First published in Italian as *Viaggio in Europa*
by Arnoldo Mondadori Editore in 2006
This English translation first published by Alma Books Ltd in 2010

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This book is published with the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Supported by the National Lottery through Arts Council England

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Printed in Great Britain by TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

ISBN: 978-1-84688-111-4

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To write about these letters by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, I cannot help but immerse myself in that world which, on my mother’s side, I half-belong to. It is an insular world. It is the world of Sicily, which Lampedusa defines as “the Iceland of the South” or the “Island of Fire” – and it is the world of Palermo and the Conca d’Oro, which he describes in infernal, Dantesque terms: “a large town, low-lying and red-hot, enclosed in a circle of steel-grey cliffs, the whole enveloped in a great cloud of reddish dust”.

Being half from the island of Sicily and half from that of Venice, I realize that we islanders are odd people, even eccentric, with an inborn need to cook up something – whatever it may be – as long as it’s original. In the Palermo of last century, there were even people who had funerals for their cats, or had the Corriere della Sera publish an obituary for their pet blackbird.

I cannot remember the first time I went to Palermo, and it seems as if I have always been on my way there – I have always felt that dry heat and seen the reddish dust covering the paving stones of the doorway. The sand comes from the Sahara, which the sirocco blows over all the way from Africa, as I was told every year, always unsure whether to believe it or not, yet dreaming of clouds of sand in the sky.

My mother was born in Palermo, and she lived there until she got married. So every year, for Christmas, we went
down to visit the grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins and the whole extended family. All of them belonged to the Bellini Club, just like Lampedusa and his cousins, the Piccolos, to whom most of these letters are addressed.

My grandfather remembered Lampedusa from his times at the Bellini and the various balls, where he often leant against the door jamb, like a spectator rather than an actor in that magical comedy, together with Roberto Lucchesi Palli, Duca della Grazia. As a result, the pair received the nickname of “The Pillars of Hercules”.

At the time, it was common for the Sicilian aristocracy to travel regularly to France and England. In Paris, the ladies would get fitted from head to toe, while the men went to London to get custom-made shirts and shoes, and stopped in Paris for the gibus, the collapsible top hat. We used my grandfather’s as an accordion or – walking with a bone-topped cane in arm – lowered it over our eyes to imitate him.

Among the “travelling” Bellini members, my grandfather Ciccio sent his shirts to London to be laundered. Another member, Cicciuzzo, the “Demented”, from the landowning family of the Cupane barons, was extremely intelligent and had an almost maniacal taste for paradox. He would come out of the library with his clothes all crumpled, exclaiming: “I went on the most marvellous trip – I’ve just come back from China” – and asking the Maestro di Casa, before leaving the Club, to send home a telegram with instructions to wake him up the next morning. Slovenly and always with unkempt hair and beard, he was very different from his cousin Cicciuzzo, the “Lackey”, who always looked like a true gentleman, perfectly turned out and well dressed.
Other members of my Sicilian family travelled too, also in very eccentric ways. One of my uncle’s ancestors had vowed to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land if he survived a cholera epidemic, but since he didn’t have enough money to embark on such a long journey, he decided to replicate the expedition through his garden and inside his own house. So, on a Monday night, he set off for the “Holy Land” with his butler: one day they would camp near the fish pond, where the papyrus plants would brush against the fabric of the tent; another day in the flower bed under the orange-tree blossoms; one day in the stables, and the next in the ballroom or the music room, covering the whole distance until they finally reached their destination. To celebrate their arrival, a mass was held in the house chapel, after which my uncle’s ancestor turned to the butler and said: “And now let’s get ready for the journey home.” To which the butler is said to have replied, in a deferential tone, “M’Lord, if you don’t mind, I’d rather stay here, in the Holy Land.”

In the years between 1925 and 1930, the future author of *The Leopard*, then in his thirties, also travelled a great deal, especially in Europe, reaching as far as the Baltic. He would leave Palermo at the beginning of the summer, and return well into the autumn, after long stays in his beloved England and in Paris, and often also in Germany. Then he would cross Austria, sometimes going on to Latvia, finally to return to Sicily via Switzerland or the Alto Adige region.

In these *Letters from London and Europe* – part sketch-writing and part burlesque entertainment – we can already glimpse a hint of the sort of writing we will find in *The Leopard*. With the precision of a great narrator, Lampedusa gives detailed descriptions of the landscape and the people he meets, mostly referring to himself in the
third person – a solitary traveller who perceives the world around him in a fairly detached way. It is a way of writing and being that is undoubtedly intrinsic to Lampedusa’s character and upbringing, but which is also in some ways influenced and inspired by his roots – that Sicilian world which, perhaps because it is an island, leaves its distinctive and picturesque trace.

Lampedusa’s letters are full of jokes, puns, witticisms, grotesque exaggerations, allusions and literary references – all things which his correspondents, the Piccolo brothers, would have fully understood and appreciated. Of course, one cannot help but notice the occasional cutting remark about Jewish people, or his superficial views on the advance of Fascism. These are elements which unfortunately were, in Lampedusa’s time and circle, fairly common. But it is hardly an ideological judgement on his part – rather a sceptical, crude glance at the outside world.

All in all these letters, like Lampedusa’s masterpiece, The Leopard, in which the actors are members of the family, are a faithful, ironic and paradoxical description of life itself – whether tragic or comic.
Introduction

Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi

The correspondence of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, as preserved by his heirs, consists of two main collections. The most substantial group, which is not included in the present volume and is currently being prepared for publication, is made up of the letters between the married couple. Giuseppe and his wife, Alessandra Wolff Stomersee, exchanged a very large number of letters: about four hundred of them survive. They have come down to us in groups of letters from one spouse to the other; but the two series seldom intersect, and therefore the interlinking coming and going of the correspondence has been lost. These letters, often sent at the rate of three per week, must have been at least twice as many in total, considering the replies are almost always missing. They are all in French, and are characterized by an inconsistent flow of information: the rapport between the spouses would have suffered if it had been too detailed: hence the exchange reflects a relationship which was close and at the same time circumspect (on his part).

The second group consists of about seventy letters sent to Italian correspondents, some of whom were the writer’s best friends. Among these, there is a particular biographical importance for the understanding of the distinctive personality of Lampedusa before 1955 – the year in which my direct testimony and that of my contemporaries begins – in the letters to two friends whom he met in the prison camp: Guido Lajolo and Bruno Revel. These letters are few – three to Revel
and three to Lajolo – but in contrast to the others they are utterly frank, and in them one finds that the correspondents are on the same wavelength. In 2010 Ilaria Erede, granddaughter of Massimo Erede, another fellow prisoner of Lampedusa in Szombathely, wrote her BA dissertation based on twenty-two items – postcards and letters – addressed by Lampedusa to her grandfather. With her father’s permission, four of them, relating to the author’s journey’s through Europe between 1925 and 1927, are added in the Appendix to the present edition. In the Twenties, Massimo Erede played an important role in Lampedusa’s life. Through him he got in touch with Mario Maria Martini, a wealthy man and the editor of the literary monthly *Le Opere e i Giorni*. Lampedusa, under the name Giuseppe Tomasi di Palma, contributed to the monthly in 1926 with two essays on Paul Morand and W.B. Yeats. In 1927 he published a longer essay, which was printed in two successive numbers of the magazine. It is a review of Richard Gundolf’s *Caesar: Geschichte seines Ruhms*. Obviously all the letters to Italian correspondents are in Italian, and therefore in a language of which Lampedusa, in contrast with French, was totally in command.

The bulk of the letters given in this volume, acquired by the Fondazione Biblioteca di via Senato of Milan, are addressed to the Piccolo cousins of Calanovella and represent a crucial discovery for the understanding of Lampedusa in the five years from 1925 to 1930. To the letters which make up this pool are added here two others, to make a total of twenty-nine: one (V) to Casimiro Piccolo, preserved in the archives of the Fondazione Famiglia Piccolo di Calanovella at Capo d’Orlando, the other (XXVII) to Aunt Alice Barbi, the wife of Pietro Tomasi della Torretta, preserved by Lampedusa’s heirs and given here because of its chronological and thematic affinity.
In the Appendix, besides the recently discovered items addressed to Massimo Erede, there are three more letters. The first one, held by Lampedusa’s heirs, was sent to the author by his mother when he was in London on 28th June 1926 and shows the intimacy and the tone of complicity between the two. The second one, addressed to his aunt Teresa Piccolo and dated 16th October 1938, quite different in style and content, expresses the family’s anxieties over his mother’s health. The final item in the Appendix is a double postcard-letter written by Lampedusa’s future wife Alessandra Wolff (Licy) before 1929.

The letters to the Piccolos are composed in the same sparkling style as their conversations during the many meetings between the cousins in which I had the good fortune to participate. This style is the precursor of the language of The Leopard and the short stories, and also of that particular, original way of perceiving the external world which played such a great part in the author’s success. His unerring, introspective, mordant eye on the human comedy is all here already – a feature which is no small thing in the narrator’s characterization.

These letters describe the typical summer itinerary of Lampedusa in the Twenties: a long journey through Europe, beginning with a prolonged stay in England and followed by a brief tour of France and a flying visit to Austria, before joining his mother for a stay in the Tyrol. For 1927 we have a summer’s correspondence (eighteen letters) which we may regard as almost complete. From 1928 we are left with only six letters, which repeat a similar itinerary (before reaching Innsbruck, Lampedusa passes through Zurich). In 1929 we have two letters from Rome, and in 1930 three from Berlin which refer to a journey to the Baltic: this is when the
LETTERS FROM LONDON
AND EUROPE
Paris, 27th July 1925

Dear Casimiro,

I’m very excited about the latest political events. A few days ago, the attack on Amendola filled me with exquisite pleasure, and now the sight of Palermo under the spotlight in Italian, even European politics makes me really proud.* I should like to hope that you will win and show that Palermo, although it has no facilities for cleaning the streets, is not without the facility for a political clean sweep. The imminent duel (or rather tournament) between the Prefect and Trabia, Cesarò and Arenella* will be a very interesting spectacle, and a profoundly comic one – and if I were a millionaire I should not hesitate for an instant before returning to Palermo just to be there while it is taking place.

And the Bellini!* Oh, the Bellini, the blood of whose Swordsman is at this moment in danger of coursing through the eminently Bellinian enterprise of the Aventine Secession!*“J’ai vu mourir Louis XVI et Bonaparte”* – or, if not that, I have in my lifetime seen more than one memorable action. I have seen Raniero the Magician play mah-jong,* I have seen the swans which cleave the velvety waters of the Lake of Love in Bruges; I have seen Piccadilly at midday
and Montmartre at midnight; I have seen Michelangelo’s Moses and I have heard Masnata talk about antiquity;* I have breakfasted more than once with Pirandello and I have conversed with Raimondo Arenella; I have seen the beauty of the Princess Yolanda and the ugliness of her husband;* I have walked beneath the centuries-old limes in Windsor and beneath the famous cypresses in Fiesole; I have seen war and the crueller aftermath of war; I have seen Mussolini in his black shirt and young Alice in court dress;* I have eaten “cailles truffées au champagne” with Lady Vanderbilt and I have starved on the millet of Kriegsgefangen;* I have seen the Turners in the Tate Gallery, the Memlings in Bruges and the Raphaels in the Louvre; I know Dante, I love Shakespeare, I have read Goethe and have endured the poems of Lucio;* I have seen the eyes of Rosalind and the legs of Mary Ashley;* I am acquainted with the peaceful dignity of Vicenza and the vulgarity of Brussels; I have endured every kind of fate: the Viceroy of India has insisted that I should go before him through a door; I have been mocked by Corradino; in Modena I have paid court to the daughter of an innkeeper and in London to Lady Beauchamps;* I have been in all sorts of situations and been equal to them all. I repeat: “J’ai vu mourir Louis XIV et Bonaparte.”

And yet I would give up all these experiences, I would wipe them all out of my memory, to have the pleasure of being present for one hour these days at a session of the Bellini.

At Antwerp, in the famous zoological garden, I have seen le palais des singes – in an immense cage, more than three hundred monkeys with every kind of phizog and every colour of buttock were giving themselves over to obscene frolicking and quick-witted pursuits, and were trying, in
vain, to make us blush for our ancestors. All the same I am confident that that cage is a model of the highest spirituality, of dignified composure, of calm beauty, a kind of garden of Academe or salon of Madame Rambouillet, in comparison with the Bellini these days.*

Lucky you who can at this stage store up enough amusement to provide all you will need during a long life.

* * *

Together with this letter I am sending you a pamphlet on the exhibition of Decorative Arts which is taking place here. It is extremely interesting: the examples of architecture are magnificent, and the furniture and the interior decorations are in no way inferior. I have the impression that at long last a twentieth-century style has been found. It would interest you enormously. And then the display is magnificent, especially in the evening. The Austrian and Czech pavilions are the best. The Italian pavilion, which is interesting enough on the inside, is on the outside, in utter incomprehension of the object of the exhibition, in the Renaissance style with the added annoyance of an interminable Latin inscription. But the public is always philistine: from what I hear it is one of those which are most successful with the crowd. It is also sad to observe the total incomprehension and the cheap mockery by the public of all the other beautiful things, and since there is here no question of fine art but of buildings to construct, furniture to sell and decorations to market, the bourgeois taste of the public is a serious matter and could result in the failure of this artistic impulse.

* * *
In a bookshop on the Rue Royale a whole window is devoted to books on Fascism and portraits of Mussolini at all stages of his life, in various poses and costumes. Incidentally, in the newspapers here, disquieting rumours have recently been circulating about his death. What do they say about it where you are?*

In one of the side roads there is a kind of fair, and among other things there is a game of “roulette”, in which instead of numbers there are the flags of the various nations. I watched it for a little while, and the ball stopped at the Italian flag, and the man announced: “C’èst l’Italie qui a gagné.” And a young man in the crowd said to his friend: “Je te crois; avec leur Mussolini!”*

Small symptoms.

Here, on the other hand, I am in a potentially Bolshevist country. The situation is very serious. But, just notice how important national honour is: I don’t give a damn, because I know that even if a revolution breaks out, no one will touch a hair on my head or steal one penny from me, because by my side I have… Mussolini!

That’s enough: I must go out now.

I repeat my encouragement and my good wishes for the battle of 2nd August. Which I will follow step by step in the Giornale di Sicilia which reaches even up here.

Please remember me to Aunt and Giovanna,* and even to Lucio, who I hope will reply to my polite letter from Brussels.

Affectionate regards

The French Monster

I include a postcard of a delightful Egyptian statuette in the Louvre.
NOTES
Two numbered sheets, each one folded in order to give four pages. On the top left corner of the first page, inside a box drawn in ink: “Giuseppe Tomasi / Hôtel Vouillemont / 15 – rue Boissy-d’Anglas”.

p. 5, the attack on Amendola… makes me proud: The Deputy Giovanni Amendola had been attacked by the Fascists at Montecatini on 21st July. He did not recover, and he was to die in a clinic in Cannes in April 1926. Amendola had been an interventionist, but after the War he became connected with Francesco Saverio Nitti’s party, which advocated the development and industrialization of southern Italy. In 1922 he had founded the anti-Fascist party Unione Democratica Nazionale, which was most active in the South of Italy. Hospitalized after the attack, he was visited by various parliamentarians. Even the Prince of Trabia, a senator of the Kingdom, went to visit him. In Palermo the campaign for the local elections was underway. In the Giornale di Sicilia for 22nd–23rd July 1925, Lampedusa had read: “Sicily has become fashionable for the last four or five days”.

p. 5, Trabia, Cesarò and Arenella: Pietro Lanza Branciforte, Prince of Trabia, saw his supremacy over the Palermitan aristocracy recognized. He was nicknamed “the Viceroy”. Giovanni Antonio Colonna, Duke of Cesarò, was an MP for several terms, and Minister for Post and Telegraphy from 1922 to 1924. Giuseppe Valguarnera, Duke of Arenella and Prince of Niscemi, was the nephew of Corrado Valguarnera di Niscemi. A garibaldino and the model for Tancredi Falconeri in The Leopard, he was Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s cousin.

p. 5, the Bellini: An aristocratic club founded in Palermo in 1769 as the Grand Salon of the Nobility. In 1864 it was named The Bellini Club. It was situated next to the Bellini Theatre, known before 1860 as the Caroline Theatre. Many of Lampedusa’s allusions to the Piccolos originate in conversations and remarks in the Bellini Club. Most noticeably present in the letters are