



The Literary Triumph Of a Dead Prince

SIDNEY ALEXANDER

THE PUBLISHING sensation of the year—and many a year—in Italy has been this runaway-selling novel by a Sicilian aristocrat with the drum-rolling name of Giuseppe Tomasi, Duke of Palma and Prince of Lampedusa. The poor prince, alas, is unable to savor his belated and well-deserved acclaim; four months after he had recopied the final draft of his manuscript, Tomasi, an unpublished genius in his sixties, was dead. One hundred thousand copies of his novel have been printed—this, in a country in which a serious work of fiction that attracts five thousand customers is considered a notable success.

If *Il Gattopardo* were a *libro giallo* or a *libro rosso*—a mystery story or a cheap romance—the sales would not be surprising. Italy, with its own magnificent outcroppings that still blessedly remain above water, is being submerged, like all of us, under the dismal brown tide of middle-mass taste: television, jukeboxes, pinball machines (although the latter are now permitted only in church recreation halls), *canzonette* instead of grand opera, Domenico Modugno and Perry Como, comic books, cheap films, the popular machine-made arts. All the more puzzling, there-

fore, is the relatively wide popular success of *Il Gattopardo*, a novel elegant in style and uncompromisingly anti-mass in its sentiment and in its taste. Here is one of those happy occasions, all too rare, in which artful critics and the artless public agree about a work of art.

With some exceptions. During the electioneering for the Strega literary prize, Alberto Moravia, who was sponsoring a hard-boiled Roman-dialect novel called *La Vita Violenta* by Pier Paolo Pasolini, was quoted as declaring: "Whoever votes for *Il Gattopardo* is voting against the modern Italian novel." To my American ears this dictum of the famous Moravia sounded uncomfortably like the Zhdanov decrees, despite the fact that Moravia's point of issue was not politics but literary tendency. Critics here are hasty to categorize writers according to their "tendencies"—are they realistic or are they idealistic? The precise meaning of these categories is hidden in clouds of rhetoric. The categories, of course, disintegrate when brought within the field of force of any true work of art.

Gratifyingly, despite Moravia's ill-tempered remark, *Il Gattopardo* won the Strega Award, the most important Italian literary prize. Equal-

ly gratifying, as a sign that not all writers here are imprisoned within their "tendencies," was the fact that the Socialist Ignazio Silone, whose style is far from aristocratic and whose novels deal with peasants rather than princes, ardently stood sponsor for the Prince of Lampedusa's posthumous work. "Oh, well, they're both *meridionali*—"southerners" was one "explanation" of Silone's above-the-barricade attitude. It is difficult for some Italian intellectuals not to search for hidden motives in acts of simple sincerity. Oddly enough, the same argument was used to explain why Elio Vittorini, known to Americans for his novel *Conversations in Sicily*, had turned *Il Gattopardo* down when it was offered to another publisher. Vittorini is said to have adjudged the book an essay rather than a novel. "Oh, well, they're both Sicilians," I was told with a smile.

The literary Left has also refused to join in the applause. How can they clap for a historical novel that is less than convinced about the desirability of the Risorgimento, and hopeless about "progress" in Sicily? So left-wing critics, while admitting the superb literary quality of this historical novel, denigrate the author's sense of history. "Where are the heroic peasants?" they cry; which recalls to an American our proletarian literary critics of the 1930's—"But where are the Scottsboro Boys?"

The publisher of this new commercial and critical success is Feltrinelli, who broke with the Communists to print Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago*. (Pantheon, the American publisher of *Doctor Zhivago*, is planning to bring out an English translation of *Il Gattopardo*.) With two such hits—the humanistic poetic anti-statism of the Russian and the ironic melancholy *plus ça change*ism of the Sicilian—Feltrinelli undoubtedly will be charged with having formed a "tendency" all his own.

A PART from the indisputable merits of the work, interest was stirred up by the romantic legend of the mysterious Sicilian prince who had published nothing during his lifetime and then left a masterpiece. The story is told in Giorgio Bassani's preface:

"The first and last time that I saw

Giuseppe Tomasi, Prince of Lampedusa, was in the summer of 1954, at San Pellegrino Terme, on the occasion of a literary convention . . ." The revelation of the gathering was the poetry of a Sicilian baron named Lucio Piccolo, sponsored by the well-known poet Eugenio Montale. The baron, distracted, timid, dressed in *démodé* elegance, had come up from Sicily by train, accompanied by an older cousin and a servant. This bizarre trio, always together, aroused the curiosity of everyone—"The servant, bronzed and robust as a mace-bearer, never for a moment took his eyes off the other two . . . That was enough to excite a tribe of *litterati* on semi-vacation."

Piccolo introduced Bassani to his cousin: Giuseppe Tomasi, Prince of Lampedusa. "He was a tall gentleman, corpulent, taciturn: pallid-faced, with that grayish complexion of dark-skinned southerners. Judging by his accurately buttoned topcoat, the brim of his hat pulled over his eyes, the knotty cane on which he leaned heavily while walking, one would have taken him at first glance for a retired general or something like that. He was older than Lucio Piccolo, now nearing sixty. He strolled alongside his cousin in the valleys surrounding the *Kursaal*, or sat in on the work of the convention, always silent, always with the same bitter twist to his lips. When he was presented he limited himself to bowing briefly without saying a word."

Five years later a Neapolitan friend telephoned Bassani, who was editing a series for Feltrinelli. "He had a book for me, he said, a novel. An acquaintance had sent it to him some time ago from Sicily. He'd read it, it had seemed very interesting . . ." "Who wrote it?" I asked. "Oh, I don't know. I don't believe it will be difficult to find out, though."

In due course the typescript arrived, without signature. No sooner had Bassani ". . . savored the first delicious phrases, I knew that this was a serious work, the work of a real writer."

He telephoned immediately to Palermo. There he learned that the author was the man he had met at the literary convention five years before, and who had died at Rome in the spring of 1957.

In the late spring of 1958, Bassani went to Palermo. "And it was a very fruitful trip, after all: because the original manuscript of the novel—a thick lined notebook almost entirely filled with the small calligraphy of the author—revealed on examination that it was much more complete than the typescript . . ."

FROM the author's wife, the Baroness Alessandra Wolff-Stomersee, born in the Baltic of an Italian mother, Bassani learned some facts about the writer. The most surprising was that the book had been entirely written in a few months before the author's fatal illness set in. Apparently the stimulus of the literary conference at San Pellegrino had finally goaded him to undertake the novel on which he had meditated for twenty-



five years. According to the widow, Tomasi had always had in mind a historical novel set in Sicily during the period of the landing of Garibaldi, and founded upon the figure of his paternal great-grandfather, Giulio di Lampedusa, astronomer. "He thought of it continually," said the widow, "but he never decided to begin." Besides the manuscript of the novel, Bassani found other unedited, unpublished papers: four short stories, various essays on French nineteenth-century narrative artists, and letters.

The portrait of the artist that emerges from *Il Gattopardo* and the random papers, as well as the reminiscences of friends and relatives, is that of an old-style urbane aristocrat, versed in many languages, reading in the original the best in all

principal European literatures. One of the manuscripts was a remarkably perceptive essay on Stendhal, written in 1955, part of a course on French nineteenth-century literature the prince gave for a group of young friends in his palace at Palermo. Recently published, this essay substantiates every point of its analysis with pertinent references to Goethe, Horace, Virgil, Dante, Ariosto, Manzoni, Shakespeare, Ronsard, Corneille, Cervantes, Voltaire, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Joyce, Proust, and Freud, as well as numerous lesser-known figures in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century French literature. Tomasi seems to have read everything, and, as one might have expected, spent much time abroad during the vulgarity of Fascism.

It is understandable that Stendhal should have been one of his greatest loves. Indeed, there are frequent Stendhalian echoes in *Il Gattopardo*—even the name of the protagonist, Prince Fabrizio, is the same as that of the hero of *La Chartreuse de Parme*—although Tomasi's style is succulent where Stendhal's is dry. But beyond the forging of separate sentences, a similar manner and tone informs both writers: what they share is irony and discretion. In the "*Lezioni Su Stendhal*," Tomasi quotes admiringly Stendhal's power of summing up a night of love in a semicolon: "*La vertu de Julien fut égale à son bonheur; il faut que je descende par l'échelle dit-il à Mathilde, quand il vit l'aube du jour paraître.*" *Il Gattopardo* abounds with similar evocative discretions. The prince visits his mistress. Moravia would have taken us inside, seated us on the bed, and given us a lesson in the physiology of love. Any number of Americans would have given us the mechanics of love. Tomasi leaves us with the sight of the prince knocking at the door of his mistress's apartment: "I sin, it is true, but I sin in order not to sin beyond this, in order not to continue to excite myself, in order to free myself of this carnal thorn, in order not to be dragged into worse evils. The Lord knows this." As in Stendhal and in Tolstoy, physiology and mechanics are left to our imagination.

It is generally agreed that *Il Gattopardo* is the best postwar

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Italian novel, perhaps the best of this century. Tomasi is the third great Sicilian to add luster to Italian letters: but he has little in common with the naturalism of Giovanni Verga or the nervous folklore and metaphysical dread of Luigi Pirandello. For Tomasi's antecedents we must, as he did, graze in literary pastures far outside the sweet landscapes of this peninsula: *The Pickwick Papers* was his favorite bedtime reading, Stendhal he admired to the point of idolatry, and, as might be expected, according to his widow, he gave the palm to the Olympian Tolstoy over the Dionysian Dostoevsky. Humor, psychological penetration, balanced and broad historical vision—these are precisely the qualities of Tomasi's masterpiece.

To those, however, whose tastes have been steamrollered into the gray pavement "realism" of much Italian (and American) documentary fiction, Tomasi's manner will seem archaically baroque, florid. But one must not be fooled by the volutes and piled imagery of these paragraphs: this writer is not interested in turning a phrase for its own sake. His characters are vividly alive; psychology interests the author more than intricacies of plot; and always there is a very modern twentieth-century mind at work, a clear poetically scientific gaze directed upon an event in history; a sharp if melancholy realization of the inevitable event: the passing of the old order, the rise of a new united Italy, the rise to power of the bourgeoisie.

IN this historical novel dealing with the repercussions of the Risorgimento in Sicily, the author's sympathies are obviously with his protagonist: the humanistic, authoritarian, cynical Prince Fabrizio, a cultured representative of the old barons of the island. But although Don Fabrizio has no faith whatever in the possibility of making any fundamental changes in Sicily, he is far-seeing and intelligent enough to realize that the Bourbon monarchy must be swept away. Like his favorite nephew, young Falconieri, the prince supports the Garibaldian forces. "If we're not with them, they will form a republic. If we want everything to remain as it is, then everything must change . . ." And yet, like Balzac,

Tomasi does not permit his personal sympathies to distort the clarity of his historical vision.

The theme is not unlike Proust's—the long-drawn decline of an aristocratic society, the rise of a new money-making class, and the pathetic efforts of the old to preserve itself by marrying into the new. But Tomasi's manner, though elegant, is distilled where Proust's is expansive; the Sicilian is more glinting, sharper-faceted. The symbols in *Il Gattopardo* act like a delayed time bomb, exploding in the memory long after the reading. The title, for example. A gattopardo is a serval, a kind of wildcat, long-legged, tawny-skinned with black spots. Here it serves as heraldic sign of the Salina family, the beautifully fierce symbol of the old order of Sicilian barons. But at the end of the book—we are now in 1910—the aristocratic wildcat has become the cobwebby and wormy hide of a dead dog. The moth-eaten pelt of Bendicò, dead for forty-five years, is tossed at last from an upper window upon the garbage heap in the courtyard: "During its flight down from the window, its form recomposed itself for an instant: one would have been able to see dancing in the air a quadruped with a big mustache, and the right forepaw seemed to be raised as in imprecation. Then all found peace in a heap of livid dust."

Similarly one remembers the prince's country mansion at Donnafugata: a huge labyrinth of rooms, even Don Fabrizio does not know how many. Through these mysterious crumbling passages wander the plighted lovers: the virile, penniless young nobleman Tancredi and his lovely rich plebeian Angelica, whose mother had been a pig tender. When I first read these delicious scenes, I marveled at the psychological truth of young lovers searching for romantic places in which to be alone, the evocative mood of dust and cobwebs

and falling masonry. Only later did the lurking symbolism explode in my memory: the decaying mansion of aristocracy in which the lovers—a marriage of two classes—search for whatever is salvageable. They find nothing: the mansion is doomed to destruction.

LIKE US, the Italians have their southern problem, and it is by no means the exquisite literary qualities alone that have created all the stir over *Il Gattopardo*. When Fabrizio is urged to accept a post as senator in the new kingdom, the prince, while believing it is his duty to "adhere" to the new state, refuses to "participate" in it. "We Sicilians have been accustomed to a long, very long hegemony of governments which were not of our religion, which did not speak our language. And so we split hairs. If we hadn't done that, we would not have escaped from Byzantine tax collectors, from Berber emirs, from Spanish viceroys. Now the mold is set; that's how we're shaped . . . In Sicily it doesn't matter whether one does well or does ill: the sin that we Sicilians will never forgive is simply to 'do.' We're old, very old. For twenty-five centuries, at least, we've carried on our shoulders the weight of magnificent heterogeneous civilizations, all coming from without, not a single one germinating from amongst ourselves . . . We're as white as the Queen of England, yet for two thousand five hundred years, we've been a colony. I'm not saying this to complain: It's our fault. But we're tired and emptied just the same . . . Sleep, sleep is what Sicilians want and they always hate whoever tries to awaken them, even to bring them the most beautiful presents. Every Sicilian manifestation, even the most violent, is an expression of morbid dreaminess: our sensuality is a desire for oblivion, our knifings and shootings a desire for death; our laziness is a desire for voluptuous immobility, that is, again, for death."

Undoubtedly, such exasperated discourses by a Sicilian about his own house partially explain *Il Gattopardo's* popularity in this country. Lovers of good literature rejoice at the apparition of this superb wildcat; others are pleased that it is biting its own tail.



Algeria in the Good Old Days

JOHN PHILLIPS

MY FATHER WAS a *colon*. Like all colons he owned a farm, made wine, grew wheat, wore a shaggy mustache to impress the native help, and complained about France's lack of understanding of Algerian problems. He was, however, different from the others. He came from Wales. This made him the only foreign colon in Algeria. The others, mostly noncommittal farmers from Normandy, suspiciously called him "*l'Anglais*" until he established an *entente cordiale*.

My father's farm was in Great Kabylia, also known as La Kabylie du Djurdjura on account of the Djurdjura mountains, where the cedars grow. It was there I was born on a Friday the thirteenth in 1914. On the next market day I was registered at the town hall of Bouira, the township of our district, seventy-seven miles south of Algiers on Route 5.

I was three when my father sold his farm to enlist in the French Army. He had to give up the farm because Kabyles do not work for a woman, and Kabylia was no place for my mother to be alone with a child during the war. Had it not been for this, it is likely I would be a colon today, blindly fighting the Arabs as the present owners must be doing.

Kabylia is a land where mountains rise above torrential *oueds* that inundate a countryside gashed by deep ravines. The wild appearance matches the character of the Kabyles. These Kabyles, Berbers like most natives in North Africa, had been converted to the Moslem faith through conquest; Arabs by assimilation, they became fanatics.

Kabylia left its imprint on me. My nanny was a Berber and the first words I uttered were in her language. Although these were soon blotted out when we moved to Algiers, my speech, even today, has a peculiar Arabic guttural which marks me out.

A child in North Africa, I was very much like Douanier Rousseau—in reverse. While he painted exotic landscapes in a French suburb, I, a

small boy beneath the blue sky of Islam, living in the midst of natives and the smell of jasmine, imagined a strange picture of my father's country, Wales, a land that, below soggy clouds, lay shrouded in puritanism. My mother's home, Troy, New York, which manufactured shirts for a continent, was no easier for me to visualize. For the only place I knew was El Djezair, where the numerical majority was considered a minority and wore their shirts outside their pants.

In Arabic El Djezair means "the islands." These disappeared in harbor works when El Djezair became the city of Algiers—an island of France unwilling and unable to become integrated with Arab Algeria. If you look at Algiers from the harbor, the French town rises above you, like



staggered stacks of shoe boxes, all the way to the Bois. Off to the right of this European town the Kasbah sprawls, a twisted and convulsed mass of low white houses.

I still cannot forget the smell of Algiers, which lingers around the docks and drifts out to sea. It is mixed up, like the population. In my mind, the predominant essence is the stale aroma from large empty

wine casks piled up along the wharfs. But there are also the smells of leather, of oranges, of dampness, and of cookies fried in oil.

The sound of Algiers! I recall it best from the Café Tantonville where my father drank *apéritifs* and gave me pistachio ice cream to keep me from fidgeting. All around the café terrace the noise rises in a ground swell. Native drivers honk their horns with insistence and scream at barefoot urchins tearing across the street without looking, arms outstretched, eyes popping. In the distance a streetcar screeches off toward Bab el Oued, a district of narrow streets that overflows with people haggling in Algerian and Arab French, Spanish, and Maltese. Close by from a mosque the muezzin summons the faithful in a long monotonous singsong.

ACROSS the café, a word echoes harshly above the chatter of conversation—"roho," a native word used by Europeans to brush aside the Arabs, who outnumber them ten to one. An offhand "*roho*" and the young bootblack gaily rattles the wooden box he uses as a footrest and scampers off. An impatient "*roho!*" dismisses the peanut and burnt-almond vendors. Two angry "*rohos*" get rid of the rug and curio salesmen (most of whose wares come from France). Three "*rohos*" are needed to discourage the skinny Moroccan acrobats who perform wild cartwheels. Four "*rohos*" are required for beggars in rags with obsequious manners and cold eyes. And a whole string of "*rohos*" simply makes the fat man with gold teeth sigh, put his dog-eared post cards back into a breast pocket, and offer his sister, whom he calls a gazelle.

The abyss between the European and the Arab was due to a simple reason nobody gave much thought to. Everybody was enchanted about the conquest of Algeria, except the natives. Although France brought progress and hygiene which enabled the Arab population to increase by millions, this only meant so many million more voices in protest. There were, it is true, a few *caïds*, chieftains, who cantered around on their white Arabian horses and proclaimed their devotion to France on the fourteenth of July. But their