

Krystyna Jachniewicz-Zarebski

## Go East, Young Man

by Thomas Fleming

We shall soon be celebrating the cardinal date of the second Christian millennium, the fall of New Rome, otherwise known as Constantinople in 1453. For a thousand years after the collapse of the Western empire, New Rome had stood, a living museum of Greek culture and Roman law, the last organic link with the origins of our civilization. For centuries—at least since 1204, when Crusaders sacked the city—Constantinople had been a shadow of its former glories, the empire a hollow fiction with boundaries hardly broader than those of the smallest Italian commune. Catholic Europe had learned to deride her rulers as the Emperor of the Greeks, but when Manuel II made his futile trip to Europe in search of Christian help against the Turks, our gaudy barbarian ancestors were struck with the nobility and simplicity of the emperor.

Unlike the empire of the West, whose flame had guttered out in vice and imbecility, the empire of the East went down with all the glory of a sunset. Constantine Paleologus, whom Gibbon describes as the last and best of the Caesars, refused all offers of escape. He preferred to put on the uniform of a common soldier and died fighting with his men in the streets of The City, for in those days it was *the city*, the symbol of all civilized life, and to this day the infidel conquerors call it Istanbul, garbled Greek for “to the city.”

Charles Williams once suggested that the Reformation was a just retribution upon the Western Christians who had turned their backs on the Eastern church. The defense of the city against the Turks may have been impossible, but the European powers barely lifted a finger to save the Greek Christians who crossed themselves the wrong way. The Popes were

willing to call a Crusade, but only if the Romaioi acknowledged his authority. The last emperors acceded, precipitating a schism that made it even harder to hold out against the enemy.

It was a Hungarian who manufactured the cannon that breached the walls and Christians who taught the Turks how to concentrate their fire. In the end, it was a Genoese commander (Giustiniani) who, receiving a wound, deserted his post and escaped through a hole in the wall, followed by the greater part of the western allies. The betrayal was altogether fitting, since the Genoese, hoping to preserve their own trading colony, had made a separate peace with the Sultan.

In undermining the emperor, Genoa had worked hand in hand with its chief rival, Venice. It was a Venetian Doge, at the head of his fleet, who persuaded the leaders of the notorious Fourth Crusade, when they sacked the city and imposed their barbarian rule upon the East, and it was the Venetians who had sought to monopolize the trade of the East and undermine the economic base of the empire.

In this activity, Genoa was not far behind. As a Pisan proverb has it, Genoa was a “sea without fish, men without honor, and women without shame.” The Pisans had, perhaps, a right to be resentful. For several centuries, they had labored to enrich themselves at the expense of the Moslems, and no maritime power had been more forthright in joining any expedition—to Sardinia, to Sicily, to Majorca, and even to the coast of North Africa—where the Cross could be advanced, their pockets filled. It is easy to be cynical about the freebooting “republic of the waves,” but when Pisans captured Palermo from the Saracens, they devoted a large part of the

spoils to the facade of their great cathedral. Defeated by Genoa in 1284, Pisa was subjugated by Florence in 1406, but even under the Florentine yoke, Pisan merchants continued to prosper in the levant trade.

The Eastern empire had been the cynosure of the maritime republics, Genoa, Venice, Amalfi, and Pisa. By the 15th century, only Venice and Genoa were in a position to help the city, whose capture spelled ultimate ruin for the merchant republics that depended upon the Eastern trade. The influx of Byzantine exiles, before and after the conquest, helped to inspire that rebirth of classical literature, languages, and art we call the Renaissance, and on a deeper level, the dwindling and demise of the city, in breaking the links with the past, set the Italian mind free to invent a mythical and glorious ancient world, an equally mythical Dark Age, and a future restoration of classical antiquity. Such was the dream of Petrarch and his disciples. Elaborate plans were drawn up for rebuilding Rome, "just as it was," and these dreams of restoring the empire were to inspire every would-be world ruler down to Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin. In fact, the great political myth of the Russians is that they are the real successors to the Byzantine Empire and that Moscow is the Third Rome.

But if the fall of Constantinople served to liberate Italian culture, it also closed the Eastern frontier that had attracted so many hardy and rebellious spirits. A city might in principle be governed by an emperor's vassal, by a handful of merchant oligarchs, or by a Machiavellian prince like Castruccio Castracani, but the seas were free. On their voyages, the merchants of Genoa and Pisa enforced their own laws, carried out their own foreign policy, made alliances and conducted wars as if they lived in a state of nature.

In the four centuries (roughly 1000-1400) when Pisa, Lucca, Florence, and Siena were busily beating each other's brains out for predominance in their part of Tuscany—a region smaller than Vermont—their peoples were acquiring liberty for themselves and creating a civilization that the world has been living off ever since. It was the second great creative age of the West, and it was a period of unremitting competition, strife, and carnage.

Little Pisa, with a population and area smaller than Rockford, Illinois, was willing to take on the world. A national news program, describing the structural problems of the Leaning Tower, commented that if not for the Tower, no one would go to Pisa. It is true that we did our best to bomb the Campo Santo into Detroit, but the cluster of buildings around the Cathedral of Santa Maria may be the most impressive urban scene devised by man.

As my friend Leo Raditsa once pointed out to me, you can date the Florentine conquest of a Tuscan town by its art history. Once Pisa and Siena were absorbed into greater Florence, they ceased to be creative and the cityscape is fossilized in its period of independence. Florence grew at the expense of Siena as Venice gradually sucked the vitality out of Verona.

When I explain all this to my teenage son, he wonders why I worry so much about books and paintings. I tell him that poetry and art, important as they are in themselves, are also the vital signs of culture, an index to their more general creativity, a measure of their success as human beings engaged in what is ultimately a tragic and futile struggle to make sense of their lives. I became a localist, years ago in school, when I began to realize the cultural significance of jerkwater places like Sicyon

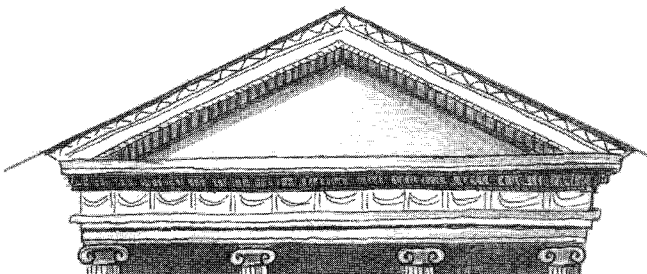
and Ceos and Greenville, Mississippi.

By the end of the 15th century, however, the social and political structure of Italy had hardened. Naples (and Sicily) were already in the hands of the Spanish, and before long Milan would fall under the same yoke. The Florentines, under the gangster dynasty of the Medici, maintained only an external independence—autonomy but not liberty. Cut off from the East, the Italian states became increasingly provincial, indolent, ingrown. The patchwork of feudal loyalties and commercial *communi* had slowly been recast into a more orderly pattern of regional empires: Florence, Venice, Milan, the papal states, and Naples all held sway not only over their own *contado* but also over dozens of subjugated communes and principalities.

In the civilized arts, however, the Italians continued to dominate throughout the next century, but the poetry and the painting—magnificent as they are—seem less fresh, more mannered. (Compare Botticelli or Signorelli with, for example, Caravaggio; Dante and Boccaccio with Tasso). Of course, it is only in the later Renaissance that Italy became known preeminently for its music, an art in which Italians were to dominate until the end of the 18th century and in which they continued to excel until the early 20th century, when music was, for the most part, abandoned as a serious art form.

Apart from *The Magic Flute*, Mozart's great operas are all written to Italian librettos, the best of them by a good-looking confidence man, Lorenzo Da Ponte, who immortalized his remarkable career in a memoir marked by a mixture of dishonesty and simplicity that is almost unparalleled. After being booted out of Venice, Vienna, Paris, and London, he made his way—like so many misfits—to our shores, and after a brief career as a traveling salesman and *saltimbanco* he became the first professor of Italian literature at Columbia.

In the centuries when Italy was slowly subsiding into a tourist attraction, reckless Europeans were looking westward. The inexperienced and down-at-heels Genoese sailor who discovered the New World sought the patronage first of Portugal and then of Spain. He may even have thought of England, but not of the great maritime power that gave him his birth. Cristoforo Colombo was far from being the only Italian sailor to make Atlantic voyages. The Cabots, sailing for England, explored the Northern coasts of North America, while Verrazano under the French flag made his way down the coast from New York to North Carolina.



By the mid-16th century, however, we hear only of Spanish, French, Dutch, and English explorers, colonists, and conquerors. The Italians, become the pawns of Austrians and Spaniards, continue to compose operas and paint pictures, and the tough and ruthless people who started "all this" turn into stock characters in Northern European farce. (Conrad's Nostromo and Wilkie Collins' Count Fosco are two of the

only manly Italians in our literature.)

There are more iron laws of history than just the law of oligarchy. One of them was stated succinctly by Bob Dylan: "He who is not busy being born is busy dying." It is the nature of states (using that term very loosely to cover all polities) to expand, either by conquest or colonization. Their rivals are either absorbed to become part of the successful expanding power or else find their own avenues for growth. By the 18th century the competition for colonies and foreign markets plays a dominant role in European politics, and the New World tail begins to wag the Old World dog, decades before the American War for Independence.

The expansion of European man across the Americas is one of the great sagas of world history, and while it is customary to depict our progress across the continent as an uninterrupted sequence of genocidal massacres, the other side of the story—our side, if you will—is far more interesting. What can we say of the character of men like Columbus and John Smith or, even better, of Cortez, whose bones the Mexican revolutionaries wanted to dig up and desecrate. The story of his conquest is the most incredible tale since Xenophon. That Columbus and Cortez were ruthless adventurers goes without saying, but it is their hardihood and recklessness that define the American character at its best. The official history that now proclaims the conquistadores and frontiersmen outlaws is, in a profound sense, a rejection of ourselves—if it is proper, any longer, even to speak of an American "us."

The frontier, starting at the Atlantic, replaced the East, not only in an economic sense, but also in a moral and political sense. As an outlet for European expansion, North America became the new setting for the recreation of political liberty, and while the social and political evolution of the American states and Italian *communi* took quite different paths, there are common themes. If Genoa and Pisa found their liberty at sea, the Americans discovered their liberty—and their identity—on the frontier.

In his famous essay on the frontier, Frederick Jackson Turner dwells at length upon the formation of a distinctive American character and on the development of democratic institutions. As an aside, he pointed to what he regarded as the darker side of the frontier experience—the tendencies toward anarchism and violence:

... the frontier is productive of individualism. Complex society is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive social organization based on the family. The tendency is anti-social. It produces antipathy to control, and particularly to any direct control. The tax-gatherer is viewed as a representative of oppression ... the frontier conditions prevalent in the colonies are important factors in the explanation of the American revolution, where individual liberty was sometimes confused with the absence of all effective government.

A few pages later, Turner inserts a footnote on "the lawless characteristics of the frontier," and cites "the gambler and desperado, the regulators of the Carolinas, and the vigilantes of California" as "types of that line of scum that the waves of advancing civilization bore before them." Turner, one has to remember, wrote at the height of the Progressive era, when all the best men assumed, as a matter of course, that govern-

ment was the benign agency of progress.

Reduced to less polemical terms, Turner's observations are a fair description of the frontier experience. The "primitive social organization based on the family" is otherwise known as patriarchy, the most basic and essential form of social organization. Civilized communities slowly wean themselves from the elementary facts of life and learn to nourish themselves on peculiar diets and bureaucratic regimens, but thrust back into the real world they easily rediscover the most natural institutions. Robinson Crusoe becomes king of his island, the Swiss Family Robinson functions as a patriarchal clan, the admirable Crichton changes from obsequious butler into a father of his people, and a boatload of Anglican choirboys transforms itself into a ruthless band of hunters, complete with leaders, rules, and cults. These are European fables, but they go to the heart of the American experience.

I shall not repeat what I have previously written (October 1990) on the rediscovery of family autonomy on the American frontier, except to say that it—and not the ideas of John Locke or even Thomas Jefferson—was the real basis of American liberty. Free families in search of free land might view the tax-collector as the enemy, but they were far from lawless. The very examples that Turner cites—the Carolina Regulators and the California vigilantes—are the refutation of his rhetoric. Committees of vigilance are the expression of a community's determination to enforce a moral order, and even where government agents existed, many frontier communities preferred lynch law as a concrete demonstration of their moral sentiments.

Vigilante groups are only one manifestation of the American preference for private associations over government agencies, and in a later essay Turner was to repeat Tocqueville's praise for "extra-legal, involuntary associations":

This power of the newly arrived pioneers to join together for a common end without the intervention of governmental institutions was one of their marked characteristics. The log rolling, the house-raising, the husking bee, the apple paring, and the squatters associations whereby they protected themselves against the speculators in securing title to their clearings on the public domain, the camp meeting, the mining camp, the vigilantes, the cattle-raisers' associations, the 'gentlemen's agreements,' are a few of the indications of this attitude. ... America does through informal associations and understandings on the part of the people many of the things which in the Old World are and can be done only by government intervention and compulsion. These associations were in America not due to immemorial custom of tribe or village community. They were extemporized by voluntary action.

Turner follows Tocqueville in emphasizing the difference between the Old World and the New, and the distinction is valid—up to a point—for the period he is discussing, but the voluntary associations of America are rooted in the immemorial customs of European villages. Consider only the distinctive American institution of the shivaree—the rowdy mockery, burlesque, and practical jokes to which newlyweds were exposed. The origin of the term is, of course, the French *charivari*, a general European (really, a universal human) device used to repress excessive individualism and to express com-



munity sentiment against social deviance. The message to the young couple is a warning not to get wrapped up in themselves at the expense of their neighbors; more often the *charivari* was employed to show disapproval of wife-beaters, adulterers, or old men taking young wives.

The New England Puritans were famous for their colorful methods of exerting social control, but the ducking stool, the stocks, and scarlet letters were all transported from old England. Before European man had created the modern states that have absorbed so much of his social and political energies, he knew how to mind his own business, govern his neighborhood, and solve all the petty problems that have always and will always plague our fallen human nature.

In the early Italian *communi*, it is hardly possible to speak of the state. On the political level, Pisa or Lucca might in theory be governed by the emperor's representative—although the Bishop's powers, especially in the rural parishes, was very great both in law and in practice. The real life of the town, however, was conducted with scant reference to the Visconte or even to the consuls who replaced him. The commune itself—and its consols—was more a private association of the rich and powerful than anything we could call a state, and the consuls were free to conduct business on their own account, merging their own resources with those of the city. In this the Italians were normal rather than exceptional. The strict separation between private and public interest is a modern and northern European phenomenon. Paul Veyne, in his contribution to *The History of Private Life*, compares the civil and military administrators of the Roman Empire to a mafia *capo* who simultaneously protects and squeezes his clients: "A Roman noble has more in common with this 'godfather' than with a modern technocrat."

In modern America it is the mafia (at least in its idealized form) that embodies ancestral European custom and the republican institutions of the commune, not the hypocrisy of honest government and political reform—the perennial slogans of those who wish to consolidate their power by freezing out the competition. But if the "godfathers" of the commune represented the highest form of socioeconomic organization in late medieval Italian towns, they were far from holding a monopoly. In addition to the Church, there were the various *arti*—trade guilds—that set standards, determined weights and measures, punished infractions of various kinds. There were also alliances of merchants and noblemen, including the "tower associations"—mutual defense pacts of families living in proximity to each other and maintaining a common tower for their protection. The neighborhoods themselves were often a fundamental unit of government, choosing their own mayors and judges, settling disputes.

Despite all these other forms of association, the family remained the foundation of the social order, and if one family member offended another, the difficulty was to be settled by the head or elders. If a man of one family murdered a member of another, the response was not law but *vendetta*—the word Dante regularly uses to mean justice.

In many ways, Pisa in the 12th century resembles nothing so much as Tennessee in the days of Andrew Jackson and the Benton brothers, rough men who followed the course of the expanding frontier in search of abundant game, free land, and the opportunity to "catch the shortest way" to success. Turner was inspired to write his essay by the 1890 census, which had declared the closing of the frontier. If American democracy

was the peculiar product of the frontier experience, what sort of political revolution did the future have in store? If Turner had only looked inside himself, he would have found the answer. As a Progressive gone to the Ivy League, Turner favored the style of government activism that would find its expression in Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, and the creative and expansionist impulses of Americans were transferred, inevitably, from the conquest of the continent to the creation of a bureaucratic infrastructure at home and an economic and political empire abroad.

---

**There are opportunities for Western businesses, it goes without saying, but in the New World of the East, America will be only one of the players, perhaps not the most important.**

---

Some nations thrive on peace and settled order, but European man has always been a wanderer, an adventurer, a conqueror. By the second millennium our ancestors were on the move, drifting into what we now call Europe. India and Persia, Greece and Italy became home to distinctively Indo-European civilizations that merged and blended with the previous populations. Other waves of settlers poured into Northern Europe, although the Celts had occupied Lombardy by the fourth century B. C. Later waves of Germans and Slavs destroyed most of the Roman Empire, only to be attacked by their Viking cousins, as soon as they settled down into the ways of peace. Among the most violent and aggressive of these barbarians were the Franks, but the tale of their rapid degeneration is all too familiar and depressing. I fear we too often interpret Lord Acton's admonitions on the corruption of power in a metaphorical sense, but the corruption of Frankish kings and the American Congress is no abstraction.

The European story is only a major-key variation on a human theme. Man is by nature a competitive beast who seeks dominion, both as an individual and as a member of a tribe. He thrives on domestic strife and local competitions. As Machiavelli observed, Rome's political liberties were the product of their endless rounds of class conflict. "To me those who condemn the quarrels between the nobles and the plebs, seem to be cavilling at the very things that were the primary cause of Rome's retaining her freedom. . . . Nor do they realize that in every republic there are two different dispositions, that of the populace and that of the upper class and that all legislation favorable to liberty is brought about by the clash between them."

But if domestic conflict leads to liberty at home, it is wars with the neighbors that sharpens the character of the commonwealth: "Should heaven . . . be so kind to it [the commonwealth] that it has no need to go to war, it will then come about that idleness will either render it effeminate or give rise to factions; and these two things, either in conjunction or separately, will bring about its downfall."

Machiavelli's discourses are only ostensibly about ancient Rome. The intention is to provide political lessons to 16th-century Italy in general and in particular to the corrupted Florentine republic that had lost the *virtu* that is required of a

free people. That *virtu*, as we all know, followed the frontier and passed to Spain, to England, to Holland, and to France, and ultimately to the Americas, where it was extinguished in the course of the 20th century.

Am I arguing that America and Western Europe are locked onto the wheel of fate, that since our day has come and gone, we should sit under the trees, drinking wine, reading old poetry, and catching the occasional trout? There are worse ways to live, of course, but—as the old saying goes—fortune doesn't close one door without opening another. If there is any strength to these observations, then the main challenge to modern states is to discover challenges. For a time it seemed that the exploration of space was "the final frontier," but that hope fizzled out long before the Challenger disaster that exposed the frailty of our commitment to space exploration. For the most part, space exploration has become just another business.

If space is not the frontier, could the exploration of inner space provide the challenge? Pisa, ruined by military defeat and depopulated by malaria, devoted much of the town's surplus energies to its university, and in a more general way, the Italians learned to carry on their wars "by other means," confining themselves to a merely cultural aggression. But even if political impotence can be mitigated by aesthetic strength, if the success of Rossini and Bellini can assuage national vanity, the idea of a cultural frontier can only apply to a rare class of sylphs—"if he's content with a vegetable love, which would certainly not suit me, why what a most particularly pure young man, this pure young man must be."

Besides, even the artist grows febrile and innervated in a politically emasculated society. Eighteenth-century Italian poetry is generally dreadful, and when a great poet did come along in the person of Leopardi, the rest of the world was content to discount him as a freak or even to ignore his existence (at least until recently, since there appears to be some sort of

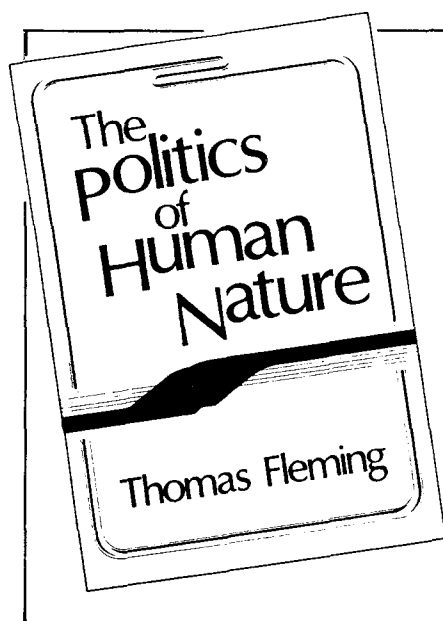
Leopardi revival going on).

I would wish my people to escape the fate of the Lydians who were saved for a life of pleasure. One of Professor Turner's older contemporaries, William James, wrote of the need in modern societies for a "moral equivalent of war," but so far no one has found the moral equivalent for any of the most basic human affections and institutions—competition and war, private property and the free market, marriage and family. We have tried to replace all of them in the course of this century, and the finest result was the Soviet Empire so recently brought to its knees.

The collapse of communism and the disintegration of the Soviet Union inflicted a shock to the world system—something like a hole punched into the pressured cabin of a high-altitude aircraft. Nature abhors a vacuum, and despite all our flailing and floundering efforts, the United States is not going to fill any of the voids—military, economic, ideological, cultural—that have been created. There are opportunities for Western businesses, it goes without saying, but in the New World of the East, America will be only one of the players, perhaps not the most important.

The frontier, which had been moving westward since the fall of Constantinople has now, with the liberation of the Third Rome, reappeared in the East. There is now a united Germany, once again, and if we strain our ears we can begin to detect the whispered demands for a pan-German state. Meanwhile, the hybrid states of Versailles are breaking up like overloaded ships in heavy seas. Even the shipwreck survivors, clinging to the flotsam and jetsam, seem bent on destroying each other, and yet, what all this violence conceals, is the fact that a new Europe is being born, and it may not matter much what sort of arrangements the bureaucrats in Brussels engineer. The Wild West is now the Wild East, and Americans will have to work very hard, if they want to be in on the action.

◁



**transaction**

“**Learned, thoughtful, and superbly written . . .**”  
—Robert Nisbet  
NATIONAL REVIEW

"In this probing and thoughtful book, Thomas Fleming has begun to address the principal challenge to our society and polity."

—Elizabeth Fox-Genovese  
CHRONICLES

"A thoughtful conservative of the old school. . . . Progressives and radicals could benefit from grappling with Fleming's intellectually stimulating presentation."

THE PROGRESSIVE

ISBN: 0-88738-189-8 (cloth) 276 pp. \$32.95

Major credit cards accepted. Call (201) 932-2280

Send prepaid orders to:

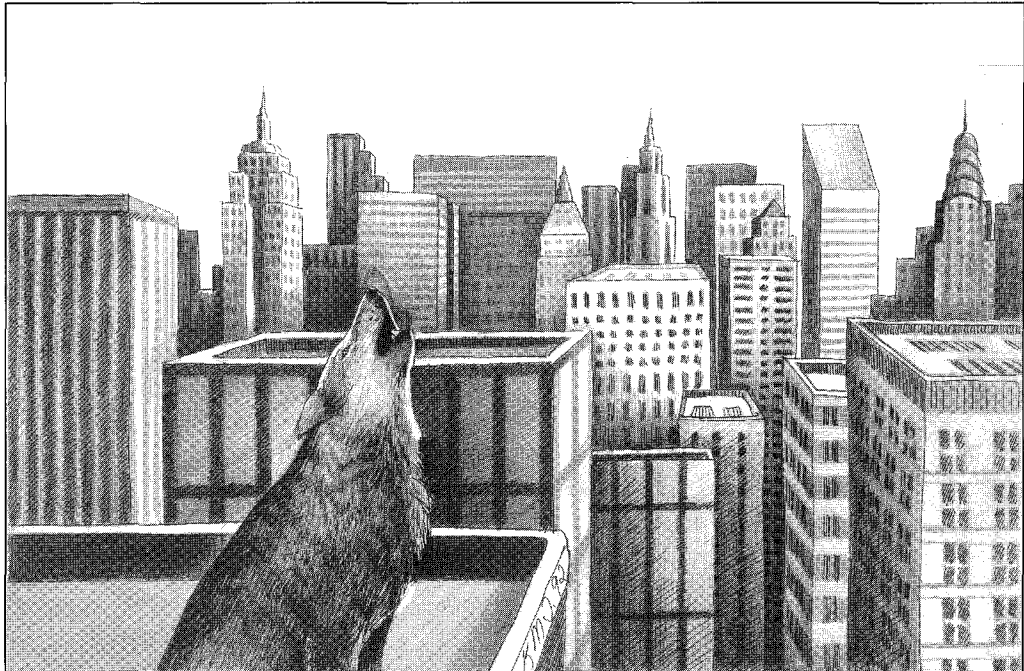


**transaction publishers**

Department FL  
Rutgers—The State University  
New Brunswick, N.J. 08903

# Gift: The Life of Lorenzo Da Ponte

by David R. Slavitt



Krystyna Jachimowicz-Zarebski

Not merely a strange place, but the home of strangeness,  
the land stretching away west to vertiginous  
spaces beyond the imagination.  
Philadelphia first,  
then New York, where Nancy is living.

The Grahls have done well, chemists, merchants, physicians.  
Lorenzo and Nancy cross the river, settle  
in Jersey, open a grocery store  
in Elizabeth.

He writes how he laughed,  
“every time my poetical hand weighed out  
two ounces of tea, or cut a plug of tobacco  
for some cobbler or carter.”  
Thus amused, he never notices how  
people cheat him, take his kindness as weakness  
and him for all he is worth—  
seven thousand dollars  
going, gone.

And Nancy bears him a son,  
a last child, christened Charles Grahls  
da Ponte  
(Lorenzo will always call him Carlo).  
What to do to eat?

Teach perhaps?  
Italian?  
Maybe Latin?  
Something will turn up.  
There may yet be something good around the corner.

He sells the house  
and they return to New York.

There are more corners there.

\*

You wake from a dream you cannot remember,  
try this setting or that, make odd suggestions,  
but nothing speaks.

That wasn't it. The kernel  
of meaning is gone, and you are the empty husk.

What was there?

The color of lilacs?  
Their scent?  
You let your mind go blank but all you have  
is a blank mind,  
which is all you deserve.

In a bookstore on Broadway . . .  
If he has any church or synagogue,  
if he believes in anything, feels at home  
anywhere, it would be in bookstores.  
In a bookstore then, on Broadway, where he is browsing,  
he enters into a casual conversation  
with a younger man, a stranger.

An idle remark,  
an answer, a joke, perhaps, and then an allusion,  
a reference,  
a password . . .