

# The Places of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's Infancy

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Over the course of the history of literature, we have encountered many a writer whose works have centred on places occupying their memories – places from the culture in which they grew up, from their childhoods and from their epochs. They then seem to enter into dialogue with these places, which in turn appears to imbue their literary works with meaning and helps them explore their past, present and future culture as well as their individual memories. One of the most fascinating examples of this phenomenon is the Italian writer and aristocrat Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa. In one of his best-known tales, *Places of my Infancy*, he paints the following picture: “The house in Palermo also had a few country residences attached to it, which immeasurably enhanced its charm. There were four of them: Santa Margherita di Belice, the villa in Bagheria, the palace in Torretta and the country house in Raitano. There was also the house in Palma and the Castle of Montechiaro, although we never went to either of them.”<sup>1</sup> From all of these different places, two really stand out: Palma di Montechiaro, the site of both the house and castle mentioned by Lampedusa, and Santa Margherita di Belice. In a letter to his friend Enrico Merlo, Lampedusa writes: “The palace at Donnafugata is one and the same as the one at Santa Margherita, while for the town as a whole, the reference is to Palma

di Montechiaro.” In the same letter, he discloses some other very interesting information about the characters that appear in his most famous novel, *The Leopard*: “I hardly need to tell you that the ‘Prince of Salina’ is in fact the Prince of Lampedusa, Giulio Fabrizio, my great-grandfather; everything is real – his physical stature, the mathematics, the bogus violence, his wife, his German mother, his refusal to serve as a senator.” He also states that Father Pirrone existed, although he improved on the original, making him more sensitive and more intelligent. As far as Tancredi and Angelica are concerned, he confided to his close friend: “In terms of physique and mannerisms, Tancredi is Gio; in moral terms, he is a blend of Senator Scalea and his son Pietro. I’m not sure who Angelica is, but remember that the name Sedara is very close to Favara.”

Palma di Montechiaro was founded in the mid-17th century by the Tomasi family. It is from here that the family’s medieval title hails. For Giuseppe, this area – beautiful, yet harsh as it was – was emblematic of feudal Sicily, with its big agricultural estates. Palma is some twenty kilometres from Agrigento in the south of the island, hence some way from Palermo. Over many centuries, the area’s soil was dug to obtain sulphur. The writer’s family lineage can be charted back to a Catalan soldier by

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1. From chapter 3 of *Racconti* [“Stories”], entitled “Il Viaggio” [“The Journey”], Milan, Feltrinelli, 1995.

the name of Palmerio De Caro. At the end of the 14th century, Mario Tomasi, a knight who had arrived in Sicily with Viceroy Colonna's retinue, married the last in the De Caro line. The twins born from this marriage, Carlo and Giulio, would go on to become the founders of Palma. The Tomasis were devout Catholics and counter-reformists. Their design for Palma was intended to replicate the sacred layout of the city of Jerusalem. The town was designed by the Ragusa-born scientist and astronomer Giovanni Battista Hodiema, who went on to become the town's first archpriest. In 1678, Palma had more than 3,000 inhabitants, with 11 churches, 32 priests and 20 monks. Cardinal Giuseppe Maria Tomasi (1649-1713) promoted culture and the arts. This bustle of activity was noted by the Abbot of Saint-Non, who visited Sicily at the end of the 18th century, as well as by the English traveller and author of *Travels in the Two Sicilies* (1783), Henry Swinburne, and the German traveller and author of *Briefe uber Kalabrien und Sizilien* (1787-1791), Heinrich Bartels. All these visitors voiced their surprise at Palma's architecture, as well as its nature, awash as it was with almond trees and palm forests. The town also aroused the same admiration in the poet Leopold Stolberg, again visiting at the end of the century of the Enlightenment. It was this town – ripe as it was for mysticism – that gave birth to the Saint Duke (Giulio Tomasi), Sister Maria Crocifissa (the religious name adopted by Isabella Domenica Tomasi) and Giuseppe Maria Tomasi (who was canonised in 1986). Palma's most outstanding buildings are the Palazzo Ducale (Duke's Palace), the Chiesa Madre (Mother Church), the Benedictine Monastery and the Casa degli Scolopi (House of the Scolopi), the modern-day headquarters of the municipal authorities. You can also visit the Calvary and the Castle of Montechiaro. The Palazzo Ducale was

built in the mid-17th century by Giulio Tomasi, the Duke of Palma, and then, from 1667, the first Prince of Lampedusa. The building has exquisite wooden roofs, once bearing the coat of arms depicting the Leopard, which has since disappeared as an adornment. The novel evokes the Saint Duke's quarters in the most remote part of the palace: "In the mid-17th century, one of the Salinas had withdrawn there into some kind of private monastery to do penance and chart his route to Heaven."<sup>2</sup> In the novel, Tancredi and Angelica venture to the most secret parts of the palace as they play their love games. They discover a giant crucifix hanging from a wall and, next to a divine corpse, "a whip, with a short handle from which six strips of hardened leather protruded, each with a lead ball the size of a hazelnut at the end. This was the Saint Duke's form of 'discipline'. In that room, Giuseppe Corbera, the Duke of Salina, would flagellate himself in the presence of God and fief. And he must have believed that drops of blood would rain on his lands to redeem them [...]". The palace now houses an archaeological museum. When I went there a few years ago, there was a temporary exhibition on the Tomasi family. At the end of 1999, an announcement appeared in the press stating that a gravedigger was to inherit the "Leopard's summer house". The last owner of this particular property was a Sicilian nobleman who always dressed in black. Don Calogero Comparato surprised his cousins, the Caputos from Caltanissetta, by leaving them no inheritance and instead leaving all his possessions to Rosario di Falco, better known as Don Saro, his loyal servant over many years. The family contested the will and I am unsure of the current legal status of the estate.

The Chiesa Madre is the work of the architect Angelo Italia. It is a white-stone building. You reach the church via a long and quite

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2. *The Leopard*, London, Everyman's Library, 1991.

extraordinary staircase in the baroque style. At the bottom of the monumental staircase stands the Santa Rosalia church (no longer used for worship), which was built by Tomasi at the same time as the town itself. The stone arch over the main door still bears the family's coat of arms.

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The Benedictine convent was formerly the dukes' original residence where they lived while the town was being built. The convent is next to the chapel, which contains a portrait of Giuseppe Maria, the Tomasis' saint; Isabella's (Sister Maria Crocifissa's) and the Saint Duke's remains; reminders of the Devil's visit to the nun; as well as clothing, manuscripts and letters belonging to Isabella and Giuseppe Maria Tomasi. In the novel, we read that: "According to age-old custom, on the morning following the Salina family's arrival, they would go to the Convent of Santo Spirito to pray before the tomb of the blessed Corbera – an ancestor of the prince – who had founded the convent, provided it with an endowment and lived a holy life and died a holy death there." The convent was – and remains today – closed to the outside world. With the exception of the Prince of Salina and the King of Naples, men were not allowed to enter. The Prince "liked everything about the place – the spartan visiting room, the canon vault in the centre of which the Leopard would dance, the two-layered bars for conversations, the small wooden volume for incoming and outgoing messages, the sturdy, well-fitting door [...]. He was always astonished

to see the two famous, indecipherable letters framed on the wall of a cell: the letter written by the blessed Corbera to the Devil beseeching him to embrace good and the latter's reply, in which he appears to regret the fact that he cannot comply with her request." Both letters are illegible, at least for mere mortals. Who wrote the Devil's letter?

Other notable monuments included the Chiesa dell'Istituto delle Scuole Pie (Church of the Institute of Devout Schools) and the former Convento degli Scolopi (Monastery of the Scolopi). The institute was set up by Giuseppe Maria Tomasi, Giulio's eldest son. He gave up all his entitlements in favour of his brother Ferdinando to join the Teatini order and became Cardinal in 1717. The monastery once housed seminarians sent by the Cardinal from Rome. It is now the headquarters of the municipal authorities.

The Castle of Montechiaro is perched up above the sea. The Chiaramonte family had it built in the 14th century and, two centuries later, it became the property of the Tomasi di Lampedusa family. The small chapel inside the castle houses a marble statue of the Virgin of Montechiaro, sculpted by Antonello Gagini. Lampedusa visited Palma di Montechiaro in his latter years. Although he no longer owned any property there, he remained a descendant of the saints that were once so beloved of the townspeople. The writer went back to follow the same route his Prince of Salina followed every year and he was received with the same affection and respect by the nuns.

Santa Margherita di Belice was Lampedusa's favourite place. His family would spend long summer – even autumn – months there. "It was one of the most beautiful houses I have ever seen," remarks the narrator in *Places of my Infancy*.<sup>3</sup> Originally constructed in 1680,

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3. Included in *The Siren and Selected Writings*, London, The Harvill Press, 1997.

it was completely rebuilt in 1810 by Prince Niccoló Filangeri di Cutó, his maternal great-great-grandfather, because Fernando IV and Maria Carolina – having fled Naples when Murat's Napoleonic troops entered the city – came for a very long stay. The house had 100 rooms, three vast courtyards, stables and coach houses, a church, an enormous, delightful garden and a large orchard. Moreover, it had a theatre with 300 seats. From 1080 onwards, all of Filangeri's ancestors hung on the palace walls. "There was a library with cupboards of that very pleasant 18th-century Sicilian style – known as the 'Badia style' – similar to the florid Venetian style, though coarser, less cloying." The list of books Lampedusa runs through is fabulous: Diderot's *Encyclopedia*, the works of Voltaire, various delightful illustrated editions of *Don Quixote*, fables by La Fontaine, novels by Zola, etc. There was also a large collection of newspapers. *The Leopard* contains the following observation: "It was precisely at this time that, through novels, the literary legends that still dominate European minds were taking shape. However, Sicily – in part because it had traditionally been impervious to any new developments, in part because the people generally did not know any foreign languages and in part, it has to be confessed, because of the degrading Bourbon censorship exercised by the customs authorities – was unaware that Dickens, Eliot, Sand, Flaubert and even Dumas existed. In spite of all this, a couple of volumes of Balzac had, via a series of subterfuges, ended up in the hands of Don Fabrizio, who was the self-appointed family censor. Having read the books, he disposed of them in disgust, passing them on to a friend of his for whom he felt no great affection. They were, he conceded, the product of great talent, though also extravagant and wedded to certain 'set ideas' (we would nowadays describe them as 'monomaniac'); a hasty verdict, as you can tell, though not entirely misguided. Hence, people's

reading level was relatively low, conditioned as it was by respect for girls' virginal modesty, by the Princess's religious scruples and by the Prince's own sense of dignity, who would never have deigned to read such 'filth' in the presence of the whole family." The house was awash with tapestry hangings, paintings and exquisite furniture. There was also a church, which served as the cathedral for the town of Santa Margherita. Large and beautiful, "I recall that it was in the imperial style, with large ugly frescos encrusted with white stuccos from the roof, like the ones in the Olivella church in Palermo, to which it bore a striking resemblance." It was in this town that he learnt to read the Bible, the Gospels and classical mythology. This was also where he first saw theatre performances. "It was a genuine theatre with two rows of eleven boxes, plus a gallery and, of course, the pit. The whole hall was white and gold with room for at least 300 people. The seats and walls in the boxes were of a very pale blue velvet. It was in the style of Louis XVI, simple and elegant. In the middle stood the equivalent of the royal box; in other words, our box." It was also in this theatre that he saw his first cinematographic projection. The palace and the church were destroyed in the 1968 earthquake. The palace was rebuilt as a modern structure and, although it retained some of its original features, it is a far cry from where Lampedusa once lived. All that is left of the church are facades and walls with a few paintings; nothing remains of the roof. The garden is the only place that has held on to some nostalgic flavour from the era about which the writer eulogised, since the passing of time and the decline already discernible in the splendour that Lampedusa so compellingly depicted have wiped away its traces. Hence, nowadays, the best way of wandering through the places in the Italian writer's memory is through his literature, in which he takes us on a journey and helps us to enter into a dialogue with everything that made up his world, his time, his culture.