ELIO VITTORINI

1908–66

The tiny Sicilian island of Ortigia, where Vittorini was born, is connected by an isthmus to Siracusa, home of an Ancient Greek theatre. A railway worker's son, Vittorini left Sicily when he was nineteen years old to work on a construction site in the region of Venezia-Giulia. He was a proofreader for a newspaper in Florence, and it was there, thanks to a co-worker, that he learned English during his breaks, by translating, word for word, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. At the foreign books division of Mondadori, he was commissioned to translate a book by D. H. Lawrence, and he also translated Edgar Allan Poe, William Faulkner, William Saroyan and John Steinbeck. His passion for translation would culminate in assembling the epic anthology *Americana* (see Introduction). But as one of the prime movers at Einaudi, Vittorini was also part of the ingenious editorial collective that galvanized Italian literature after the Second World War. His first book, *Piccola borghesia* (Petty Bourgeoisie), published in 1931, contained stories that had appeared in the journal *Solaria*, known for its Modernist, international bent, and thus criticized for its opposition to Fascist values and aesthetics. His first major novel, *Conversazione in Sicilia* (*Conversations in Sicily*), reflects the cadences of the English language which he'd read, translated, absorbed and reconstituted into Italian. The American edition contains a glowing preface by Ernest Hemingway. This story, elusive, unadorned and understated, is a parable combining quotidian and supernatural elements. It showcases Vittorini's penchant for dialogue, and places the acts of writing and naming at its very centre.

Name and Tears

Translated by Erica Segre and Simon Carnell

I was writing in the gravel in the garden and it was dark already; lit for a while now by the lights from all the windows.

The guard passed by.

'What are you writing?' he asked.

'A word,' I replied.

He bent down to have a look, but couldn't make it out.

'What word is it?' he asked again.

'Well,' I said. 'It's a name.'

He jangled his keys.

'With no 'Long live . . .'? No 'Down with . . .'?'

'Oh no!' I exclaimed.

And I laughed as well.

'It's the name of a person,' I said.

'A person you're waiting for?' he asked.

'Yes,' I replied. 'I'm waiting for her.'

Then the guard walked away, and I resumed my writing. I wrote and reached the earth beneath the gravel: I dug and wrote, and the night turned blacker still.

The guard returned.

'Still writing?' he asked.

'Yes,' I said. 'I've written a bit more.'

'What else have you written?' he asked.

'Nothing else,' I replied. 'Nothing except that word.'

'What?' the guard shouted. 'Nothing except that name?'

And he rattled his keys again, and lit his lantern to have a look.

'So I see,' he said. 'There's nothing there but that name.'

He raised the lantern and looked into my face.

'I've written it deeper,' I explained.

'Is that right?' he replied. 'If you want to continue, I'll give you a hoe.'

'Give it to me,' I said.

The guard gave me the hoe, then went off again, and with the hoe I dug and wrote the name deep into the ground. In truth I would have inscribed it as far down as seams of coal or iron are found, down to the most secret metals, which bear ancient names. But the guard came back again and said: 'You have to leave now. It's closing time.'

I climbed out of the name ditch.

'All right,' I replied.

I put down the hoe, wiped my brow and looked at the city around me, through the dark trees.

'All right,' I said. 'All right.'

The guard grinned.

'She hasn't come, right?'

'She hasn't come,' I said.

But immediately afterwards I asked: 'Who hasn't come?'

The guard lifted his lantern and looked into my face like before.

'The person you were waiting for.'

'Yes,' I said, 'she hasn't come.'

But then once again, straight away I asked: 'What person?'

'Damn it!' the guard said. 'The person with the name.'

He shook his lantern, rattled his keys and added: 'If you'd like to wait a little longer, don't mind me.'

'That isn't what matters,' I said. 'But thanks.'

But I didn't leave, I stayed and the guard stayed with me, as if to keep me company.

'Lovely night!' he said.

'Lovely,' I said.

Then, carrying his lantern, he took a few steps towards the trees.

'I wonder,' he said. 'Are you sure she's not there?'

I knew that she could not have come, yet I was startled.

'Where?' I whispered.

'Over there,' said the guard. 'Sitting on the bench.'

The leaves rustled as he said these words; a woman stood up in the dark and started to walk on the gravel. On hearing her footsteps, I closed my eyes.

'So she had come after all, had she?' said the guard.

Without answering, I followed after the woman.

'We're closing!' the guard shouted. 'We're closing!'

Shouting 'We're closing', he disappeared amongst the trees.

I followed the woman out of the garden and through the streets of the city.

I followed after what had been the sound of her steps on gravel. Or you might say, rather, that I was guided by the memory of her footsteps. And it turned out to be a long walk, a long pursuit, now amidst the crowd, now along deserted pavements until, raising my eyes, I saw her for the first time, a passer-by, by the light of the last shop.

What I saw, actually, was her hair. Nothing else. And fearing that I would lose her, I started to run.

The city in these parts alternated between meadows and tall houses, dimly lit parks and lit-up funfairs, with the red eye of the gasworks in the background. Many times I asked: 'Did she come this way?'

Everyone told me that they didn't know.

But a mocking child came up, quickly, on roller-skates, and laughed.

'Haah!' she laughed. 'I bet you're looking for my sister.'

'Your sister?' I exclaimed. 'What's her name?'

'I'm not telling you,' the girl replied.

And again she laughed, doing a dance of death around me on her roller-skates.

'Haah!' she laughed.

'Then tell me where she is,' I said.

'Haah!' laughed the girl. 'She's in a doorway.'

She skated her dance of death around me again for a moment, then sped off up the endless avenue, laughing.

'She's in a doorway,' she called back from afar, still laughing.

The doorways were all occupied by abject couples, but I arrived at one that was abandoned and empty. The door opened when I pushed it. I went up the stairs and began to hear someone crying.

'Is it her crying?' I asked the concierge.

This old woman was sitting asleep, halfway up the stairs with her rags in her hand – and she woke up and looked at me.

'I don't know,' she replied. 'Do you want the lift?'

I did not want it, I wanted to go to where the crying was, and I continued to climb the stairs between the black, wide-open windows. I finally came to where the crying was, behind a white door. I went in, felt her close to me and turned on the light.

But I saw no one in the room, and heard nothing more. And yet there, on the sofa, was the handkerchief, damp with her tears.

'Nome e lagrime'
First published in the magazine *Corrente* (31 October 1939). It then became the title of Vittorini's first novel, published by Parenti in 1941, and then, the same year, by Bompiani as *Conversazione in Sicilia*.

GIOVANNI VERGA

1840–1922

Catania, on the eastern coast of Sicily, was destroyed more than once by earthquakes and eruptions of Mount Aetna. The effect of its late baroque reconstruction begun in 1693, from lava stone, is at once grim and spectacular. Still charged with the weight of disaster, the city personifies drama, destruction and rebirth. Verga, astride the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the eldest author of this collection, was raised there, but to produce his art he had to get away, first to Florence, immersing himself in its literary culture, and then to Milan, where he lived for twenty years (although he made frequent journeys back to Sicily). He was born three months after Thomas Hardy, an author with whom he bears comparison. Both wrote about hardship, family and fatal passions with lyricism and pessimism. Both had complex relationships with their places of origin, which both inspired and alienated them. Verga's realistic approach – called the school of *Verismo* in Italian – was a reaction to a movement in the same period called *Scapigliatura* (devoted, broadly speaking, to interiority, individualism and ideals). Realism, in Verga's time, was considered an anti-conformist approach to literature: alert to social tensions, refusing to elevate or evade. In reproducing elements of dialect, he allowed characters to sound as they actually would have in real life, and described the poor without sentimentality. In doing so, he broke definitively with the literary aesthetic in Italy that had come before him. Verga wrote seven collections of short stories in his lifetime. '*Fantasticheria*' ('Picturesque Lives'), a description of a fishing village, is considered an antecedent to his later masterpiece, a novel called *I Malavoglia* (The Malavoglia, translated as *The House by the Medlar Tree*). It was adapted, in 1948, into

the neoRealist cinematic classic *La terra trema* (The Earth Trembles) by Luchino Visconti. But it is more than preparatory work, striking for its epistolary structure, its imagery, its precise yet panoramic vision.

Picturesque Lives

Translated by G. H. McWilliam

Once, when the train was passing by Aci Trezza, you looked out of the carriage window and exclaimed, 'I'd like to spend a month down there!'

We went back there and spent, not a month, but forty-eight hours. The villagers who stared in disbelief at your enormous trunks must have thought you would be staying for a couple of years. On the morning of the third day, tired of seeing nothing but green fields and blue sea, and of counting the carts as they trundled up and down the street, you were at the station, fiddling impatiently with the chain of your scent bottle, and craning your neck to catch sight of a train that couldn't arrive too soon. In those forty-eight hours we did all it was possible to do in Aci Trezza. We walked down the dusty street and we scrambled over the rocks. Under the pretext of learning to row you got blisters beneath your gloves that had to be kissed better. We spent a marvellously romantic night at sea, casting nets so as to do something to convince the boatmen it was worth their while to be catching rheumatism. Dawn came upon us at the top of the beacon rock. I can still see that dawn – pale and unassuming, with broad, mauve-coloured shafts of light playing across a dark-green sea, caressing the tiny group of cottages that lay huddled up asleep on the shore, while above the rock, silhouetted against the dark and cloudless sky, your tiny figure stood out clearly in the expert lines designed for it by your dressmaker, and the fine, elegant profile of your own making. You were wearing a grey dress that seemed to have been specially made to blend with the colours of the dawn. A truly pretty picture! And you certainly knew it, to judge from the way you modelled yourself in your shawl and smiled with those enormous, tired, wide-open eyes at that strange spectacle, and at the strangeness, too, of being there

yourself to witness it. What was going on at that moment in your little head, as you faced the rising sun? Were you asking it to tell you where in the world you would be, a month into the future? All you said, in that ingenuous way of yours, was, 'I don't understand how people can spend the whole of their lives in a place like this.'

But you see, the answer is easier than it looks. For a start, all you need is not to have an income of a hundred thousand lire, and to take comfort in suffering a few of the many hardships that go with those giant rocks, set in the deep blue sea, that caused you to clap your hands in wonder. Those poor devils, who were nodding off in the boat as they waited for us, need no more than that to find, in among their ramshackle, picturesque cottages, that seemed to you from a distance to be trembling as if they too were seasick, everything you search for, high and low, in Paris, Nice and Naples.

It's a curious business, but perhaps it's better that way for you, and for all the others like you. That cluster of cottages is inhabited by fishermen, who call themselves 'men of the sea' as opposed to your 'men about town', people whose skins are harder than the bread that they eat, when they eat any bread at all, for the sea is not always as calm as it was when it was planting kisses on your gloves. On its black days, when it roars and it thunders, you have to rest content with standing and gazing out at it from the shore, or lying in your bed, which is the best place to be on an empty stomach. On days like that, a crowd gathers outside the tavern, but you don't hear many coins rattling on the tin counter, and the kids, who throng the village as if poverty was a good way to multiply their numbers, go shrieking and tearing around as though possessed by the devil.

Every so often typhus, or cholera, or a bad harvest, or a storm at sea come along and make a good clean sweep through that swarm of people. You would imagine they could wish for nothing better than to be swept away and disappear altogether, but they always come swarming back again to the very same place. I can't tell you how or why they do it.

Did you ever, after an autumn shower, find yourself scattering an army of ants as you carelessly traced the name of your latest boyfriend in the sand along the boulevard? Some of those poor little creatures would have remained stuck on the ferrule of your umbrella, writhing in agony, but all the others, after five minutes of rushing about in panic, would have

returned to cling on desperately to their dark little ant-heap. You wouldn't go back there, certainly, and neither would I. But in order to understand that kind of stubbornness, which in some respects is heroic, we have to reduce ourselves to the same level, restrict our whole horizon to what lies between a couple of mounds of earth, and place their tiny hearts under a microscope to discover what makes them beat. Would you, too, like to take a look through this lens here, you who contemplate life through the other end of a telescope? You'll think it a curious spectacle, and it might amuse you, perhaps.

We were very close friends (do you remember?), and you asked me to dedicate a few pages to you. Why? *à quoi bon*, as you would put it. What value does anything I write possess for anyone who knows you? And to those who don't, what are you anyway? But never mind all that, I remembered your little whim, on the day I set eyes once again on that beggarwoman you gave alms to, with the pretext of buying the oranges she'd laid out in a row on the bench outside the front door. The bench is no longer there, they've cut down the medlar tree in the yard and the house has a new window. It was only the woman that hadn't changed. She was a little further on, holding out her hand to the cart-drivers, crouching there on the pile of stones blocking the entrance to the old outpost of the National Guard. As I was doing the rounds, puffing away at a cigar, it struck me that she too, poor as she is, had seen you passing by, fair of skin and proud of bearing.

Don't be angry if I've remembered you in such a way, and in such a context. Apart from the happy memories you left me, I have a hundred others, indistinct, confused, all different, gathered here, there and everywhere – some of them mere daydreams, perhaps – and in my confused state of mind, as I walked along that street that has witnessed so many happy and painful events, the frail-looking woman crouching there in her mantilla made me somehow feel very sad, and made me think of you, glutted with everything, even with the adulation heaped at your feet by the fashion magazines, that often splash your name in the headlines of their elegant feature articles – glutted to such a degree as to think up the notion of seeing your name in the pages of a book.

Perhaps, when I have written the book, you won't give it a second thought. But meanwhile, the memories I send you now, so far away from you in every sense, inebriated as you are with feasting and flowers, will

bring a refreshing breeze to play upon the feverish round of your endless revelry. On the day you go back there, if you ever do go back, and we sit together again, kicking up stones with our feet and visions in our thoughts, perhaps we shall talk about those other breezes that life elsewhere has to offer. Imagine, if you like, that my mind is fixed on that unknown little corner of the world because you once stepped into it, or in order to avert my gaze from the dazzling glare of precious stones and fevered expectation that accompanies your every movement, or because I have sought you out in vain in all the places smiled upon by fashion. So you see, you always take the lead in my thoughts, as you do in the theatre!

Do you also recall that old man at the tiller of our boat? You owe it to him to remember, because he saved you a dozen times from soaking your fine blue stockings. He died down there, poor devil, in the town hospital, in a huge white ward, between white sheets, chewing white bread, assisted by the white hands of the Sisters of Charity, whose only weakness was their failure to comprehend the string of woes that the wretched fellow mumbled forth in his semi-barbaric dialect.

But if there was one thing he would have wanted above all else, it was to die in that shaded little corner beside his own hearth, where he had slept for so many years 'below his own roof', which is why, when they carried him away, he was in tears, whining as only the old are able to.

He had spent his whole life between those four walls, looking out on that lovely but treacherous sea with which he had had to wrestle every day of his life to extract what he needed to survive without coming to a watery end. And yet for that brief moment in time when he was silently relishing his place in the sun, huddled on the thwart of the boat with his arms round his knees, he wouldn't have turned his head to admire you, and you would have looked in vain into those spellbound eyes for the proud reflection of your beauty, as when so many of the high and mighty bow their heads as they make way for you in the fashionable salons, and you see your reflection in the envious eyes of your best women friends.

Life is rich, as you see, in its inexhaustible variety, and you can enjoy that part of its richness that has come your way just as you please.

Take that young woman, for instance, who peeped out from behind the pots of basilico when the rustling of your dress set off a clamour in the street. When she espied your famous face in the window opposite she

beamed as though she too were dressed in silk. Who knows what simple joys filled her thoughts as she stood at that window behind the fragrant basilico, her eyes fixed intently on the house opposite, bedecked with branches of vine. And the laughter in her eyes would not have turned later into bitter tears in the big city, far away from the four walls that had witnessed her birth and watched her grow up, if her grandfather hadn't died in the hospital, and her father hadn't drowned, and her family hadn't been scattered by a puff of wind that had blown right through it – a puff of ruinous wind, which had carried one of her brothers off to prison on the island of Pantelleria, or 'into trouble', as they say in those parts.

A kinder fate lay in store for those who died, one in the naval battle of Lissa. He was the eldest son, the one you thought resembled a David sculpted in bronze, as he stood there clutching his harpoon with the light from the flame of the lanterns playing about his features. Big and tall as he was, he too glowed with pleasure whenever you darted your brazen eyes in his direction. But he died a good sailor, standing firm at the rigging of the yardarm, raising his cap in the air and saluting the flag for the last time with the primitive shout of the islander bred and born. The other man, the one who was too timid to touch your foot on the island to free it from the rabbit trap where you got it caught in that heedless way of yours, was lost on a dark winter's night, alone at sea amid the raging foam, when between his boat and the shore – where his loved ones awaited his return, rushing here and there as though possessed – there lay sixty miles of storm and darkness. You would never have guessed the amount of sheer dauntless courage that man was capable of, who allowed himself to be overawed by the handiwork of your shoemaker.

The ones who are dead are better off. They are not eating 'the king's bread', like the poor devil locked up on Pantelleria, or the kind of bread his sister is eating, nor do they go around like the woman with the oranges, living on the charity of God, which doesn't flow too freely in Aci Trezza. At least the dead need nothing any more! That's what the son of the woman who keeps the tavern said, the last time he went to the hospital to enquire about the old man and smuggle in some of those stuffed snails that are so good to suck for anyone who has no teeth, and he found the bed empty, with the blankets neatly folded upon it. He crept out into the hospital yard and planted himself at a door with a lot of wastepaper piled

up against it, and through the keyhole he spied a large empty room, hollow-sounding and icy even in summer, and the end of a long marble table, with a thick, starched sheet draped over it. And thinking to himself that the ones inside no longer needed anything, and the snails were of no use to them any more, he began to suck them one after the other to pass away the time. It will comfort you to think, as you hug your blue fox muff to your bosom, that you gave a hundred lire to the poor old fellow.

Those village kids who followed you like stray dogs and raided the oranges are still there. They are still buzzing round the beggarwoman, pawing at her clothes as though she's hiding a crust of bread, picking up cabbage stalks, orange peel and cigar stubs, all the things thrown away in the street but obviously still having some value because the poor live on them. They live so well on them, in fact, that those starving, blown-out ragamuffins will grow up in the mud and the dust of the street, and turn out big and strong like their fathers and grandfathers. Then they in turn will populate Aci Trezza with more ragamuffins, who will cling on to life as long as they can by the skin of their teeth, like that old grandfather, wanting nothing else but simply praying to God they will close their eyes in the place where they opened them, attended by the village doctor who goes round every day on his donkey, like Jesus, to succour the departing ones.

'The ambition of the oyster!' you may say. Exactly, and the only reason we find it absurd is that we were not born oysters ourselves.

But in any case, the tenacious clinging of those poor souls to the rock on to which fortune decreed they should fall, as it scattered princes here and duchesses there, their brave resignation to a life full of hardships, their religion of the family, reflected in their work, their homes and the walls that surround them, seem to me, for the time being at any rate, deeply serious and worthy of respect. It seems to me that the anxieties of our wandering thoughts would find sweet solace in the tranquil calm of those simple, uncomplicated feelings that are handed down, serene and unchanging, from one generation to the next. It seems to me that I could watch you passing by, to the sound of your horses' trotting hooves and the merry jingling of their brasses, and greet you without a care in the world.

Perhaps because I have tried too hard to penetrate the whirlwind that surrounds and pursues you, I have now learned to understand the inevitable need for that solid, mutual affection among the weak, for the instinct of

the underprivileged to cling to one another to survive the storms of their existence, and I have tried to unravel the humble, undiscovered drama that has dispersed to the four winds its plebeian actors whom we once got to know together. The drama of which I speak, which perhaps one day I shall unfold to you in its entirety, would seem to me to depend essentially on this: that whenever one of the underprivileged, being either weaker, or less cautious, or more selfish than the others, decided to break with his family out of a desire for the unknown, or an urge for a better life, or curiosity to know the world, then the world, like the voracious fish that it is, swallowed him up along with his nearest and dearest. From this point of view you will see that the drama is not without interest. The main concern of oysters must be to protect themselves from the snares of the lobster, or the knife of the diver that prises them from the rock.

'Fantasticheria'
First published in the weekly magazine *Il fanfulla della Domenica* (14 March 1880), and, in the same year, in the collection *Vita dei campi* (Treves).

GIUSEPPE TOMASI DI LAMPEDUSA
1896–1957

Tomasi di Lampedusa, born in Palermo, was a learned prince, and his literary legacy remains a cause-célèbre. His most celebrated published work was composed within the two years leading up to his death, including the novel, *Il gattopardo* (*The Leopard*), feverishly written between 1955 and 1956, only to be rejected by various publishers, including Vittorini, who didn't think it was the right fit for his *Gettoni* series. It was another writer, Giorgio Bassani – having received a partial manuscript from the writer Elena Croce, daughter of the famous philosopher – who travelled to Palermo the year after Tomasi di Lampedusa's death, obtained his papers from his Latvian widow and quickly published *Il gattopardo*. An engrossing historical and psychological novel about the decline of the Sicilian aristocracy as Italy moved towards unification, it sold over three million copies, was translated into twenty-seven languages, and was turned, in 1963, into a film by Luchino Visconti. In addition to *Il gattopardo*, Tomasi di Lampedusa had also left behind critical essays and a few short stories, including this one, unquestionably his most powerful. A story within a story, everything about it is doubled: it contains two narrative planes, two central protagonists, two settings, two tonal registers, two points of view. There are even two titles; though published as '*La Sirena*' ('The Siren'), it was originally called '*Lighea*', (the title provided by the author's wife), which refers to the name of the siren at the heart of this mysterious tale. Fusing elements at once carnal and intellectual, both pagan and modern, it is a story about the revitalizing and transformative things that can happen while learning another language – in this case, Ancient Greek. Tomasi di Lampedusa wrote it in the final months of his life, with certain knowledge of his imminent death from lung cancer.

The Siren

Translated by Stephen Twilley

Late in the autumn of 1938 I came down with a severe case of misanthropy. I was living in Turin at the time, and my local girl no. 1, rifling my pockets in search of a spare fifty-lire note as I slept, had also discovered a short letter from girl no. 2. Spelling mistakes notwithstanding, it left no room for doubt concerning the nature of our relations.

My waking was both immediate and violent. Outbursts of angry dialect echoed through my modest lodgings on Via Peyron, and an attempt to scratch my eyes out was averted only by the slight twist I administered to the dear girl's left wrist. This entirely justified act of self-defence put an end to the row, but also to the romance. The girl dressed hurriedly, stuffing powder puff, lipstick, and a little handkerchief into her bag along with the fifty-lire note, 'cause of so great a calamity,' thrice flung a colourful local alternative to 'Swine!' in my face, and left. Never had she been so adorable as in those fifteen minutes of fury. I watched from the window as she emerged and moved away into the morning mist: tall, slender, adorned with regained elegance.

I never saw her again, just as I never saw a black cashmere sweater that had cost me a small fortune and possessed the woeful merit of being cut to suit a woman just as well as a man. All she left were two of those so-called invisible hairpins on the bed.

That same afternoon I had an appointment with no. 2 in a patisserie in Piazza Carlo Felice. At the little round table in the western corner of the second room – 'our' table – I saw not the chestnut tresses of the girl whom I now desired more than ever but the sly face of Tonino, her twelve-year-old brother. He'd just gulped down some hot chocolate with a double

portion of whipped cream. With typical Turinese urbanity, he stood as I approached.

'Sir,' he said, 'Pinotta will not be coming; she asked me to give you this note. Good day, sir.'

He went out, taking with him the two brioches left on his plate. The ivory-coloured card announced that I was summarily dismissed on account of my infamy and 'southern dishonesty.' Clearly, no. 1 had tracked down and provoked no. 2, and I had fallen between two stools.

In twelve hours I had lost two usefully complementary girls plus a sweater to which I was rather attached; I also had to pick up the bill for that infernal Tonino. I'd been made a fool of, humiliated in my very Sicilian self-regard; and I decided to abandon for a time the world and its pomps.

There was no better place for this period of retreat than the café on Via Po where, lonely as a dog, I now went at every free moment, and always in the evening after my work at the newspaper. It was a sort of Hades filled with the wan shades of lieutenant colonels, magistrates and retired professors. These vain apparitions played draughts or dominoes, submerged in a light that was dimmed during the day by the clouds and the arcade outside, during the evenings by the enormous green shades on the chandeliers. They never raised their voices, afraid that any immoderate sound might upset the fragile fabric of their presence. It was, in short, a most satisfactory Limbo.

Being a creature of habit, I always sat at the same little corner table, one carefully designed to provide maximum discomfort to the customer. On my left two spectral senior officers played trictrac with two phantoms from the appeals court; their military and judicial dice slipped tonelessly from a leather cup. On my right sat an elderly man wrapped in an old overcoat with a worn astrakhan collar. He read foreign magazines one after another, smoked Tuscan cigars, and frequently spat. Every so often he would close his magazine and appear to be pursuing some memory in the spirals of smoke; then he would go back to reading and spitting. His hands were as ugly as could be, gnarled and ruddy, with fingernails that were cut straight across and not always clean. Once, however, when he came across a photograph in a magazine of an archaic Greek statue, the

kind with widespread eyes and an ambiguous smile, I was surprised to see his disfigured fingertips caress the image with positively regal delicacy. When he realized that I'd seen him, he grunted with displeasure and ordered a second espresso.

Our relations would have remained on this plane of latent hostility if not for a happy accident. Usually I left the office with five or six daily papers, including, on one occasion, the *Giornale di Sicilia*. Those were the years when the Fascist Ministry of Popular Culture, or MinCulPop, was at its most virulent, and every newspaper was just like all the others; that edition of the Palermo daily was as banal as ever, indistinguishable from a paper published in Milan or Rome, if not by its greater share of typographical errors. My reading of it was accordingly brief, and I soon set it aside on the table. I had already begun to contemplate another product of MinCulPop's vigilance when my neighbour addressed me: 'Pardon me, sir, would you mind if I glanced at this *Giornale di Sicilia* of yours? I'm Sicilian, and it's been twenty years since I came across a newspaper from my part of the world.' His voice was as cultivated as any I'd ever heard, the accent impeccable; his grey eyes regarded me with profound indifference.

'Be my guest. I'm Sicilian myself, you know. If you like, I can easily bring the paper every evening.'

'Thank you, but that won't be necessary; my curiosity is a purely physical one. If Sicily remains as it was in my time, I imagine nothing good ever happens there. Nothing has for the past three thousand years.'

He glanced through the paper, folded it, and gave it back to me, then plunged into reading a pamphlet. When he stood to go, it was clear that he hoped to slip out unnoticed, but I rose to introduce myself; he quietly muttered his name, which I failed to catch, yet neglected to extend his hand. At the threshold of the café, however, he turned, doffed his hat, and loudly shouted, 'Farewell, fellow countryman.' He disappeared down the arcade, leaving me speechless while the shades at their games grumbled disapprovingly.

I performed the magical rites necessary to conjure a waiter; pointing at the empty table, I asked him, 'Who was that gentleman?'

'That,' he replied, 'is Senator Rosario La Ciura.'

The name said a great deal even to an ignorant journalist. It belonged

to one of the five or six Italians with an indisputable international reputation – to the most illustrious Hellenist of our time, in fact. I understood the thick magazines and the caressing of the illustration, the unsociability and hidden refinement, too.

In the newspaper offices the following day I searched through that peculiar drawer of the obituary file containing the 'advancers.' The 'La Ciura' card was there, for once tolerably well drafted. I read how the great man had been born into an impoverished petit bourgeois family in Aci Castello (Catania), and that thanks to an astonishing aptitude for Ancient Greek, and by dint of scholarships and scholarly publications, he had at the age of twenty-seven attained the chair of Greek literature at the University of Pavia. Subsequently he had moved to the University of Turin, where he remained until retirement. He had taught at Oxford and Tübingen and travelled extensively, for not only had he been a senator since before the Fascists came to power and a member of the Lincean Academy; he had also received honorary degrees from Yale, Harvard, New Delhi and Tokyo, as well as, of course, from the most prestigious European universities from Uppsala to Salamanca. His lengthy list of publications included many that were considered fundamental, especially those on Ionic dialects; suffice to say that he had been commissioned to edit the Hesiod volume in the Bibliotheca Teubneriana, the first foreigner so honoured, to which he had added an introduction in Latin of unsurpassed scientific rigour and profundity. Finally, the greatest honour of all, he was *not* a member of the Fascist Royal Academy of Italy. What had always set him apart from other exceedingly erudite colleagues was a vital, almost carnal sense of classical antiquity, a quality on display in a collection of essays written in Italian, *Men and Gods*, which had been recognized as a work not only of great erudition but of authentic poetry. He was, in short, 'an honour to a nation and a beacon to the world,' as the card concluded. He was seventy-five years old and lived decorously but far from lavishly on his pension and senator's benefits. He was a bachelor.

There's no use denying that we Italians – original sons (or fathers) of the Renaissance – look on the Great Humanist as superior to all other human beings. The possibility of finding myself in daily proximity to the highest representative of such subtle, almost magical, and poorly remunerated wisdom was both flattering and disturbing. I experienced the same

sensations that a young American would on meeting Mr Gillette: fear, respect, a certain not ignoble envy.

That evening I descended into Limbo in quite a different spirit than that of the previous days. The senator was already at his spot and responded to my reverential greeting with a faint grumble. When, however, he'd finished reading an article and jotted down a few things in a small notebook, he turned toward me and, in a strangely musical voice, said, 'Fellow countryman, from the manner in which you greeted me I gather that one of these phantoms has told you who I am. Forget it, and, if you haven't already done so, forget the aorist tense you studied in secondary school. Instead tell me your name, because your introduction yesterday evening was the usual mumbled mess and I, unlike you, do not have the option of learning who you are from others. Because it's clear that no one here knows you.'

He spoke with insolent detachment. To him I was apparently something less than a cockroach, more like a dust mote whirling aimlessly in a sunbeam. And yet the calm voice, precise speech and use of the familiar *tu* radiated the serenity of a Platonic dialogue.

'My name is Paolo Corbera. I was born in Palermo, where I also took my law degree. Now I work here for *La Stampa*. To reassure you, Senator, let me add that on my exit exams I earned a "5 plus" out of 10 in Greek, and I suspect that the "plus" was only added to make sure I received my diploma.'

He gave a half smile. 'Thank you for telling me this. So much the better. I detest speaking with people who think they know what they in fact do not, like my colleagues at the university. In the end they are familiar only with the external forms of Greek, its eccentricities and deformities. The living spirit of this language, foolishly called "dead," has not been revealed to them. *Nothing* has been revealed to them, for that matter. They are poor wretches, after all: How could they perceive this spirit without ever having had the opportunity to hear Greek?'

Pride is fine, sure, it's better than false modesty, but it seemed to me the senator was going too far. I even wondered whether the years might have succeeded in softening somewhat his exceptional mind. Those poor things, his colleagues, had had just as much opportunity to hear Ancient Greek as he had – that is, none.

He went on: 'Paolo, you're lucky to bear the name of the one apostle who had a bit of culture and a smattering of reading under his belt. Though Jerome would have been better. The other names you Christians carry around are truly contemptible. The names of slaves.'

I was disappointed again. He really seemed like nothing more than a typical anticlerical academic with a pinch of Fascist Nietzscheism thrown in. Could it be?

He voice rose and fell appealingly as he continued to speak, with the ardour, perhaps, of someone who had passed a great deal of time in silence. 'Corbera . . . Is that not one of the great names of Sicily, or am I mistaken? I remember that my father paid the annual rent for our house in Aci Castello to the administrator of a House of Corbera di Palina, or Salina, I can't recall which. He'd always joke and say that if there was one thing that was certain in this world, it was that those few lire weren't going to end up in the pockets of the "demesne," as he called it. But are you one of those Corberas, or just a descendant of some peasant who took his master's name?'

I confessed that I really was a Corbera di Salina, the sole surviving specimen, in fact. All the opulence, all the sins, all the uncollected rents, all the unpaid debts, all the political opportunism of the Leopard were concentrated in me alone. Paradoxically, the senator seemed pleased.

'That's fine, just fine. I have a great deal of respect for the old families. Their memory is . . . miniscule, of course, but still it's greater than the others'. It's as much of physical immortality as your sort can hope for. Think about getting married soon, Corbera, seeing as how your sort haven't found any better way to survive than scattering your seed in the strangest places.'

He was definitely trying my patience. 'Your sort.' Who was that? The whole contemptible herd that was not fortunate enough to be Senator La Ciura? Who'd attained physical immortality? You'd never know it from looking at his wrinkled face, his sagging flesh . . .

'Corbera di Salina,' he continued, undeterred, 'You don't mind if I call you *tu*, as I do with my students in their fleeting youth?'

I professed to be not only honoured but delighted, and I was. Moving beyond questions of names and protocol, we now spoke of Sicily. It had been twenty years since he'd set foot on the island, and the last time he'd

been 'down there,' as he called it in the Piedmontese manner, he'd stayed a mere five days, in Syracuse, to talk to Paolo Orsi about the alternating choruses in classical theatre.

'I remember they wanted to take me in a car from Catania to Syracuse; I accepted only when I learned that at Augusta the road passes far from the sea, whereas the train follows the coastline. Tell me about our island. It's a beautiful places, even if it is inhabited by donkeys. The gods once sojourned there – and perhaps in some endless Augusts they return. But don't on any account speak to me about those four modern temples of yours, not that that's anything you'd understand, I'm sure.'

So we spoke about eternal Sicily, the Sicily of the natural world; about the scent of rosemary on the Nebrodi Mountains and the taste of Melilli honey; about the swaying cornfields seen from Etna on a windy day in May, some secluded spots near Syracuse, and the fragrant gusts from the citrus plantations known to sweep down on Palermo during sunset in June. We spoke of those magic summer nights, looking out over the gulf of Castellammare, when the stars are mirrored in the sleeping sea, and how, lying on your back among the mastic trees, your spirit is lost in the whirling heavens, while the body braces itself, fearing the approach of demons.

The senator had scarcely visited the island for fifty years, and yet his memory of certain minute details was remarkably precise. 'Sicily's sea is the most vividly coloured, the most romantic of any I have ever seen; it's the only thing you won't manage to ruin, at least away from the cities. Do the trattorias by the sea still serve spiny urchins, split in half?'

I assured him that they did, though adding that few people ate them now, for fear of typhus.

'And yet they are the most beautiful thing you have down there, bloody and cartilaginous, the very image of the female sex, fragrant with salt and seaweed. Typhus, typhus! They're dangerous as all gifts from the sea are; the sea offers death as well as immortality. In Syracuse I demanded that Orsi order them immediately. What flavour! How divine in appearance! My most beautiful memory of the last fifty years!'

I was confused and fascinated: a man of such stature indulging in almost obscene metaphors, displaying an infantile appetite for the altogether mediocre pleasure of eating sea urchins!

Our conversation stretched out, and on leaving he insisted on paying for my espresso, not without a display of his peculiar coarseness ('Everyone knows kids from good families are always broke'). We parted friends, if you disregard the fifty-year difference between our ages and the thousands of light years separating our cultures.

We proceeded to see each other every evening; even as my rage against humanity began to wane, I made it my duty never to fail to meet the senator in the underworld of Via Po. Not that we chatted much; he continued to read and take notes and only addressed me occasionally, but when he spoke it was always a melodious flow of pride and insolence, sprinkled with disparate allusions and strands of impenetrable poetry. He continued to spit as well, and eventually I observed that he did so only while he read. I believe that he also developed a certain affection for me, but I didn't delude myself. If there was affection it wasn't anything like what one of 'our sort' (to adopt the senator's term) might feel for a human being; instead it was similar to what an elderly spinster might feel for her pet goldfinch, whose vacuousness and lack of understanding she is well aware of, but whose existence allows her to express aloud regrets in which the creature plays no part; and yet, if the pet were not there, she would suffer a distinct malaise. In fact, I began to notice that when I arrived late the old man's eyes, haughty as ever, were fixed on the entrance.

It took roughly a month for us to pass from topical observations – always highly original but impersonal on his part – to more indelicate subjects, which are after all the only ones that distinguish conversations between friends from those between mere acquaintances. I was the one who took the initiative. His spitting bothered me – it had also bothered the guardians of Hades, who finally brought a very shiny brass spittoon to his spot – such that one evening I dared to inquire why he didn't seek a cure for his chronic catarrh. I asked the question without thinking and immediately regretted risking it, expecting the senatorial ire to bring the stucco work on the ceiling raining down on my head. Instead his richly toned voice replied calmly, 'But my dear Corbera, I have no catarrh. You who observe so carefully should have noticed that I never cough before spitting. My spitting is not a sign of sickness but of mental health: I spit out of disgust for the rubbish I happen to be reading. If you took the trouble to examine that contrivance' – (and he gestured at the

spittoon) – 'you would realize that it contains hardly any saliva and no trace of mucus. My spitting is symbolic and highly cultural; if you don't like it, go back to your native drawing rooms, where people don't spit only because they can't be bothered to be nauseated by anything.'

His extraordinary insolence was mitigated solely by his distant gaze; I nevertheless felt the desire to stand up and walk out on him then and there. Fortunately I had the time to reflect that the fault lay in my rashness. I stayed, and the impassive senator immediately passed to counterattack. 'And you then, why patronize this Erebus full of shades and, as you say, catarrh sufferers, this locus of failed lives? In Turin there's no shortage of those creatures your sort finds so desirable. A trip to the Castello hotel in Rivoli, or to the baths in Moncalieri and your squalid aspiration would soon be fulfilled.'

I began to laugh at hearing such a cultured mouth offer such precise information about the Turinese demimonde. 'But how do you come to know about such places, Senator?'

'I know them, Corbera, I know them. Anyone spending time with politicians or members of the Academic Senate learns this, and nothing more. You will, however, do me the favour of being convinced that the sordid pleasures of your sort have never been stuff for Rosario La Ciura.' One could sense that it was true: In the senator's bearing and in his words there was the unmistakable sign of a sexual reserve (as one said in 1938) that had nothing to do with age.

'The truth is, Senator, it was precisely my search for some temporary refuge from the world that first brought me here. I'd had trouble with two of just the sort of women you've so rightfully condemned.'

His response was immediate and pitiless. 'Betrayed, eh, Corbera? Or was it disease?'

'No, nothing like that. Worse: desertion.' And I told him about the ridiculous events of two months earlier. I spoke of them in a light, facetious manner; the ulcer on my self-regard had closed, and anyone but that damned Hellenist would have teased me or possibly even sympathized. But the fearful old man did neither; instead he was indignant.

'This is what happens, Corbera, when wretched and diseased beings couple. What's more, I'd say the same to those two little trollops with respect to you, if I had the revolting misfortune to meet them.'

'Diseased, Senator? Both of them were in wonderful shape; you should have seen how they ate when we dined at Gli Specchi. And as for wretched, no, not at all: Each was a magnificent figure of a young woman, and elegant as well.'

The senator hissingly spat his scorn. 'Diseased, I said, and made no mistake. In fifty, sixty years, perhaps much sooner, they will die; so they are already now diseased. And wretched as well. Some elegance they've got, composed of trinkets, stolen sweaters and sweet talk picked up at the movies. Some generosity too, fishing for greasy banknotes in their lover's pockets rather than presenting him, as others do, with pink pearls and branches of coral. This is what happens when one goes in for those little monstrosities with painted faces. And were you all not disgusted – they as much as you, you as much as they – to kiss and cuddle your future carcasses between evil-smelling sheets?'

I replied stupidly, 'But Senator, the sheets were always perfectly clean!'

He fumed. 'What do the sheets have to do with it? The inevitable cadaver stink came from you. I repeat, how can you consent to carouse with people of their kind, of your kind?'

I, who already had my eyes on an enchanting sometime seamstress, took offense. 'It's not as if one can sleep with nothing but Most Serene Highnesses!'

'Who said anything about Most Serene Highnessess? They're bound for the charnel house like the rest. But this isn't something you'd understand, young man, and I was wrong to mention it. It is fated that you and your girlfriends will wade ever further into the noxious swamps of your foul pleasures. There are very few who know better.' Gazing up at the ceiling, he began to smile; a ravished expression spread over his face; then he shook my hand and left.

We didn't see each other for three days; on the fourth I received a telephone call in the editorial office. 'Is this Signor Corbera? My name is Bettina Carmagnola, I'm Senator La Ciura's housekeeper. He asks me to tell you that he has had a bad cold, and that now he is better and wishes to see you tonight after dinner. Come to 18 Via Bertola at nine, second floor.' The call, abruptly interrupted, became unappealable.

The building at 18 Via Bertola was a dilapidated old structure, but the