



## Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (1896-1957)

[Daniela Shalom Vagata](#)

Novelist.

Active 1926-1957 in Italy

Much of what can be highlighted in a first encounter with Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, the internationally renowned writer of *Il Gattopardo* [*The Leopard*], is the impact of the aristocratic world on his oeuvre. Direct experiences, vital memories and countless anecdotes are filtered through the writer's imagination and distilled into his writing. Even so, Francesco Orlando -- who at the age of twenty benefited from Tomasi di Lampedusa's lessons on French and English literature, attended the reading of *Il Gattopardo* during its writing process and typed out part of the book under the writer's dictation -- warns that a strict correspondence between the author's life and work should not be presumed.

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa was born into an aristocratic family in Palermo in 1896. He was a descendent of the Tasca di Cutò family on his mother's side. His mother, the charming and educated Beatrice Mastrogiovanni Tasca di Cutò, received an international education from her own mother, one which was open to external influences and was vastly distinct from the zealously religious one typical of Sicily at the time. Accordingly, an interest in foreign languages and literature was transmitted to the author of *Il Gattopardo* very early on. On his father's side, Giuseppe is linked to saints, mystics and virtuous aristocrats such as Cardinal Giuseppe Tomasi, 'Il Duca-Santo', Carlo Tomasi and Beata Corbera, as well as the writer's great-grandfather Fabrizio, an astronomy aficionado who provided a source of inspiration for the character of Don Fabrizio. As was the case with many aristocratic Sicilian families, Tomasi di Lampedusa's family assets experienced a rapid decline at the end of the nineteenth century. His father, the Duke of Palma, was a fashionable man in spite of his patrimonial misfortune, however, and regularly attended Circolo Bellini, a gentlemen's club in Palermo mentioned in several of Tomasi di Lampedusa's works.

At the turn of the century, Palermo was one of the leading cities of the *Belle Epoque*, exotic and cosmopolitan: the famed poet Gabriele D'Annunzio nicknamed it 'Palermo Felicissima'. Aristocrats, monarchs and emperors from northern Europe and the Balkans visited Palermo as guests of the notable industrialist Ignazio Florio and his beautiful wife Franca. Giovanni Boldini's portrait of Franca Florio, *Ritratto di donna Franca Florio* (1901-1924) [Portrait of Mrs. Franca Florio]; Raleigh Trevelyan's *Princes Under the Volcano* (1973), a fragmented history of the upper reaches of the English society living in Sicily; and Fulco Santostefano della Cerda's memoirs, *The Happy Summer Days. A Sicilian Childhood* (1976) recorded the splendors of the time. Fulco Santostefano, Duke della Verdura and Marquis della Cerda, an acclaimed jewelry designer for Coco Chanel, played a role in familiarizing Sicilians (among them Tomasi di Lampedusa) with French intellectuals and writers such as Valéry, Cocteau, Gide, Jacob and Radiguet. This period was later described by the writer as happy and carefree in his memoir *Ricordi d'infanzia* [*Childhood Memories*].

In the preface of *Letteratura francese* [French Literature], written by the writer's adopted son Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi, Tomasi di Lampedusa is described as having led a secluded and solitary life. "With the exception of the time he lived at the Italian embassy in London and some trips to Paris during his childhood, Tomasi di Lampedusa led a secluded life similar to the one of all Southern aristocrats which was cut off from emerging society at the fall of the protection provided by the reign of the Bourbons" (Tomasi di Lampedusa, *Opere*, p. 1338). This brief summary, however, does not touch upon his travels to Germany, his stays in Rome and in the north of Italy during his time at the university, his military service and participation in World War I, or his brief career in the Red Cross. It also does not mention his meeting with the aristocratic psychoanalyst Alexandra von Wolff-Stomersee, from Latvia, in 1925 and their subsequent marriage in 1932, the destruction of Palazzo Lampedusa in Palermo due to an American bomb in 1943 (see Tomasi di Lampedusa, p. 346), and his relocation to a palace in Via Butera, Palermo, from 1949, where he lived alongside his wife. Tomasi di Lampedusa and his wife had lived separately, meeting only a few times a year, until the end of World War II, when she moved to Palermo permanently.

Tomasi di Lampedusa did not have any real contact with the literary world until 1954, when he accompanied his cousin, the poet Lucio Piccolo, to a literary awards ceremony in San Pellegrino Terme. At the ceremony, Tomasi di Lampedusa had the opportunity to meet several key literary figures of the time, including the writer Eugenio Montale and the critic Emilio Cecchi. It is said that Tomasi di Lampedusa embarked on the composition of *Il Gattopardo* and of other written texts as a creative *exploit*.

Tomasi di Lampedusa's education, taste, reading, travels and love are recorded in his letters addressed to his cousins Lucio and Casimiro Piccolo, and to Alexandra Wolff. Part of the letters addressed to Alexandra, whom the writer affectionately called Licy, are published in *Lettere a Licy. Un matrimonio epistolare. Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa e Alexandra Tomasi Wolff* (1986) [Letters to Licy. An Epistolary Marriage. Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa and Alexandra Wolff] and in *Licy e il Gattopardo. Lettere d'amore di Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa* (1995) [Licy and the Leopard. Love Letters by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa], while their entire correspondence, comprising more than four hundred letters, was donated to ASPI (*Archivio storico della psicologia italiana*) [Historical Archive of Italian Psychology] by Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi. Beyond providing information on Tomasi di Lampedusa's life, the letters to Alexandra Wolff show the author's reluctance to express passion: Caterina Cardona, curator of *Lettere a Licy*, points out what may be described as a 'screened approach' to intense emotions. Additionally, the letters document Alexandra Wolff's own psychoanalytic activities and both Giuseppe's and Alexandra's difficulties in living together after their marriage.

The letters to his cousins, conversely, were mainly written while Tomasi di Lampedusa was living in London from 1925 to 1930 and are now collected in a volume entitled *Viaggio in Europa* (2006). In *Viaggio in Europa*, intertextual aspects of Tomasi di Lampedusa's work as well as an abundance of literary allusions can be clearly observed. These letters demonstrate the author's extraordinary knowledge of Italian, French and English literature, as well as his preference for allusive and subtle style. Moreover, *Viaggio in Europa* reveals *Il Gattopardo*'s stylistic, inventive and figurative roots. Tomasi di Lampedusa used to sign his letters as "*il mostro*" (the monster), recalling both his tremendous thirst for reading and his enormous size. "*Il mostro*" is a fictitious identity that allows the writer to talk about himself from a distance. Additionally, these letters display Tomasi di Lampedusa's passion for cinema and his fascination with metropolises and their crowds, both considered the epitome of modernity.

Tomasi di Lampedusa produced three articles in his youth. These were published in *Le opere e i giorni* [Works and Days], a monthly magazine from Genova, and are titled *Paul Morand* (May 1926), *W. B. Yeats e il risorgimento irlandese* [W. B. Yeats and the Irish Renaissance] (November 1926) and *Una storia della fama di Cesare* [A story of Cesar's Fame] (March-April 1927). These articles appear to be "summaries" and "encyclopedia-like entries" (Tomasi di Lampedusa, *Opere*, p. 457), and they are vastly different from the subjective critical readings that Tomasi di Lampedusa would later give on English and French literature.

Aside from the articles in *Le opere e i giorni* and the collection of letters, there is no other evidence of Tomasi di Lampedusa's literary activity until 1953. At the end of 1953, on Alexandra Wolff's suggestion, Tomasi di Lampedusa started to give informal lessons in English grammar, followed by lessons in British literature and later French literature, to Francesco Orlando. These lessons, held in Tomasi di Lampedusa's palace, were conceived for Francesco Orlando and occasionally attended by a small public (among them Gioacchino Lanza, who was also allowed to read Tomasi di Lampedusa's notes in private, Gioacchino's fiancé Mirella Radice, Francesco Agnello and Antonio Pasqualino). Before his classes, Tomasi di Lampedusa would write pages of notes, which, however, lack a definitive revision. These were read by Francesco Orlando during his classes. According to Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi, his lessons "represent the broadest and the most meaningful document of Lampedusa's life and world" (Tomasi di Lampedusa, *Opere*, p. 549).

The lessons in English literature appear to be divided into five sections and are in chronological order. Tomasi di Lampedusa undertook hundreds of direct readings (his library counted almost 4000 volumes) and used reference books such as *The Concise Cambridge History of English Literature* (1949) and *Fifty Years of English Literature 1900-1950* (1953), parts of which were translated, summarized and edited. Furthermore, suggestions regarding book editions emerged in his lessons. *Letteratura inglese* shows a special documentary interest in historical background, literary epochs, the arts and the history of fashion and society as well as Tomasi di Lampedusa's inclination towards finding connections between different writers. *Letteratura inglese* covers a wide range of authors, both major and minor, from Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare to James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, though Tomasi di Lampedusa did complain about the lack of contemporary fiction. Tomasi di Lampedusa's lessons in English literature pay special attention to the authors' lives and demonstrate his ability to convert writers' anecdotes into a fictional story based on the stylistic traits of hyperbole and amplification. *Letteratura inglese* provides readers with a valuable insight into Tomasi di Lampedusa's writing methods. It illustrates the writer's concern with narratological questions related to spatial and temporal compression; analysis of rhythm and sound meanings; preference for falsification, verisimilitude, anecdotes and digressions; use of jargon; continuous references to his audience and contemporary events; stylistic fluidity; and an abundance of irony. Many of these stylistic features recur in *Il Gattopardo*.

If *Letteratura inglese* demonstrates Tomasi di Lampedusa's profound knowledge of literature, society and culture, the "connective tissue" that unites all writers, *Letteratura francese* reviews only major French authors, sixteenth-century literature and Stendhal. His analysis of Stendhal's work in particular provides a vital clue to the composition of *Il Gattopardo*, especially in evoking atmosphere, portraying characters through their actions and perceptions, and inviting readers to co-experience characters' points of view. Tomasi di Lampedusa's considerations of Stendhal's work appeared under the title "Lezioni su Stendhal" [Lessons on Stendhal] in the magazine *Paragone*, in April 1959, published by Sellerio in 1977. A detailed look at "Lezioni su Stendhal" is pivotal in gaining an understanding of *Il Gattopardo*.

Firstly, according to Tomasi di Lampedusa, Stendhal's conciseness is to be ascribed to the practice of eliminating a prior abundance of ideas and memories, namely a mental process that transforms memories of the past into new impressions ready to be written. After all, it is no coincidence that Tomasi di Lampedusa mentioned *Vie de Henry Brulard* at the beginning of *Ricordi d'infanzia* in a paragraph concerning the immediacy and sincerity of his feelings, his sensual memories and his attempt to be essential (see Tomasi di Lampedusa, *Opere*, p. 337). At this point, one should take into account Tomasi di Lampedusa's stylistic division of writers into "*scrittori magri*" ["lean writers"] and "*scrittori grassi*" ["plump writers"]: "lean writers" being identified by implicitness and conciseness and "plump writers" by verbal abundance and explicitness. While Stendhal belongs to the group of "lean" writers, Tomasi di Lampedusa is peculiar in the sense that, although his sophisticated use of tropes would render him a "plump writer", he is implicit nonetheless.

Secondly, Tomasi di Lampedusa draws attention to Stendhal's ability to evoke rather than describe atmosphere, places and temporality. This practice is comparable to that of the theatre, in which sensations, gestures,

physiognomy and silence play an important role, while setting could be likened to a *mise en scene*, which silently reinforces the characters' actions and the plot. A prior evocation of place helps readers to fully visualize the set where the action will take place. Tomasi di Lampedusa's considerations on Stendhal's style show his affinity to filmic language and reflect Tomasi di Lampedusa's interest in cinema.

Furthermore, Tomasi di Lampedusa tracks references to the present day as well as the use of anecdotes and fables in Stendhal's novels. He also draws attention to the distinction between narrating time and narrated time, pauses and accelerations in narration, and to variable internal focalizations. Significantly, in *Chartreuse*, the observational center is identified as being with the character leading the narrative flow. As a result, the narrator, characters and reader experience the same point of view, while narrative facts are told from an internal perspective. In 1956, lessons in French literature gradually gave way to Orlando's reading and typing of *Il Gattopardo*.

The writing of *Il Gattopardo* dates back to the final months of 1954. Its composition can be divided into three stages: a first draft of the manuscript written in 1955-1956; a subsequent typescript divided into six parts and typed by Francesco Orlando under the author's dictation from the beginning of 1956 (including parts one to four, seven and eight); and a final but unfinished handwritten copy in eight parts, created by Tomasi di Lampedusa in 1957 and entitled *Il Gattopardo (completo)*. As specified in the volume of *Opere*, the word "part" in lieu of the word "chapter" suggests a separate story, each being told from a different perspective (Tomasi di Lampedusa, *Opere*, p. 6). Each part is, in fact, autonomous. Initially, Lampedusa intended to write a story about the Prince Don Fabrizio, based on the life of his great-grandfather, astronomer Prince Giulio di Lampedusa, and occurring within a timeframe of 24 hours on the day of Garibaldi's landing at Marsala, similar to the 24 hours of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. The writer later split the novel into three fundamental phases: 1860-1862 (first six parts), 1983 (death of Don Fabrizio, part seven), and 1910 (Concetta's memories, part eight).

The story of the composition of *Il Gattopardo* is tightly bound to the story of its publication and rejection from the leading publishers Einaudi and Mondadori due to writer Elio Vittorini's editorial misjudgment. *Il Gattopardo* was published in 1958 by Feltrinelli, as one of their "*Contemporanei*" titles, and was edited by writer Giorgio Bassani. Bassani had received a draft copy from Elena Croce, daughter of the philosopher Benedetto Croce, based on the typed draft in six parts written in 1956. Bassani integrated this draft with another part ("The Ball Episode", part six), a combination of the copy typed out by Alexandra Wolff under the writer's dictation during the last month of his life and the manuscript of 1957, with an additional one ("Holidays of Chaplain Pirrone", part five), based on the handwritten text from 1957, which Bassani discovered in 1958 when he went to Palermo to find the novel's sources. Bassani proofread the typewritten draft of the manuscript, changing a large quantity of variants and correcting punctuation, and he copied the index summary of each part. In 1968, critic Carlo Muscetta raised doubts about the authenticity of *Il Gattopardo* under Bassani's editing and a new edition of the novel based on the manuscript of 1957 was published by Feltrinelli. An overview of these variations is discussed in Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi's foreword of the novel included in *Opere*, which reviews the novel according to the manuscript from 1957. *Il Gattopardo* became an Italian bestseller immediately after its publication, winning the Strega Prize in 1959. *Il Gattopardo* as well as Tomasi di Lampedusa's biography inspired different films. In 1963, Luchino Visconti created his remarkable cinematic version of *Il Gattopardo*, while in 2000 *Il manoscritto del principe*, a film by Roberto Andò on Tomasi di Lampedusa's relationship with his two young pupils, was released.

*Il Gattopardo* depicts the disappearance of the aristocracy and suggests a sense of disillusionment and skepticism regarding the unification of Italy. More specifically, it tells the story of the decline and eventual fall of the aristocratic house of Salina and its last real scion, Don Fabrizio, prince of Salina. Don Fabrizio's story intersects with the ambitions of his favorite nephew, Tancredi, who, in need of money, marries the beautiful and sensual Angelica, daughter of the social climber Don Calogero Sedara.

*Il Gattopardo* can be analyzed in cinematographic terms. On a first reading, the vanishing aristocratic society seems to be narrated from the perspective of Don Fabrizio, Prince of Salina. A deeper analysis of the story, however, reveals that the narrative does not strictly coincide with Don Fabrizio's perspective, but rather appears to employ multiple focal points. This may be compared to a photographic lens: at times the lens takes close-ups of the fictional world of *Il Gattopardo* and presents Don Fabrizio's view and ideology, while in other moments it becomes distant, resulting in a feeling of the readers' estrangement and even alienation from the narrative. The lens draws readers closer at a narrative level through the means of interior monologues, direct dialogue and free indirect speech, while at a stylistic and linguistic level, a zoom is created through the recourse to adjectives corresponding to the character's perspective, the use of hypocorism, augmentatives, enumerations and linguistic mimesis. The presence of flashbacks and leitmotifs, as well as the practice of correlative objects and of personal symbolism, also contribute to this effect and play a role in creating an internalized depiction of places in addition to forging a symbolic net that gradually reveals the novel's ideology. Conversely, distance is created through the means of irony, extra-diegetic voice often put in parenthesis, the narrator's references to his present time and to the practice of writing, his habit of addressing readers directly, and the misappropriation of words to the point in which they lose their original meanings in a kind of "semantic stretch". As a result of these two opposing movements, the novel suggests that an objective representation of the fictional world is impossible.

This interplay between magnification and distance also reveals the coexistence of two contrasting temporal concepts. In *Il Gattopardo*, the linear and diegetic time of history, including the depiction of the aristocracy's collapse, with the disappearance of its traditions and rituals, coexists with the circular time of the novel's narrative. The novel ends up questioning the truth of what happened fifty years beforehand. Similarly, circular time can be seen in Don Fabrizio's desire for temporal immutability and the halting of social change. This desire, however, results in inertia and inactivity, and, eventually, an intimate yearning for death. Romano Luperini (see p. 145) refers to Don Fabrizio's unresponsiveness to social transformation through the quote "e persistenza è solo l'estinzione" ["And persistence is only extinction"] from a verse of Eugenio Montale's "Piccolo Testamento" ["Little Testament"], in *Bufera e altro* [*The Storm and Other Poems*] (1956). Don Fabrizio's unwillingness to accept the course of history mirrors that of Tomasi di Lampedusa himself. *Il Gattopardo*, together with *La sirena* [*The Professor and the Siren*] and *Ricordi d'infanzia*, should ultimately be considered the writer's creative anticipation of death. Despite the fact that Tomasi di Lampedusa did not know he was ill until the end of his novel's composition, *Il Gattopardo* is rich with references to death and decay. The mysterious flow of time that inevitably leads to the end of life is converted into an act of writing.

As previously mentioned, in addition to *Il Gattopardo*, Tomasi di Lampedusa wrote a series of texts which come under the title *I racconti* [*Short Stories*] from 1955. First published in 1961 by Feltrinelli, a critical edition only appeared in 1988. *I racconti* includes *Ricordi d'infanzia* (1955), childhood recollections centered on the houses in which he lived while growing up; two short stories, *La gioia e la legge* [*Joy and the Law*] (1956), the story of a poor clerk dealing with his patronage and social status, and *La sirena* (1956-1957), also known as *Lighea*, according to the title given by the author's widow, which recounts the encounter between the young professor La Ciura and a mermaid; and the first chapter of a second novel he intended to title *I gattini ciechi* [*The Blind Kittens*] (1957), based on the rise of the Ibba family from share-cropper status to landowners.

There are strong intertextual connections between *I racconti* and *Il Gattopardo*, as Salvatore Silvano Nigro has pointed out in his *Il principe fulvo* [*The Reddish Brown Prince*]. These are particularly noticeable in *La sirena* and *I gattini ciechi*. The extensive use of rhetorical figures, attention to characters' physical expression and the practice of a hyperbolic strategy in *La gioia e la legge* and *I gattini ciechi* are all devices employed within *Il Gattopardo*. Equally important is the use of multiple focal points through which readers experience alternate perspectives on the theme of primacy based on latifundium. *I gattini ciechi* is set at the beginning of the twentieth century, eighteen years after Don Fabrizio's death. Some characters, moreover, correspond to those in *Il Gattopardo*.

The novella *La sirena* displays thematic affinities with *Il Gattopardo* rather than stylistic ones. For instance, Don Fabrizio's death, represented as a sensual meeting with a young woman alluded to as the planet Venus, resembles Professor La Ciura's erotic encounter with the siren. The siren is represented either as a meridian demon or a nymph. Given that traditionally meridian demons "possess" humans, causing *acedia* (a mixture of melancholy and sloth), the siren creates an intense longing for death in La Ciura's heart. This desire ultimately results in his joining the immutable order of nature and going beyond human temporality. Additionally, *La sirena* and *Il Gattopardo* both share the theme of aristocratic privilege as well as the oppositions of mortality and immortality, time flow and eternity, form and formlessness, chaos and order. These oppositions are relevant in understanding Lampedusa's symbolic representation of Sicily as a land of gods: a symbol of human aspiration to the eternal.

*Ricordi d'infanzia* was written after Lampedusa's journey to southern Sicily in 1955, with particular reference to the towns Santa Margherita di Belice and Palma di Montechiaro, which once served as a feudal base for Tomasi di Lampedusa's family. The journey provided Tomasi di Lampedusa with creative input for the composition of *Il Gattopardo*, in particular for the ball episode in Palazzo Ponteleone. The prose of *d'infanzia* is fragmentary. It recounts bodily (especially acoustic and visual) impressions of the writer's childhood, such as the vastness of the palace in which he used to live, the dazzling Sicilian light and his parents' reactions to the death of King Umberto I. Much attention is given to sensations in *d'infanzia*, reinforcing the idea that Stendhal's method of creative writing served as a model for Tomasi di Lampedusa.

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa died of lung cancer at the age of sixty in July 1957. He never knew of the enormous success that *Il Gattopardo* would achieve after its publication.

**Note:** The author wishes to thank Gabriella Page for her valuable assistance with the English language.

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