

# Rereadings

## The Leopard and the ruins of history

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's novel is a lesson in the anarchic motions of our times

By Tanjil Rashid

What do you do when time is out of joint, when history's tectonic plates clash and unleash seismic shifts throughout society, when the tsunami of one class, nation, or ideology engulfs another, when lava and ash fly all around? What then? One disaster response remains surprisingly consistent in the Western tradition: you sit down and read a novel; better still, you write one.

That is precisely what Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, the last prince of that much storied Sicilian isle, did on approaching the end of a life of unanticipated upheaval. Born in 1896 into a family of ancient nobility – no ancestor had held a job more recently than the Crusades – Di Lampedusa lived through two world wars, serving ineptly in both, and the waning of an aristocracy that, during the belle époque of his childhood, everyone presumed would rule forever. So, he retreated into his library, reading, then writing. Just before he died in 1957, he finished *The Leopard*. It would go on to become the greatest novel in modern Italian literature, guiding generations through the bewildering caprices of history.

Fiction is not, as a contemporary prejudice suggests, an escape from the ravages of time. Far from it. The whole point of the novel, the very reason for the form's existence – as the Hungarian theorist Georg Lukács suggested during the First World War – is historical rupture, the fragmentation of reality. This moves the novelist into a reactionary exertion, to reshape it into some semblance of order. In other words, when history trembles and leaves the image of a society lying shattered on the floor, the novelist pieces the shards back together into a vision of

what it might once have been like. This envisioning inevitably reveals more about the present than the past – as *The Leopard* shows.

Written in the ruins of postwar Italy (Di Lampedusa's palace had been destroyed by Allied bombing) it was published – following successive rejections – a year after the author had died under the impression all his scribblings were in vain. The historical novel, a chronicle of what happened in a village in Sicily in 1860, became a sensation, with 52 reprints in six months, igniting a lively debate across the continent about a country that had too often been its proverbial “sick man”. It won the Strega, Italy's top prize, and when Luchino Visconti made it into a film that won the Palme d'Or. Now, the novel has become Netflix's latest big-budget costume drama, proving there's life in the old leopard yet.

Di Lampedusa displaced the plot of *The Leopard* back beyond his birth to Italy's modern founding in the mid-19th century, the time of the Risorgimento – the movement to unify the country led by Giuseppe Garibaldi. These events are interpreted through the eyes of Don Fabrizio, Prince of Salina, or simply – echoing another august invention of Italian letters – “the Prince”. He is the heir to a great dynasty approaching extinction in the new liberal order. The leopard, his heraldic figure (like Di Lampedusa's), is a magnificent, bewhiskered, endangered feline, who serves as the novel's central motif, declaring the author's identification with the Prince as a creature out of time, the last of his genus.

Garibaldi and his red-shirted army land in Sicily to annex it to the fledgling Italian state, ostensibly a kingdom, but the Prince can see that monarchy's time is up. The Bourbons who rule Sicily from Naples are deposed, not that the Prince rates the king (“a seminarian dressed up as a general”). Even less worthy are his own people, the decadent, feckless nobility. But he's sceptical about their replacement: the rising bourgeoisie, embodied by the uncouth Sedara family, who have designs on the Prince's inherited privileges, property, and even pedigree. They have what Don Fabrizio calls the “deluded and rapacious mind of a liberal”, for every freedom they espouse comes with a lease to jack up or a genealogy to doctor.

This scepticism about the Risorgimento reflects a broader attitude towards political promises generally, not least those of the great world-promisers to come – the *fascisti* still fresh in the author's memory. We, as readers, are artfully cajoled into this scepticism: by setting his novel in the past, Di Lampedusa creates a kind of historically conscious dramatic irony, where past aspirations can be judged by their future fruits. Don Fabrizio's accountant, eyeing up the spoils to be vacated by the aristocracy, proclaims, “Glorious new days will dawn for this Sicily of ours.” Of course, we know those days never did dawn. Similarly, when a plebiscite on joining the new Italy is held in Donnafugata, the Prince's country seat, all anti-unification ballots mysteriously disappear. Italian democracy has ever since been dogged by corruption, traced here to its very origin.

**The Leopard**  
Giuseppe  
di Lampedusa  
Collins and  
Harvill, 1960





**Plus ça change:** Burt Lancaster plays the Prince opposite Claudia Cardinale in Luchino Visconti's 1963 film adaptation

**C**hange, however dramatic the guises in which it comes, is an illusion – perhaps *The Leopard's* most enduring impression. In a now famous line, Don Fabrizio's cherished nephew, an aristo turned Red Shirt jostling for power, declares: "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change." Change, even revolution, becomes a Trojan horse for the status quo, and in this vision of politics as a cynical masquerade, *The Leopard* turns out to have more in common with Machiavelli than simply the fact it concerns a prince.

*The Leopard* is filled with dazzling rhetoric in the fine tradition of Italian writers after the Renaissance, whose greatest distinction lay in rhetoric and theory, from Machiavelli to Vico. The lengthy debate between Don Fabrizio and the government emissary Chevalley could stand alone among the best of their works. Chevalley, having come down from Turin, pleads with the Prince to become a senator, to bring progress to his downtrodden island. Don Fabrizio declines; Chevalley's "hope to canalise Sicily into the flow of universal history" (there's Vico, for the eagle-eyed) is ▶

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◀ dismissed as arrogant, ignorant, and yet another outsider seeking to impose an alien new order on a demoralised people:

We are old, Chevalley, very old. For more than 25 centuries we've been bearing the weight of a superb and heterogeneous civilisation, all from outside, none made by ourselves, none that we could call our own. We're as white as you are, Chevalley, and as the Queen of England; and yet for two thousand and five hundred years we've been a colony.

The contemporary reader hears a postcolonial resonance here. Sicily was ruled by everyone from the Byzantines to the British, all treating it as a paving stone on the road to the Middle East – where, for mainland Italians, it may as well have been. Camillo Cavour, Italy's first prime minister, who governed as *The Leopard* unfolds, thought Sicilians spoke Arabic. The wounded mentality of the colonised, the naivety of nation-building projects – things that would later be described in VS Naipaul's novels – are all found here. Don Fabrizio bemoans:

... this continual tension in everything, and these monuments, even, of the past, magnificent yet incomprehensible because not built by us and yet standing around like lovely mute ghosts; all those rulers who landed from every direction, who were at once obeyed, soon detested, and always misunderstood, their only expressions works of art we couldn't understand and taxes which we understood only too well and which they spent elsewhere: all these things have formed our character, which is thus conditioned by events outside our control as well as by a terrifying insularity of mind.

I find it almost consoling how futile the winds of change are in the face of the almost *geological* resistance of millennia: they blow along the surface, without making even a dent into the rocky carapace of history. Of course, change happens – Don Fabrizio catalogues the Byzantine tax gatherers, the Berber emirs, and the Spanish viceroys who have come and gone from Sicily – but he seems to tell us that all change can be located, as Vico too once argued, within an unstinting, overarching pattern. The insight abides; today, perhaps, into the bloodlands of Ukraine and Russia, imperilled by intermittent war for centuries.

But *The Leopard* is no apologia for the status quo, whether under Bourbon rule or any other kind. Its original critics on the Italian left would have been surprised to learn – as we since have from the lectures he gave to local students – that Di Lampedusa favoured Cromwell and the Jacobins over the decapitated kings of England and France. Yes, there's the novel's pessimism about class struggle. "If," Di Lampedusa writes of aristocracy, "this class were to vanish, an equivalent one would be formed straight away with the same qualities and defects." Yet the relentless focus on class is indebted to Marx, his influence wryly acknowledged when

Don Fabrizio alludes to "some German Jew whose name I can't remember".

The Prince's suspicion of revolution finds echoes within Marxist tradition, particularly in the writings of Antonio Gramsci, who purported that the Risorgimento wore only the camouflage of revolution. It's not known how much Di Lampedusa knew of the master theoretician of Italian communism – a near contemporary of his who similarly rose to prominence only posthumously and would acquire an influence on Italian politics rivalling his own. *The Leopard* often even becomes directly reminiscent of some of Gramsci's own work, particularly the sprawling volume known as the *Prison Notebooks* – it's virtually a novelisation of Gramsci's now ubiquitous assertion (originally made regarding prewar Italy) that "the old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born". When Don Fabrizio declares himself to be "swung between the old world and the new", he is referring to the same convulsions.

Much of the novel's eloquence arises from its author's gift for evoking these worlds side by side in exquisite, sensuous prose. Who can forget the Prince's introductory walk? As he ambles through his walled garden, what should be a picture of fragrant vitality is transformed into one of putrid decay. The yard smells "like the aromatic liquids distilled from the relics of certain saints" and the roses, fetched from Paris, now look "like flesh-coloured cabbages". When he gets a noseful, he "seemed to be sniffing the thigh of a dancer from the Opéra". (I've always loved that merry imprecation.) A political theorist such as Gramsci could only portend worlds old and dying, or nascent and struggling. A novelist of Di Lampedusa's grandeur lets us smell them in one fell swoop.

Although *The Leopard* really must be *read*, one outstanding image, indeed the last and perhaps the most lasting, offers the advantage to film over text. Unaccountably, it is passed up by Netflix, and indeed Visconti in his version. In the novel's coda, long after Don Fabrizio's death, his daughters retire to the palace, an "inferno of mummified memories", not least of which is the stuffed carcass of their father's dead dog, a stand-in for the late leopard himself, comically demoted from wild cat to domestic canine. Dusty and moth-eaten, it's thrown out into the trash, but "during the flight down from the window its form recomposed itself for an instant; in the air there seemed to be dancing a quadruped with long whiskers..."

A motion picture in words. And most remarkable for militating against the very conservative nostalgia that readers, not unfairly, usually take from the novel. Here, instead, we see tradition pathetically, pointlessly embalmed, unworthy of holding on to; junk. Resurrecting the past is only ever illusory, like the dog appearing to dance and, I think, in a final irony, like *The Leopard* itself. For what else was this novel born of but a desire to reanimate history? It too is illusory, Di Lampedusa means to tell us; all we have done is spend the last 300 pages chasing a mirage. ●

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