The Solitude of Don Fabrizio

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The Last Leopard
Lampedusa's claims are more justifiable than Liey's, but in fact both exaggerated, as did many critics who insisted that The Leopard must be either an historical novel or an autobiographical work without considering that it might have been a combination of the two. Don Fabrizio and Tancredi both owe much to historical figures, Prince Giulio di Lampedusa and his nephew Corrado Valguarnera di Niscemi. They are not portraits of either of these people, because the author did not know enough about the character and personality of his relations, but some of their actions and the historical circumstances that guided them are the same. The problems of Don Fabrizio's mind may have been those which tormented Lampedusa, but his political problems, his interests and much of his property belong to Prince Giulio. Tancredi's charm and sense of humour were Gioacchino's, and the relationship he has with Don Fabrizio resembled that between the writer and his adopted son: when Lampedusa relates Salina's inability to become angry with Tancredi or the impossibility of being bored in his company, he is in fact describing his own attitude towards Gioacchino. But the conditions of the period which inspired Tancredi's behaviour are those which governed Corrado Valguarnera and his friends.

Before beginning his own book, Lampedusa read many works about Garibaldi's 'Thousand' in Sicily, one of the books being the published journal of Francesco Brancaccio di Carpio, Tre mesi nella Vicaria di Palermo nel 1860. Brancaccio was a friend of Valguarnera and his diaries record the frivolous and often ludicrous behaviour of those young Sicilian aristocrats who, like Tancredi, joined Garibaldi. Their lives before 1860 consisted largely of balls, fencing, horseplay and practical jokes: 'We did not bother much about politics and thought of nothing but enjoying life and amusing ourselves.' Then they became ballroom conspirators, plotting for the fun of it, rolling carriages between waltzes, talking about liberty yet understanding nothing about political or social issues. While they were campaigning with Garibaldi, Brancaccio and his friends 'every night enjoyed a pillow fight for half-an-hour or so before going to sleep', and their absurd behaviour even managed to provoke a riot within the Turr division.

Tancredi is not Brancaccio nor Valguarnera (who was in fact a less ridiculous figure than his friends) nor Gioacchino, but a mixture of them with the addition of other characteristics invented by Lampedusa. Don Fabrizio's composition is more complicated. There are obvious similarities between him and Prince Giulio, notably their obsession with astronomy, but the author's great-grandfather seems to have been less of an autocrat than the Prince of Salina. Fabrizio shares many of the traits of his creator, his sceptical intelligence, his intolerance, his mind, conditioned by long periods of solitude and abstract thought. He shares many opinions, such as his pessimistic view of Sicily and Italian unity, and also various experiences, not of events but of feelings and attitudes. Don Fabrizio is more autobiography than invention but he is autobiography transformed into something else, into the person the writer would have liked to have been. Lampedusa did not have Salina's arrogant confidence, his overt sensuality, his authority over others; the author's own personality, largely moulded by his mother, and his family's decadence, initiated by Prince Giulio, made him a very different person. Lampedusa shared the Leopard's ideas and reactions, had many of the inner thoughts and secret feelings, but his behaviour was that of a milder animal.

Don Fabrizio has 'an authoritarian temperament' transformed by 'the relaxing atmosphere of Palermo society... into capricious arrogance'. Like his creator he is not interested in making money and too lazy to understand financial affairs. He has an aristocratic disdain 'about matters he considered low' and 'used to say that a house of which one knew every room wasn't worth living in'. He is both sceptical and fatalistic about the future, 'watching the ruin of his own class and his own inheritance without ever making, still less wanting to make, any move towards saving it'. When his accountant predicts that the Risorgimento will bring 'glorious new days for this Sicily of ours', Don Fabrizio remembers that 'these have been promised us on every single one of the thousand invasions we've had, by Nicias onwards, and they've never come'. Yet he is no reactionary, building Edens of the past. He is disgusted by the greed and lack of idealism of the liberal 'progressives', but he is not an apologist for the old order and the Bourbon monarchy. He ridicules much of the past and its enclosed with one of Orlando's typescripts sent by Lampedusa to his friend,
THE SOLUTION OF DON QUIXOTE

The solution of Don Quixote is a complex and multifaceted problem, reflecting the dual nature of the character himself. On one hand, Quixote embodies the idealistic and romantic vision of chivalry, where honor, loyalty, and courage are paramount. On the other hand, he is also a product of his time and society, embodying the contradictions and absurdities of the Spanish court.

The conflict between these two aspects of Quixote's personality is central to the novel, as it explores themes of empathy, compassion, and the power of the imagination. Throughout the story, the reader is encouraged to question the nature of heroism and the role of the individual in society.

The solution of Don Quixote, like many other literary works, is open to interpretation. Some readers may view it as a critique of the chivalric ideal, while others may see it as a celebration of its enduring appeal. Ultimately, the true meaning of the novel lies in its ability to provoke thought and engage the reader on a deep and personal level.
Donnafugata is thus loved less for itself than for its ‘sense of tradition and the perennial expressed in stone and water, of time congealed’. People, objects, institutions that he did not care for before became dear to him as they disappear. Among the uncertainties of 1860, he momentarily laments the Bourbons: ‘Those Ferdinands, those Francises that had been so despised, seemed for a moment like elder brothers, trusting, just, affectionate, true kings.’

Behind the demeanour of the nineteenth-century prince, Fabrizio is a curiously modern figure, afflicted by problems which probably never disturbed his historical counterpart, Prince Giulio. The critics who dismissed The Leopard as an historical novel must have read it carelessly. Of course it says a good deal about Sicilian and Italian history, but it is primarily a contemporary novel about its protagonist’s problems and anxieties, the problems of an outsider who has lost his way and can find no directions. The old certainties have gone, replaced by nothing substantial he can hold on to. During his dying confession he cannot even decide what were his real sins. He feels his whole life has been blameworthy rather than individual acts, and then wonders whether this consideration does not negate the whole notion of sin: ‘The only real sin,’ he reflects, ‘is original sin.’

Earlier in the novel Fabrizio compares the ‘ghastly journey [to Donnafugata] with his own life, which had first moved over smiling level ground, then clambered up rocky mountains, slid over threatening passes, to emerge eventually into a landscape of interminable undulations, all the same colour, all bare as despair’. It could also serve as a description of Lampedusa’s own life which one critic called a ‘rain search for shade in a sun-parched desert’. Yet if the passage is autobiographical, reflecting the writer’s own disillusionment, it is also in a sense universal, expressing the alienation and restlessness of a person wandering aimlessly in a world without settled values. In a powerful essay Massimo Ganci made a similar point, comparing the ‘irredeemable Sicily’ of The Leopard to ‘the sterility of modern

man ... suspended in a void between a past permanently dead, though evoked in a nostalgic tone, and a future from which he is ever more estranged.\(^8\)

Death or oblivion provide the only release from this interminable wandering over an unmapped landscape. Fabrizio’s attitude to death is naturally ambivalent: his sensual appetite for life makes him fear and dread it just as his weariness and disgust make him welcome it as a release. Death is for him two different things: he sees it as putrescence, the last stage of the corruption of living things, but also as freedom from that corruption. Much of the novel is concerned with Don Fabrizio’s efforts to understand death and to come to terms with it.

Death is in the first sentence of the book and permeates the rest of the novel. It goes all the way through the first chapter, from the garden of the Villa Salina, which has ‘the air of a cemetery’, to the corpse of the Bourbon soldier and to Palermo itself with its ‘sense of death’. Fabrizio’s thoughts of his own end are accompanied throughout the novel by the deaths of animals and other people. On the way to the ball his carriage halts so that a priest bearing the Last Sacraments may pass. When he reaches the Ponteceleone palace he spends much of the night reflecting on death and his contempt for the other guests gives way to compassion for all these ephemeral beings out to enjoy the tiny ray of light granted them between two shades, before the cradle, after the last spasms. How could one inveigh against those sure to die? Then he goes into the library and contemplates a picture of a dying man; while wondering whether his own death will be similar, he is found by Tancredi who asks, jestingly, if he is courting death. Death follows him after the ball too, a waggon carrying quartered carcasses from the slaughterhouse interrupts his walk home under the stars.

Death is a source of much of Lampedusa’s imagery, frequently used in descriptions of Sicily and its ‘funereal countryside’, and of Sicilians themselves. The Sicilian ‘sense of death’ was not invented by Lampedusa. ‘Death is at home in Sicily,’ wrote his cousin Fulco di Verdura. ‘Sicilians are used to her presence. The everlasting mournings, the continual references to dead people as if they were still alive’ make the islanders familiar ‘with the idea of death from earliest childhood.’ Don Fabrizio can thus extend of his own attitudes to his countrymen. Sicilian behaviour,
The Leopard's Sicily

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goes beyond the views of his creator, but Lampedusa had little faith in their analytical capabilities. ‘Lock five Sicilians and five Piedmontese in a room to solve a problem,’ he once said. ‘After a quarter of an hour all the Sicilians and none of the Piedmontese will have an answer in their heads. But after an hour all the Piedmontese and none of the Sicilians will have solved the problem.’ For Lampedusa the Sicilians neither created nor preserved. Goethe’s view of Sicily – ‘To have seen Italy without having seen Sicily is not to have seen Italy at all, for Sicily is the clue to everything’ – was incomprehensible to him. Ruskin was surely more justified in arguing that it was pointless to visit the island just to see buildings put up in the architectural styles of various conquerors. In any case Sicily, which ‘from poverty and neglect was the most destructive of countries’, neither understood nor attempted to preserve its monuments.

The numerous targets for Lampedusa’s sarcasm in Palermo included its newspapers, the stagnation of its intellectual life, and the sexual boasting of its male inhabitants, which he regarded as ‘compensation for an often inhibited sex life’. In his writing he was remorseless about Sicilian defects and his characters parade before the reader pursued by short, venomous phrases: Don Ciccio with his ‘deluded and rapacious soul’; Russo, ‘greedy eyes beneath a remorseless forehead ... a perfect specimen of a class on its way up’; Sedara, ‘all munching and grease stains’, ‘this little heap of cunning, ill-cut clothes, money and ignorance’; and the peasant brother-in-law of Father Pirrone: ‘with his low forehead, ornamental quiffs of hair on the temples, lurching walk and perpetual swelling of the right trouser leg where he kept a knife, it was obvious at once that Vincenzino was “a man of honour”, one of those violent imbeciles capable of any carnage’. Even those characters who are exempt from such remarks, like Don Onofrio or Ciccio Tumeo, serve to emphasize the deficiencies of the others. In describing Ferrara (in I gattini ciechi) as ‘a person of sensitive feelings’, we are reminded that this is ‘a human species very rare in Sicily’.

But it was Lampedusa’s attempt at a collective description of the Sicilian mentality that provoked the strongest criticism from reviewers, Don Fabrizio’s lecture to Chevalley being singled out

In Sicily it doesn’t matter about doing things well or badly; the sin which we Sicilians never forgive is simply that of ‘doing’ at all ... Sleep, my dear Chevalley, sleep, that is what Sicilians want, and they will always hate anyone who tries to wake them, even in order to bring them the most wonderful of gifts ... your only mistake was saying ‘the Sicilians must want to improve’ ... the Sicilians never want to improve for the simple reason that they think themselves perfect; their vanity is stronger than their misery.

Don Fabrizio thought and said many contemptuous things about Sicilians but it was these remarks on their indolence and complacency which most enraged the critics, many of whom assumed that Lampedusa knew little about Sicilian history. According to the novelist Leonardo Sciascia, The Leopard was written without an ‘understanding of history’, whereas to Falqui it was the creature of ‘an extremely retrograde conception of history’ which denied the prospect of progress and liberty to Sicily. The anger in these and other attacks caused Luigi Russo to complain that Lampedusa was being treated as a politician who had made a reactionary speech instead of as a novelist who had put some ideas into the mouth of one of his characters.

Fabrizio’s views reflect many of Lampedusa’s but to treat his conversation with Chevalley as if it were an historical essay was naive and unfair. The exaggerations and generalizations should have been obvious to anyone and taken as illustrations rather than literal representations of historical truth. It was pointless to counter Fabrizio’s remarks about the desire for sleep with questions such as ‘What about the Vespers? What about the 1866 revolt?’ Lampedusa was not discussing individual behaviour in certain periods; he was making a generalization about the behaviour of millions of people over thousands of years.

Fabrizio’s ascription of Sicilian inertia to the ‘cruelty of climate’ and the ‘violence of landscape’ inspired one critic to complain that Lampedusa had reduced the ‘southern question’ to a matter of climatic considerations in order to justify his own laziness. The sun certainly plays a dominant role in the novel, its destructive influence emphasized with a stream of adjectives – ‘tyrannous’, ‘crude’, ‘implacable’, ‘drugging’, ‘savage’ – and is
The scene of warmth on the beach in Naples. In any case, the few thinkers who did exist were so

The Leopard's Study

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orange and lemon groves pouring over Palermo ... during
some sunsets in June ... the enchantment of certain summer
nights within sight of Castellamare bay, when stars are
mirrored in the sleeping sea and the spirit of anyone lying back
amid the lentisks is lost in a vortex of sky, while the body is
tense and alert, fearing the approach of demons.

Sicily had been perfect, had subsequently ‘fallen’, and was
now, in Lampedusa’s word, ‘irredeemable’. Yet even in its
decadence it retained in his eyes a certain corrupt greatness which
the recent centuries of degradation had not extinguished.
The critics were oblivious of this hidden pride, unaware that the
author was more sympathetic to the Sicilian’s ‘voluptuous torpor’
than to the zealous worthiness of Chevalley. Sicily may have been
vain and cruel but at least it was not mediocre. To Lampedusa the
north of Italy was rational but drab and he conveyed this view in
his language, his disparaging use of adjectives, his habit of using
diminutives in such a way that the Milanese count Caviaghli
becomes a contino rather than a coni. He would never have
called a Sicilian a contino: in spite of the island’s history, it
retained a sort of warped grandeur that could not be belittled.22

Lampedusa’s view of Sicily as ‘irredeemable’ annoyed many
people who believed that technological progress and democratic
government could obliterate the legacies of centuries. In most
cases they underestimated his knowledge of Sicilian history and
misunderstood an important sentence in The Leopard. In his
search for a hopeful and enlightened period of the island’s past,
Lampedusa went back to early classical times. By contrast with
Tuscany and the north during the Communes, the south had
enjoyed no period of cultural greatness and political liberty. Like
the Neapolitan writer Galanti, who in a similar quest had had to
go back to the Samnites, the primitive Italic tribes of Molise,23
Lampedusa could find nothing encouraging in subsequent eras in
Sicily except, possibly, for the century of the Norman kings. Any
attempt at any reform (political, social or economic) by any ruler
(Spanish, Piedmontese, Austrian or Bourbon) had been defeated
by Sicilian ‘interests’. The 1812 constitution, established during
the brief period of British control, was fatally undermined by a
political class divided between those who thought it went too far

Lampedusa, the Sicilians’ failure to support the constitution
destroyed their chances of a decent future: their short-sightedness
in those years ensured that the island would never experience the
British form of constitutional development.24

The misunderstood sentence was Tancredi’s famous line – ‘If
we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change’ –
which was widely seen as Lampedusa’s view and even as his
philosophy, although in the end it is explicitly rejected by Don
Fabrizio himself. A leading historian, Francesco Renda,
castigated this ‘interpretation’ as ‘sterile’ and ‘distorted’ without
troubling to ask himself whether this really was the author’s own
opinion.25 Certainly Lampedusa believed that the past was
composed of endless superficial changes and a recurrent
relabelling of the same object. But he also knew, as did Salina,
that the era of the Risorgimento was different from its
predecessors. It was not in itself a major change but it heralded
real changes – in the social structure and in the economy – which
paradoxically failed to alter many things or solve many of the
island’s problems. Sicily has obviously been transformed by the
building of motorways and oil refineries and by the
industrialization of the eastern seaboard. But Lampedusa would
have found little evidence that it had been ‘redeemed’, that
modern technology had been able to reduce the violence,
political corruption and other evils of modern Palermo. And
some of his former critics have since agreed with him. Several
years after attacking him for historical ignorance, Leonardo
Sciascia bravely admitted that ‘Lampedusa was unfortunately
right and we were wrong’ about Sicilian history. After reciting
the prince’s chronicle of failed attempts to reform the island, he
acknowledged on another occasion that Sicily had little reason to
expect a ‘radiant future’.26

Criticism of the present and pessimism about the future did not
turn Lampedusa into a reactionary. Nor did his disapproval of the
Piedmontese make him a Bourbon apologist. The Bourbons’
spokesman in The Leopard is Málvea, Don Fabrizio’s brother-in
law, who argues foolishly on their behalf. The author’s view of
them, filtered through the reflections of the prince, is harsh and
critical, though not as vituperative or as unfair as the views of
Gladstone and other British liberals. Francis II is dismissed as
The Leopard's Study
God only knew in what back-alley, in what corner of the popular conscience...

At this point calm descended on Don Fabrizio, who had finally solved the enigma; now he knew who had been killed at Donnaugata, at a hundred other places, in the course of that night of dirty wind: a new-born babe: good faith; just the very child who should have been cared for most, whose strengthening would have justified all the silly vandalisms. Don Ciccio’s negative vote, fifty similar votes at Donnaugata, a hundred thousand ‘no’s’ in the whole Kingdom, would have had no effect on the result, have made it, in fact, if anything more significant; and this maiming of souls would have been avoided.

Later Lampedusa added a footnote of his own to the story of the plebiscite: ‘Don Fabrizio could not have known it then, but a great deal of the slackness and acquiescence for which the people of the south were to be criticized during the following decades, was due to the stupid annulment of the first expression of liberty ever offered them.’

Perhaps Lampedusa exaggerated the consequences of the plebiscite and paid insufficient attention to the effects of the Piedmontese administration, the insensitive introduction of alien systems and institutions, the increase in taxation and, above all, the failure to attempt a solution of the social and agrarian problems. Yet there is no doubt that he knew of these and other factors that contributed to the southern question. He knew that there had been no real revolution in the south, nothing that would benefit the poorer classes. ‘Everything will be better,’ declares Russo, ‘the only ones to lose will be the priests.’ But Lampedusa knew that almost nothing got better and that the only ones to win were the unscrupulous opportunists who bought up most of the Church lands at derisory prices after unification. He hated these people, ‘their tenacious greed and avarice’, ‘their rancour and their sense of inferiority’, and transformed them into Calogero Sedara and the odious Ibba family. There may be some snobbery in his treatment of them but there is no injustice. They are the early mafiosi, the men who grabbed the common lands and the Church’s property and held on to them by force. Sedara is

Mafia have described him as a prototype mafioso, a ‘mafioso avant la lettre’.

“We were the Leopards and Lions,” reflects Don Fabrizio; ‘those who’ll take our place will be little jackals, hyenas.’ Again this is not entirely unfair: even Romeo admitted the deficiencies of the new Sicilian ruling class which assumed many of the worst characteristics of the old. Lampedusa’s critic, Leonardo Sciascia, went still further, declaring that ‘we must unfortunately agree’ with the prince that instead of a genuine middle class Sicily had only ‘a pack of jackals’.

Garibaldi’s triumph in 1860 had been greatly helped by an uprising of the Sicilian peasantry, but there had been little initial assistance from members of the upper and middle classes. Yet, as Denis Mack Smith has pointed out, a large majority of the peasants received no immediate benefit from the Risorgimento and, instead of the much-needed agrarian reform, the number of smallholdings decreased. Nor did the situation improve.

Writing in 1877, the distinguished Tuscan politician Sonnino noted that ‘in Sicily our institutions are based on a merely formal liberalism and have just given the opposing class a legal means of continuing as they always have. All power has been handed over to these people, to use or misuse as they please.’

Many years later, the communist intellectual Gramsci criticized the Risorgimento as a ‘passive revolution’ because its leaders had refused to ally themselves with the peasants; unlike the Jacobins in France, they had therefore failed to make a real revolution or create a modern national state.

It could be argued that Lampedusa’s criticism of the Risorgimento came from both sides, from the viewpoints of both Gramsci and the Bourbons. In his opinion it should have been a real revolution or nothing at all. If there had to be a compromise, it should have been a genuine one that merged the best things from the old regime and from the new, not one that destroyed the best in Sicilian life and preserved the worst. Lampedusa was aware of the defects of his great-grandfather’s contemporaries and would not have minded so much if they had fallen to worthy opponents such as the French Jacobins or genuine revolutionary idealists like Mazzini and Garibaldi.

*It is significant that Garibaldi, who was after all the cause of many of Don Fabrizio’s problems, is never criticized in the course of numerous references by
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