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## Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa in Class

Javier Marías

THE SADDEST thing about the whole rather sad story of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa is the publication of his one, world-famous novel, *The Leopard*, because it could be said that it was the only extraordinary thing to have happened in his life, although it happened, in fact, in death, sixteen months after he had departed this world. This is why he is one of the few writers who never felt he was a writer or lived as if he were one, even less so than others who also failed to publish anything during their lifetime, for the simple reason that he did not even attempt to do so until almost the end of his days. Not only did he make no attempt to get published, he did not even attempt to write anything.

He was more of a *reader*, insatiable and obsessive. The few people who knew him well were astonished at his encyclopaedic knowledge of literature and history, on both of which subjects he possessed a vast library. He had not only read all the important and essential writers, but also the second-rate and the mediocre, whom, especially as regards the novel, he considered to be as necessary as the greats: "One has to learn how to be bored," he used to say, and he read bad literature with interest and patience. Buying books was almost his sole expense and sole luxury, although the possibilities that Palermo offered in this respect to a man who knew English, French, German, and Russian (as well as Spanish in the last year of his life) were desperately limited. Nevertheless, given the futile existence he led, that of a provincial aristocrat, he would spend at least a couple of hours each morning inspecting the bookshops, especially one called Flaccovio, which he visited every day for ten years.

The truth is that Lampedusa's mornings must have appeared to his fellow citizens to be mornings of utter idleness, which they doubtless were. While Licy, his Latvian psychoanalyst wife, recovered in bed from the hours which, by her own choosing, she spent working late into the night, Lampedusa would get up early and walk to a café-cum-pâtisserie where he would take a long breakfast and read. On one occasion, he did not move for four hours, the time it took him to finish a large novel by Balzac, from start to finish. Then he would undertake his long tour of the bookshops, after which he would go to another café, where he would sit but not mix with a few acquaintances of his with semi-intellectual pretensions. He would listen to "their nonsense" and hardly say a word, and then, after all these marathon sittings and feeble peregrinations, return home on the bus. He is always described as walking wearily along, looking very distinguished, but with a somewhat careless gait, his eyes alert, holding in his hand a leather bag crammed with the books and cakes and biscuits on which he would have to survive until evening, since lunch was never served

at home. He carried that famous bag with great nonchalance, quite unconcerned that volumes of Proust were sitting cheek by jowl with titbits and even courgettes. Apparently the bag always contained more books than were strictly necessary, as if it were the luggage of a reader setting off on a long journey, who was afraid he might run out of reading matter while away. According to his wife, he always had some Shakespeare with him, so that "he could console himself with it if he should see something disagreeable" on his wanderings.

So passionate was Lampedusa's love of books that he even used them as strongboxes: he was in the habit of placing small quantities of money between the pages of various volumes, always forgetting afterwards, of course, in which book those notes were to be found. This was the basis for his remark that his library contained two different kinds of treasure.

Money, as you can imagine, never constituted a problem for him, but less because he was very rich than because he lacked all ambition. While it is true that he was wealthy enough never to have to work, a shared inheritance and the various crises of the century made of him very much a nobleman come down in the world. His habits were modest: apart from bookshops, these consisted in frequent visits to the cinema and occasional meals out at a restaurant; he did not even travel, although he had done so fairly often in his youth. He noted down in his diary which films he had seen (two or three a week), along with a single adjective: when he saw *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, the adjective he chose was *spet-tacolare*.

In 1954, three years before his death, he wrote: "I am a very solitary person. Out of the sixteen hours I spend awake each day, at least ten are spent in solitude. I do not, however, spend all that time reading; sometimes I amuse myself by concocting literary theories..." This is not entirely true, since, after his death, he did not leave behind him anything that could be described as literary theory. What he did leave were about a thousand pages on English and French literature, and the astonishing thing is that, initially, these pages were intended for just one person, Francesco Orlando. He was a young man from a bourgeois family (and is now an illustrious teacher and critic) to whom Lampedusa, in his final years, offered to teach both English and a complete course on the literature of that language. Occasionally that only student was not alone, but this was very much the exception. Three times a week, at six o'clock in the evening, Lampedusa would receive Orlando in his house and have him slowly read out the lesson that he, the prince, had written for this purpose, or else they would read together, especially Dickens and Shakespeare. This generous, selfless, and idiosyncratic method of teaching

changed Lampedusa's life, and in it may lie, in part, the origin of his belated decision to write. At any rate, this contact with young people and the chance to "transmit something to them" (the literary talks, if not the classes, spread to other friends the same age as Orlando) revitalized him and filled his evenings with something more than mere solitary reading. He took these classes very seriously indeed, as evidenced by comments he made bemoaning their bad or hasty preparation: "the worst pages ever written by human pen" is how he described what he had written on the life of Byron, "an utter abomination." His gentle irony led his pupil to believe that, once read by him and, indeed, as soon as he left the house, the fate of these texts was to be consigned immediately to the fire. Fortunately, however, Lampedusa kept them, and these pages—not at all scholarly, but full of wisdom, humor, seriousness, and refinement—are now beginning to be published.

He was very interested in writers' lives, believing, like Sainte-Beuve, that in those lives, or in their most secret anecdotes, could be found the key to a writer's work. Perhaps that is why—as well as to make the work of exegetes more difficult—he left very few anecdotes himself, and if there were secrets in his life, he did his best to ensure that they remained so: that is, he kept them secret. The only scrap of gossip about Lampedusa, of the kind he liked to know about his idols, was that he may have been impotent, as suggested by the fact that he had no children (but then he was thirty-seven when he married his wife) and by his apparent lack of passion for Licy, with whom, in the early years, when she found Sicily hard to bear and spent a large part of the year at the palace in Latvia where she had been born, he kept up what has been called *un matrimonio epistolare*—"an epistolary marriage." Any other anomalies belonged not to him but to his ancestors, the closest being the murder of an aunt of his, stabbed to death in a seedy Roman hotel by the baron who was her lover.

Lampedusa was as eccentric and obsessive as all writers, even though he did not know he was a writer: he hated melodrama and Italian opera, which he considered a barbarous art; in fact, he hated anything explicit. His favorite Shakespeare play was *Measure for Measure*, but he preferred, above all, Sonnet 129. He suffered from insomnia and from nightmares, but only at the end of his life did he deign to recount one of these to his psychoanalyst wife: in the dream he was walking down corridors asking for information about his imminent execution. He drank only

water, but he ate well (he was plump) and smoked heavily, not even noticing the ash sprinkling his jacket. He would shake the hand of the person being introduced to him without looking the person in the face; in society, he was shy, taciturn, solitary, and sad, so much so that many people believed that, in certain circumstances, he simply refused to speak. In private, on the other hand, with his few close friends and even fewer pupils, his conversation was brilliant and precise, pleasant and always slightly sarcastic. He could be pedantic: he spoke to each of his dogs in one of the various languages he knew. Francesco Orlando said of him that he had the air of "a vast, abstracted feline."

Little is known about his political views, if, indeed, he had any very clear views, apart from his hatred of Sicily and the Sicilians, although this was a superficial hatred, in that it carried with it a large dash of love. But he condemned all Sicily's social classes. He was anticlerical, in the old-fashioned way, and believed, anyway, that everything ended "down here." Gentle in manner, he accepted with irony and sorrow the initial rejection of his novel by some publishing houses, while his wife noted eloquently in her diary: "*Refus de ce cochon de Mondadori*" ("Rejected by that pig from Mondadori"). According to Lampedusa, what finally made him decide to write was seeing one of his cousins, Lucio Piccolo, another late starter, win both a prize and the applause of Montale for a volume of poems he had written. "Being mathematically certain that I was no more foolish than Lucio, I sat down at my desk and wrote a novel," he said in a letter to a friend. He was convinced that *The Leopard* deserved to see the light of day, but he also had his doubts. "It is, I fear, rubbish," he remarked to Francesco Orlando, who claims that he said this in good faith.

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa died of lung cancer on the morning of July 23, 1957, at the age of sixty, at the house of some relatives in Rome, where he had gone for treatment. He was sleeping, and his sister-in-law found him.

Lampedusa believed that one always had to leave people to make their own mistakes. He, of course, made his, and knew nothing of the success that chose not to wait for him. One of the misfortunes of his life, he said, had been a certain hardness of heart, and he once gave this warning to his beloved cousin Gioacchino, who was forty years his junior and whom Lampedusa finally adopted: "Be careful," he said. "*Cave obdurationem cordis.*" □

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)

### How to Speak Latin

First, learn Latin. Then speak it aloud.  
Record yourself on a tape and play it back  
at night, in the dark, when this dark  
could be any dark and this night any night  
in the long history.

—Anna Ziegler