in the novel by the unscrupulous peasant-become-millionaire, don Calogero Sedara”\(^\text{13}\)

But in a more radical sense, let me add at once, even though it may appear less evident, this ironic consciousness prevents us from accepting even a reading that is more subtle and attractive, and in many ways correct, such as the one put forward by Nunzio Zago. According to Zago “the events of the Risorgimento, as they are perceived from the Sicilian perspective,” become “the symbol of a fracture, of an epoch-making turn.” And “the decadence of an illustrious family recorded in its most salient stages and sealed in the final chapter by the episode of the relics and the discarding through the window of poor stuffed Bendicò [. . .], acquires the semblance of an existential condition plunging into the abyss, a condition guaranteed by the ‘world of yesterday’ that can now, in spite of its weighty historical limits, be lamented as the world of security.”\(^\text{14}\)

Now, the structure of *The Leopard* upon close examination is not


\(^{12}\) N. Zago, *Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa*, p. 25.


\(^{14}\) Zago, *Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa*, pp. 24-25.
that of progression or of decadence, of the progression of a deca-
dence, but rather it is the structure of the alternating opposition
(or oxymoronic juxtaposition) of the moods of a voyager with no
compass, who in the end surrenders. He recognizes that he is lost,
in a country believed at first to be foreign, not his own, coming
finally and ineluctably to realize that indeed it is his native land. As
also the analysis of Simonetta Salvestroni makes clear, “the whole
novel is constructed in such a way as to result in a continuous alter-
nating of conflicting sentiments, desires, and conceptions of one
and the same reality, a succession of episodes in the tormented
mind of the protagonist that never reach a conclusion.”

It is undeniable however that by the end of the book one has the im-
pression of a process that has come to a conclusion, a drama that has
been acted out: with no illusions left, without hope, the disinganno
seems absolute.

Obviously “crisis” has been spoken of, unfortunately not always
with great lucidity or persuasiveness; and critics speak of historical
and social conditions, the recourse to which is necessary for an
understanding of the sense of this crisis. And rightly so: however
one must naturally know first—or also—what one means when
one makes use of such terms. It is not at all sure that this is an easy
task, or that these words are readily and unequivocally compre-
hended. In other words, when we say “history,” to which history
are we referring? And to which social context or periodization? On
the other hand it seems equally opportune, quite apart from any
question of value, not to separate but rather assimilate our writer
to the family of Montaigne and Shakespeare as regards “Weltans-
chauung,” according to the manner in which he himself describes
them in his Invito alle lettere francesi del Cinquecento. There seems to
be no doubt that Tomasi shares with them “the same lack of religi-
osity; [. . .] the same universal compassion lightly tinged with de-
spise, the same eagerness to dismantle the mechanism of the
human psyche, the same serene scepticism . . .” Like them, the au-
thor of The Leopard too is unsuccessful in extracting from the
“swarming anthill of humanity,” upon which he throws his “pene-
trating glance,” “any precise concept [. . .] other than an obligatory
pity.” And like them—even if more rarely—he too allows himself
at times to be distracted from this wry contemplation to smile “mo-

15 See her “Analisi del Gattopardo,” Filologia e letteratura, 17, 1971, p. 102.
mentarily at the spectacle of the contortions and somersaults of these poor belaboured monkeys."16

Irony and pity, then. Two modes and two moods to a certain extent opposed to each other, disjunctive, yet also paradoxically complementary: just as the two rhetorical modes at work in the text, that of irony and that of allegory, are paradoxically disjunctive yet complementary. One must of course distinguish between that irony practised as a rule by the protagonist of the novel—his taste for and cult of the implicit, his “great manners” (p. 116)17, the exercise of that sprezzatura theorized by Baldesar Castiglione, whose despise, often forgotten or neglected, the prince of Salina seems to recuperate—and the irony of the narrator for whom it is—to use and join words of Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man—“a figure of disjunction, duplication and doubling,” “a disjunction by which ‘a purely linguistic subject replaces the original self.’ ”18 Not only, may I say proleptically: but, unlike that which occurs in the autobiographical piece I luoghi della mia prima infanzia, in the novel irony, ironic art consists—to quote again Derrida—of “a power [that] is preoccupied by a past which has never been present and will never allow itself to be reanimated in the interiority of consciousness.”19 In spite of and because of this, Tomasi remains, precisely like the Stendhal described in his Lezioni, “a writer whom delusion has pushed towards ironical comprehension.”20 This does not occur without the intervention and treatment of time: hence the allegory. But more of this later.

Let us return for the moment to the “ironical comprehension” of the character. In order to complete its description, however schematic, may I be permitted to quote from a fine essay by Peter Szondi, the topic of which is Friedrich Schlegel and romantic irony:

17 G. Tomasi di Lampedusa, Il Gattopardo (Milano: Feltrinelli, Universale economica, 1963), p. 116. Quotations from the Italian text will be from this edition; the English translation is that by Archibald Colquhoun in The Leopard with a Memory and two Stories (London: Collins Harvill, 1986).
19 Id., p. 65.
The subject of romantic irony is the isolated, alienated man who has become the object of his own reflection and whose consciousness has deprived him of his ability to act. He nostalgically aspires towards unity and infinity; the world appears to him divided and finite. What he calls irony is his attempt to bear up under his critical predicament, to change his situation by achieving distance toward it.\(^\text{21}\)

It is an almost perfect description of the prince of Salina’s condition, with the exception of that “attempt to . . . change” of which there is no sign in the book. Instead, the isolation of the protagonist with respect even to his own class is repeatedly emphasized in the text. Suffice it to recall here what is said on that subject in chapter 6, during the ball at Palazzo Ponteleone.

Among these men Don Fabrizio was considered an “eccentric”; his interest in mathematics was taken almost as sinful perversion, and had he not been actually Prince of Salina, [ . . . ] his parallaxes and telescopes might have exposed him to the risk of outlawry. Even so they did not say much to him, for his cold blue eyes, glimpsed under the heavy lids, put would-be talkers off, and he often found himself isolated, not, as he thought, from respect but from fear. (p. 172)

On the other hand, if one wished for further confirmation—more than that which transpires from the novel—of Tomasi’s dismissive judgment of the decayed class of Sicilian nobility, of its “tragic and comic jerking” (p. 294), expressions of an “unease” that “flowered only in the guise of jests and funny stories, as might be expected of a class with a low consumption of general ideas” (pp. 294-95), between gossip at the Club and melodrama at the Politeama: for this further confirmation a re-reading of The Blind Kittens (Il mattino di un mezzadro) would suffice. The Heideggerian analysis of Gerede and Neugier could be applied to such a reading with stunning aptness. So also the “terrifying insularity of mind” (p. 124), attributed by the protagonist to the Sicilians as a whole in the famous and much misunderstood discussion with Chevalley, is first and foremost if not exclusively to be attributed to the prince: reflective, disillusioned, “without illusions”—as is said also there (p. 145), “who lacks the faculty of self-deception, essential requisite for anyone wanting to guide others” (ibid.), more simply, in order to

\(^{21}\) P. Szondi, “Friedrich Schlegel und die Romantische Ironie” in Satz und Gegen

believe and proceed to action, any action. Hence “Don Fabrizio's bitterness and discomfort” (ibid.), that do not escape Chevalley the gentleman, as also “the proud truths” (p. 146) that he has spoken, quite apart from the “ideological inferno evoked in the little study,” and another thing altogether, not to be taken literally, to be interpreted precisely on account of being ideological.

This state of affairs, for the declaration of which the prince has recourse, not by chance, to the language of myth or allegory (think of the gods to whom the Italian volunteers would come “to teach good manners,” p. 126; “the little jackals, the hyenas who will take the place of the Leopards, of the Lions,” p. 148; Sicily emblematized as “a centenarian being dragged in a bath chair round the Great Exhibition in London, understanding nothing and caring about nothing, whether it's steel factories of Sheffield or the cotton spinners of Manchester and thinking of nothing but drowsing off again on beslobbered pillows with a pot under the bed,” p. 142); this state of affairs is clearly not the result of the present historical change. Certainly the Garibaldis, the Sedaras, the Ibbas are not the cause of the crisis from which the prince is suffering: the most one can say is that recent events have spurred it on. Without doubt, the prince's reflection is based—the whole of The Leopard is a witness to that—on his experience of the “factitiousness of human existence as a succession of isolated moments lived by a divided self.”22 This experience of temporality, particularly as seen from the point of view of a self engaged in the world, is clearly a negative one.

In a text of his youth, an essay on the Caesar of Friedrich Gundolf of 1927, Tomasi was already speaking of his age as one “in which the consciousness of the 'becoming' of everything has assumed an unprecedented acuteness, whereby the very rapidity of evolution confers on life a sense of uneasy precariousness.”23 This is determined and specified in the novel—generalized too—in what together with Montale one could call the “permanent oxymoron” that is history: fragments of a lost or non-existent totality, irremediably disjointed or juxtaposed, like the elegant pomp of the ball at Palazzo Ponteleone and the “disordered little room near

the band alcove [. . .] where a row of twenty vast pots is disposed” (p. 182); the heaps of rubbish in the streets and the stumps and the blood “from [the] bulls killed shortly before at the slaughterhouse already quartered and exhibiting their intimate mechanism with the shamelessness of death” (ibid.), and the faithful star “Venus, wrapped in her turban of Autumn mist” (ibid.). Again in the early essay was cited the “need for stable images” for “the soul [that] suffers from never being able to rest in the contemplation of a completed image,” the desire “to be able to contemplate a past life that is rounded off and closed; a figure formed not out of yielding clay but perennial bronze, which one can circle and—be it monster or divinity—weigh and evaluate” (p. 13). In its turn the novel voices on the one hand the aspiration—the desire, that denounces an absence rather than announcing a temptation—toward order, meaning, denied permanence: in short the privileges of divinity. On the other hand it sets forth the only strategy possible for the protagonist to devise in order “to bear up—as Szondi said—under his critical predicament.”

The “perpetual discontent” of the prince (who “under his Jove-like frown [was] watching the ruin of his own class and his own inheritance without ever making, still less wanting to make, any move toward saving it” [p. 27], incapable as he is of overcoming and justifying “on grounds of general necessity” [(p. 29) an event characterized by pain and disorder, irrationality and violence] can only from time to time find consolation in exercises—often wholly in bad faith—such as that for the benefit of the family gathered around the table at the beginning of The Leopard. There, and for that time, the exercise “managed to transform war into a neat little diagram of fire-trajectories from the very squalid chaos [‘concreto e sudicio’] that it really was” (p. 51). At other times the Prince seeks comfort or reanimation from the observation of his beloved stars: “They were distant, they were omnipotent, and at the same time they were docile to his calculations” (p. 182). And of Venus: “When would she decide to give him an appointment less ephemeral, far from stumps and blood, in her own region of perennial certitude?” (p. 183).

But already with these last two quotations we are put on the right road leading to an understanding of that into which nobility has been transformed, what it has been reduced to for Tomasi di Lampedusa’s protagonist: namely an exile, or a flight, or, to use the revealing language of the character, “this life of the spirit in its
most sublimated moments, those moments that are most like death” (p. 50). These are words that would merit lengthy analysis. A brief pause will suffice here to look at that which in the 1957 manuscript has been amended to the equally significant “abstract” (“this life of the spirit in its most abstract moments”24), probably in order to avoid the repetition of the adjective that had appeared barely eight lines above in an equally relevant passage: “Their appearance at the time foreseen—he is talking of the comets—was a triumph of the human mind’s capacity to project itself and to participate in the sublime routine of the skies” (p. 50). “La sublime normalità dei cieli”: that is the divine superiority and law from which, and from whose comprehension, contemplation and harmony are barred not only the Bendicòs of this world—“down here running after rustic prey” (ibid.)—and “the cook’s knives chopping the flesh of innocent beasts” (ibid.), but also and even more so, all those irritating others: those who cause “worries,” fasti, including the despised “relatives and friends, all of whom seemed to him mere driftwood in the languid meandering of Sicilian pragmatism” (p. 27).

On the one hand pragmatism, on the other contemplation: superiority, haughty and sublime distance: “From up in this observatory the bluster of the one and the blood of the other merge into tranquil harmony. The real problem is how to go on living this life of the spirit in its most sublimated moments, those moments that are most like death” (p. 50). There is without doubt a close relationship, as has been noted, between nobility and spirit, and sublimation and disdain, despise, sprezzatura. If one wished to follow the outline of this woof or rather the plot of this genealogy, one would have to analyse at least three passages. In the first place the passage in chapter 1 describing “the change in many centuries,” “the wealth of centuries [. . .] transmuted into ornament, luxury, pleasure” (pp. 42-43): “Wealth, like old wine, had let the dregs of greed, even of care and prudence, fall to the bottom of the barrel, preserving only verve and colour. And thus eventually it cancelled itself out; this wealth which had achieved its own object was now composed only of essential oils—and like essential oils soon evaporated” (p. 43). This comes close—even without coinciding—to the technical meaning of the word sublimation, the passing from the solid to the gaseous state without a liquid stage in between.

The genealogy of Tancredi too has to do with an analogous process: “Maybe it is impossible—Don Fabrizio tells Sedara—to obtain the distinction, the delicacy, the fascination of a boy like him without his ancestors having romped through [dilapidato] half a dozen fortunes” (p. 109). Here too a kind of purification, as Galileo would have said, through the medium of sublimation. The third passage—complicating and enriching these issues, or more precisely, these words and these notions, and in particular tying together disdain, despise, sprezzatura, nobility and sublimation—is the one in chapter six where the ballroom of Palazzo Ponteleone is described.

The ballroom was all golden; smoothed on cornices, stippled on doorframes, damascened pale, almost silvery, over darker gold on door panels and on the shutters which covered and annulled the windows, conferring on the room the look of some superb jewel case shut off from an unworthy world. It was not the flashy gilding which decorators slap on nowadays, but a faded gold, pale as the hair of certain nordic children, determinedly hiding its value under a muted use of precious material intended to let beauty be seen and cost forgotten. [...] That solar hue, that variegation of gleam and shade, made Don Fabrizio’s heart ache as he stood black and stiff in a doorway: this eminently patrician room reminded him of country things; the chromatic scale was the same as that of the vast wheat fields around Donnafugata, rapt, begging for pity from the tyrannous sun; in this room, too, as on his estates in mid-August, the harvest had been gathered long ago and stacked elsewhere, leaving, as here now, a sole reminder in the colour of burnt up useless stubble.

( pp. 172-73 )

Quite apart from much else that is worthy of comment, for our purposes let it suffice here to highlight the disdainful exclusion of the jewel case “from the unworthy world”; the sprezzatura that informs the grace of the gilding that does not flaunt itself, avoids all affectation, on the contrary concealing its price; finally the sublimation, the memory alone of the wheatfields entrusted to the solar hue of the room. Another fundamental element that is at work in all this—and particularly in the latter quotation—is that these transformations imply a dimension that is obviously temporal and therefore, as is said there, mournful: “The notes of the waltz in the warm air seemed to him but a stylisation of the incessant winds harping their own sorrows [‘che arpeggiano il proprio lutto’] on
those parched surfaces, to-day, yesterday, to-morrow, for ever and for ever” (p. 173). On our page this culminates in the drastic intervention of the narrator: “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, Penn., was to prove the contrary in 1943” (ibid.).

The extremely self-conscious prince certainly has no need of reminders of his mortality; sufficient for him was, as we read in the seventh chapter, “the slightest effort of attention [...] to notice [...] the rustling of the grains of sand as they slid lightly away, the instants of time escaping from his mind and leaving him for ever” (p. 184). More: the awareness of “this continual escape” is in some respects even linked to the proud theme of nobility and difference, of nobility as difference, and of nobility as sublimeness, as sublimation. Here from the same page is a first quotation: “On other occasions, more frequent, he had felt a kind of pride at being the only one to notice this continual escape, while no one around him seemed to sense it in the same way; and this had made him feel a certain contempt for others, as an old soldier despises a conscript who deludes himself that sizzling bullets are just harmless flies” (p. 185). In the following quotation, instead, the protagonist corrects the previous simile of the “continuous whittling away of his personality [...]”, linked to a vague presage of the rebuilding elsewhere of a personality (thanks be to God) less conscious and yet broader, [with] those tiny grains of sand [that] were vanishing, but accumulating elsewhere to cement some more lasting pile”: “Though ‘pile,’ he had reflected, was not the exact word, for it suggested weight; nor was ‘grain of sand’ either for that matter. They were more like the tiny particles of watery vapour exhaled from a narrow pond, mounting then into the sky to great clouds, light and free” (p. 185).

Here too, then, sublimation: as lightness, lightening, alleggerimento; and flight, from the “nuisances”, the “irritations,” the “worries,” that “he would review [...] every day, manoeuvre them, set them in column or extend them in open order on the parade ground of his own conscience, hoping to find in their evolutions a sense of finality that could reassure him; and not succeeding” (p. 84). Flight, conscious escape into a dimension which he would wish to be a-historical, outside history, or beyond it: as in the hunting episode in immemorial Sicily, in a need for purification—again of sublimation—where, “reduced to [its] basic elements, its face washed clean of worries, life took on a tolerable aspect” (p. 90).
More lucidly, the calm and serenity ("As always the thought of his own death calmed him," lo rasserenava, p. 175), "the safety exit" (p. 176) from the weighty tangle "producing anxiety" (p. 79), are found in that which Tancredi at one point defines "the courting of death": "Nuncle, you’re looking wonderful this evening. Black suits you perfectly. But what are you looking at? Are you paying court to death?" (p. 175). What is this "courting of death" that the protagonist attributes also to "Giovanni, the second son, the most loved, the most difficult," "the only one who resembled him" (p. 189), who "one fine day [... ] had vanished from home," and ended up in London from where he had then written, apologizing and strangely stating "that he preferred a modest life as clerk in a coal depot to a pampered (read: ‘fettered’) existence in the ease of Palermo" (p. 34)?

On the last day of his life, on that "general balance sheet of his whole life" (p. 191) in which Don Fabrizio is "trying to sort out of the immense ash-heap of liabilities the golden flecks of happy moments," (p. 191), the character reflects that Giovanni too "had ‘courted death,’ in fact by leaving everything he had done his best to organise for himself as much of death as he could while actually going on living" (p. 189). A kind of asceticism therefore, of sublimation neither far from, nor dissimilar to the "many hours [the prince] had spent in the observatory, absorbed in abstract calculations and the pursuit of the unreachable" (p. 191). These hours are also defined as "some sort of anticipatory gift of the beatitudes of death" (p. 168), and previously, in the first chapter, with regard to just those hours spent in the observatory we read that "the real problem is how to go on living this life of the spirit in its most sublimated moments, those moments that are most like death" (p. 50).

Thus nobility would seem set to lose almost completely its specifically historical, class connotations, and to dissolve itself, or rather resolve itself into nobility of spirit. Adel des Geistes, as Thomas Mann would have said. And certainly the interesting reversal of roles we are a witness to in the short story Lighea could uphold such a reading. Here the "anticipatory gift of the beatitudes of death" is a prerogative not of the narrator, the young aristocrat Corbera di Salina, now a journalist, but of a prince of learning, "the most illustrious Hellenist of our time" (p. 263), who, in addition, seems to be absolutely—one might say deliberately—ignorant of any taste for the implicit, any good manners. But the "haughtiness," the "pride and insolence," the "gross insolence" ex-
hibited by the senator, only "attenuated by a faraway look" (p. 268); in other words that which seems the manifestation, the title itself of his nobility, derives not from the academic successes and honours that have been justly accorded to him, numerous and universal though they be, but from the object itself upon which his gaze has been fixed. In effect, the privilege upon which his difference is founded, and which constitutes his nobility, has as its origin a memory—a memory that is his despair and his hope: that of the time spent, fifty years ago with a Siren, an immortal. Senator Rosario La Ciura's Angst is no different from that of Don Fabrizio Salina. Both suffer as a result of being thrown into the world of facticity and historicity. The story would seem to refute an historicist interpretation of this unease. Unless one wished to literalize the allegory of a time in which men were demi-gods. In other words, another version of the Fall.

In the novel perhaps things are more complicated; but I would say that similarly the problem does not seem to be posed in historicist terms. The subject of the book, as we have said, is not the decadence of a class and its supplanting, its usurpation by another. Nor is the tone of the work to be identified as that of nostalgia, or a recuperation through memory, a redemption through the filter, the magic of art. Again a sublimation. None of these things. To quote Derrida once again: "It is the power of allegory, and its ironic force as well, to say something quite different from and even contrary to what seems to be intended through it." In fact in the fifth chapter of The Leopard, the one on Padre Pirrone in San Cono and the most explicit of the novel—the most disturbing for this reason to the author—the analysis and defence of nobility is not so much one of an historical entity, as of a sociological one, so to speak: destined as such for a kind of immortality, or rather a structural and atemporal necessity. "It's a class difficult to suppress because it's in continual renewal" (p. 156). What is emphasized of it is the difference from (also its contempt towards) the other classes; both difference and contempt being based on desires that no longer have anything to do with material needs; they have to do with the spirit, then: "Because it is differences [...], not estates and feudal rights, which make a noble. [... And] if, as has often happened before, this class were to vanish, an equivalent one would be formed straight away with the same qualities and the

same defects; it might not be based on blood anymore, but possibly on . . . on, say, length of time in a place, or pretended knowledge of some text presumed sacred” (p. 156). In another passage of the same chapter, the emphasis is placed on the “strong collective memory” possessed by this class, “a heritage of memories, hopes, caste fears” for things that perhaps matter not a whit to others, “but which are vital to them” (p. 153). And again in the penultimate chapter with its narration of the prince’s death, the connection between difference and memory is reiterated:

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 quality; and the meaning of his name would change more and more to empty pomp, embittered by the gadfly thought that others could outdo him in outward show. Etc.

(p. 189)

Passages such as the one just quoted have furnished support for suggestive interpretations such as that of Nunzio Zago, according to whom “to the aristocratic condition—we may as well say of a class situated by now on the sidelines and therefore to some degree impartial—[Tomasi] attributes only one humanistic measure that would permit the critical reviewing of the new middle-class reality, in other words a point of view autre, where a need for totality is expressed.”26 I don’t believe there can be any doubt about the need, the desire for totality, evident as it is both in the novel and in Lighea. However it seems to me perhaps excessive to speak of The Leopard as an “‘untimely meditation’ on the modern middle-class civilization that has been homologated and massified.”27 “The prince of Salina, a survivor, a relic of a more authentic past—continues Zago—finds himself forced into the role of a spectator who passively looks on the flood of vulgar mediocrity that mercilessly overwhelms the generations of sons and grandsons; in other words, he is forced to submit to the advent of the greedy and materialistic ‘era of Sedara,’ a metaphor of present-day alienation, lethargy of meaning and values.”28

26 N. Zago, I Gattopardi e le Iene, pp. 91-92.
28 Id., p. 25.
The fact is that the opposition authentic / inauthentic—above all when taken as an irreducible antinomy without considering, precisely in the manner of Heidegger (in this case much misunderstood), that “the possibility of an inauthentic and partial relationship towards things inheres in the very nature of the human makeup, along with the intent to overcome it” does not stand up to an analysis that examines the texts of Lampedusa in a more rigorous fashion; whereby these texts are revealed to be much more contradictory, much richer, perhaps also much less easily readable. At the beginning of the fourth chapter, in the context of a discussion on good manners and a comparison between Don Fabrizio and Don Calogero—which is in fact a comparison between nobility and bourgeoisie—after the narrator has clarified that “gradually don Calogero came to understand” that “a well-bred,” therefore “agreeable” man, “at heart is only someone who eliminates the unpleasant aspects of so much of the human condition” (p. 114), we also learn that “from that moment there began, for [Sedara] and his family, that process of continual refining which in the course of three generations transforms innocent boors into defenceless gentry” (p. 115).

This last adjective—defenceless, indefesi—is significant. In effect “good manners,” “eironeia,” the sprezzatura theorized by Castiglione, from an active strategy—actively present in worldly affairs—an instrument of dissimulated offence ultimately aimed at their government, have been transformed or reduced to a fragile shield, a last line of defence—rarely victorious—against that which is called by litotes the unpleasantness “of so much of the human condition.” More precisely—and as the entire text abundantly demonstrates—the shield ultimately consists of no more than an attempt to remove, defer, or distance oneself from, a reality that is unbearable: in a flight towards abstraction. It is in fact of “an abstract energy,” of “a certain energy with a tendency towards abstraction” (p. 114), that we read on that same page: thus, again, an attempt at sublimation. Reality, the whole of reality, does not cease however to remain—like the Sicilian countryside “lurching to and fro” under the gaze of Chevalley—“irredeemable” (p. 148). And insalvabili e cari, “condemned and touching as the cattle lowing through city streets at night on their way to the slaughterhouse”

(p. 174), appear to Don Fabrizio the wretched spectres wandering in Palazzo Ponteleone on the night of the ball. “Nothing could be decently hated except eternity” (p. 174): it’s the character’s conclusive thought.

Obviously, however, it is that very eternity that is pursued, courted by Don Fabrizio and by Rosario La Ciura: in the full awareness—as the text makes clear through the paradoxical phrasing (beatitudini mortuarie, corteggiamento della morte)—of its impossibility. To put it another way, already for the unillusioned, the disillusioned protagonist any attempt “to leap through or across the world (ueberspringen, Heidegger would say) in order to arrive at the non contingent purity of eternal ideas or of mathematical functions and certitudes” appears extremely problematic, undermined, denied by the ironical consciousness of the radical falseness of all this “to the facticity of the world as we encounter it.”30 But it is the irony of the narrator of The Leopard, or the allegorical procedure of a story like Lighea (though the two methods continually cross each other and exchange roles, whereby one text glosses the other in a constant, productive to-ing and fro-ing that is dizzyingly complicating) that assume the task of dismantling any privilege, that denounce any claim to authenticity or to the sublimity of the beautiful soul, of die schöne Seele (one thinks of the character of Concetta); finally the folly of believing oneself different:

We were the Leopards and Lions; 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.

(p. 148)

Both The Leopard and Lighea are texts that present themselves as having something of the last testament, of the epitaph in them: they are works torn from death, that speak of ends, transits, deaths; they comment on death, on deaths. On authenticity and inauthenticity too; on memory, remains, relics, fragments both authentic and inauthentic: the inauthentic relics of Caterina and Carolina, and the “mummified memories” (p. 200) of Concetta; her recollections, shown to be erroneous or false; the four green trunks “containing Concetta’s trousseau,” the “heap of moth-eaten fur” that has for forty-five years been kept as the embalmed Ben-

30 G. Steiner, Heidegger (Glasgow: Fontana Paperbacks, 1982), p. 86.
dicò; the memory of eternity of Rosario La Ciura, and that of the “old families”: “memory minute, it’s true, but anyway greater than that of others. The best you people can achieve in the way of physical immortality” (p. 266). And finally the relics of the Hellenist, the “great humanist,” the author of *Men and Gods*, who himself was once a young god, beloved of a goddess: “the Greek vase with the Siren figures” and “the large photograph of the Korè on the Acropolis” (p. 283); also his library, inherited by the University of Catania.

The last page of both these texts ironically disposes—as promised, therefore, without “elegy,” without “querulousness” (“to rage and mock is gentlemanly; to grumble and whine is not,” p. 156)—of these last traces of nobility. Of sublimity, of spirit, of memory, embodied in the last emblem of the Leopard, in the “little heap of livid dust” (p. 210) that Bendicò has become, there remains still a breath, an “exhalation” for Concetta: “an unpleasant atmosphere exhaling from the heaps of furs; […] even poor Bendicò was hinting at bitter memories” (p. 209). Bitter memories, still vital then. And Concetta, whose “inner emptiness” was total, decides to dispose of Bendicò, to annihilate this last trace. It is the end of *The Leopard* and, as the author’s summary notes, “the end of everything.”

If the final mode of the novel is that of allegory, with the figure of the embalmed dog who recomposes itself for an instant in flight into the form of the heraldic emblem, a dancing “quadruped with long whiskers, its right foreleg raised in imprecation” (p. 210), in the short story the mode is definitely that of irony.

Both objects I sent down to my home in Palermo. Then came the war, and while I was in Marmarica rationed to half a litre of water a day “Liberators” destroyed my home; on my return I found the photographs had been cut into strips to serve as torches for night looters; the bowl was smashed; in the largest fragment can be seen the feet of Ulysses tied to his ship’s mast. I still keep it. The books were stored in cellars at the University, but as there is no money for shelves they are slowly rotting away.

(p. 283).

Both allegory and irony denounce any temptation of permanence, any nobility of spirit nourished on such illusions. Whence therefore the “desperate euphoria” (p. 23)—to use a phrase from *The Leopard*—that yet pervades the work? Its character of vital nega-
tion, of impossible promise? Of ironical victory too? Certainly not from the fact that the work, by setting itself up as a kind of superior truth, opposes itself to the illusory character of every thought or action. Nor from the fact that irony claims itself as "a preliminary movement toward a recovered unity," as "a reconciliation of the self with the world by means of art."\textsuperscript{31}

Probably Heidegger, despite everything, is right in claiming that poetry is "that which remains in the process of becoming"\textsuperscript{32}: something in fact that affirms itself "against the affirmation of what it knows about itself."\textsuperscript{33} No redemption then. That which remains, child of consciousness and also chance, lacking totality, itself the fragment of a totality that has never existed—memory of a past that has never been present, to repeat Derrida's phrase—is a work that has resigned itself to the transformation of the eternal into the temporal: a poetry whose necessarily temporal character has been recognised, wherein the desire for eternity can be expressed only in the finiteness of the moment.\textsuperscript{34} To say and to admit this is also to reiterate the intent—the intention and the tension that constitute a struggle, with its momentary victories and innumerable defeats—to which the protagonist was referring when he spoke of "the life of the spirit in its most sublimated moments, its moments most similar to death." The work itself is one of these moments, allegorical and ironical celebration of a paradox which the linguistic formulation sets itself the task of preserving, without concealing, recording rather, its own fragility.

\textit{The Johns Hopkins University}

\textsuperscript{31} Id., "The Rhetoric of Temporality," \textit{Blindness and Insight}, p. 219.
\textsuperscript{32} Quoted in De Man, "Process and Poetry," p. 64.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., p. 70.
\textsuperscript{34} For all this too, see De Man's essay "Process and Poetry."