LEONARDO SCIASCIA (1921–1989) was born in Racalmuto, Sicily. Starting in the 1950s, he established himself in Italy as a novelist and essayist, and also as a controversial commentator on political affairs. Among Sciascia’s many other books are *The Day of the Owl*, *Equal Degree*, and *The Wine-Dark Sea*, a collection of stories that is also published by New York Review Books.

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TO EACH HIS OWN

Leonardo Sciascia

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THERE'S NO AMERICAN novelist whose voice has the broad public resonance that Leonardo Sciascia's had. When an Italian critic sadly said to me, two years after Sciascia's death in 1989, that he was much missed, it wasn't a sentimental judgment. Sciascia was more than just a distinguished writer. He and his work were a critical, moral presence in Italian cultural life. He wrote regularly for the press and participated in the major polemics of the postwar period. He used storytelling as an instrument for investigating and attacking the ethos of a culture—the insular, mafia-saturated culture of Sicily—which he believed to be a metaphor of the world. The major novels, *A ciascuno il suo* (*To Each His Own*), *Il giorno della civetta* (*The Day of the Owl*), *Il Consiglio d'Egitto* (*The Council of Egypt*), and *Il contesto* (*Equal Danger*),
are about political morality, though they are not political in content or moralizing in intent. Each is a genre piece, a detective story, but of an odd kind: when all clues are gathered and aligned, they lead to a wrong solution; or the mystery proves insoluble because practically everyone involved, except the investigator, is duplicitous.

Born in 1921, one year before Mussolini’s march on Rome, in the small Sicilian town of Racalmuto in the southwestern interior near Agrigento, Sciascia was brought up in a landscape of extremes—torrid summers and icy winters, sulfur mines and vineyards, quarries and wild fruit trees. In interviews with Marcelle Padovani during the late 1970s, he commented on how strange it was to have grown up during the years of Fascism, to lead a double life as a child who hated Mussolini yet wore the obligatory school uniform: black shirt, tie pin embossed with the image of Il Duce, tasseled black fez. He spent his first twenty years in what he called a “nonsociety society,” a Pirandelloesque fiction made up of alienated, invisible, falsified, or inauthentic creatures, a society grounded in deception and bad faith, “doubly unjust, doubly unfree, doubly irrational.” Born to a culture of unreason, he became a French Enlightenment writer, although even before he discovered his literary heroes—Voltaire, Stendhal, Diderot (“He is my master”)—Sciascia committed himself to reason as a fixed pivot. His commitment was so obsessive that in time it became what he called a “neurosis of reason,” a rationality that skirted the edge of unreason.
The major novels are inquiries into the impossibility of justice and the terminal intellectual fatigue caused by disillusionment. Sciascia himself believed in the possibility of a free and just world, however imperfect, but the salient instrument in his fiction is skepticism. Skepticism as a means of social survival is also a core mafia value, so the skepticism cultivated by Sciascia was a moral inoculation against the mafia ethos. But it could also express itself as unintentional complicity. For instance, his gristly nonconformity reached its most dangerous pitch when in 1987 this lifelong enemy of the mafia criticized members of the anti-mafia commission, who had cut more deeply into the mafia hierarchy than anyone since Mussolini, for being political opportunists. The accusation had unhappy consequences for Sciascia’s image as a righteous public intellectual. It also showed what happens when skepticism outpaces or occludes facts. But whatever its dangers, Sciascia couldn’t live without it. The “detective” in To Each His Own, Professor Laurana, has a different problem. He fatally lacks the elastic, insistent, homeopathic skepticism that is rubbed so deeply and invisibly into the textures of Sciascia’s narrative. Worse yet, he allows eros to foul the clarity of his investigation.

Society held hostage to a suffocating ethos of secrecy, silence, and misdirection; criminality as an expression of maniacal self-containment; evil as an all-powerful but apparently authorless entity (the mafia, Fascism, the Red Brigades); the monstrous perversions of loyalty, love, and
honor sponsored by the mentality that is mafia—these are the real subjects of Sciascia’s best novels. The epigraph to To Each His Own comes from Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”: “Let it not be supposed that I am detailing any mystery, or penning any romance.” Sciascia said several years later that his intention had been to write a book about the political disillusionment and social chaos triggered by the failure of the 1964 coalition of Socialists and Christian Democrats, which had inspired hope for a balanced, stable, reasonably honest government. The failure of the coalition was partly responsible for the breakdown of public order that led to the violence of the 1970s (“gli anni di piombo,” the years of lead) which culminated in the 1978 kidnapping and execution of the Christian Democratic leader Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades. Even without the benefit of hindsight, when he wrote To Each His Own Sciascia knew that much was at stake and was disconcerted when the book was treated as a mafia story.

It is a mafia story, though it has little to do with the organization called the mafia, which Sciascia in the introduction to The Day of the Owl defined as “a parasitic middleclass that exploits instead of producing,” because it is about mafia as a systemic, irreducible set of assumptions and behaviors, often murderous, embedded in duplicity and concealment. Well into the story, before we know who committed the two murders that begin the action, we learn that the lawyer Rosello, one of several
cronies who gather daily in the piazza to trade gossip and philosophize on the state of things, has major business interests and is tied up in what people assume to be marginally but negligibly criminal enterprises. But he’s most admired for his political canniness. As a provincial counselor, Rosello manages to swing his recalcitrant Christian Democratic Council into an alliance with the Socialists. This ambiguous, dangerous man engineers the historic compromise Sciascia had in mind when he wrote the book.

“I don’t have a great creative imagination,” Sciascia said in his interviews with Padovani. “All my books are the story of a series of historical delusions seen in the light of the present.” Rosello, architect of hope in postwar Italian politics, also designs the double murder which begins the story. The town pharmacist, having just received a poison-pen death threat that he takes as a joke, goes hunting with a respected local physician, Dr. Roscio, and both are killed for no apparent reason. The town is immediately infested by a plague of hypotheses and attributions. Sciascia dramatizes from the inside out how a community will fabricate the appearance of truth from a tissue of unsubstantiated insinuations, usually because it needs to believe the worst of human beings, though as it turns out this is far from the worst. The murders are assumed to be a classic instance of a cuckold avenging the pharmacist’s presumed affair with a girlfriend. Dr. Roscio, unlucky soul, was killed because he was a witness.
Professor Laurana, a diffident and quiet-spoken schoolteacher, is drawn into the mystery when he notices that a piece of the threatening letter was clipped from the Vatican newspaper, the Osservatore Romano, which he recognizes from its masthead: “Unicuique suum.” To each his own. The newspaper is a clue to the crime. The motto, though he’ll realize it only when it’s too late, is a clue to Laurana’s fate. He’s certainly an unlikely detective or hero. He’s a timid, sexually repressed mama’s boy; the narrator describes him as “an honest, meticulous, melancholy man; not very intelligent and indeed at times positively obtuse.” He’s astute and Sicilian enough, however, to know that appearances shouldn’t be trusted, that niceties often mask wickedness. After an amiable interview with the local rector, a likable man, Laurana reminds himself that “Sicily . . . is full of likable people who should have their heads chopped off.” But his belief in the supremacy of reason and candor over irrationality and silence can’t save him from a pathology that infects his culture: the silent complicity that allows those who know who committed the killings and why—nearly everyone around him knows—to withhold their knowledge from him. In this culture, self-possessiveness is a shield against the incipient evil intentions of others. By concealing the erotic and political connections that implicate Rosello and Roscio’s widow, they can possess secret knowledge without exercising the power such knowledge confers. In the presence of evil, their culture
not only allows but insists on silent reserve and privileged gossip over confrontation and exposure.

Sciascia’s plain diction gives his work a rather cool tone, but his complex, bristly syntax enacts the connivances and uncertainties that drive the plot. It’s an acidic style that criticizes while it discloses, that can mimic the sophistry, the rotted grandiloquence, which is the dominant idiom of the culture. In his angular, mock-innocent observations of social behavior, he sometimes out-Stendhals Stendhal. Immediately after the killings most of the town gossip is about the hunting dogs who “report” the killings by returning without their masters. “The return of the dogs set the whole town to disputing for days and days (as will always happen when people discuss the nature of dogs) about the order of Creation, since it is not at all fair that dogs should lack the gift of speech.”

Like all of Sciascia’s books, *To Each His Own* is filled with exquisitely oblique, disputatious conversations. In an interview Laurana conducts with Dr. Roscio’s aged father, the old rationalist makes a distinction between Sicily and “the North.” A northerner who hears the proverb “The dead are dead; help the living” imagines an accident that leaves one man dead and another injured, so you let the dead man be and help the survivor. A Sicilian hearing the same proverb imagines instead a murderer and his victim, and if the victim is your own flesh and blood you help the living man by speeding his way to hell. In this elegantly brutal book, even that code is turned on
its head. It’s Professor Laurana who is sent packing to hell—he ends up buried in a sulfur mine—not a victim of someone’s vengeance, merely a scraped-off residue which would have gummed up the political-erotic watch works designed by Rosello and the widow Roscio—while the townspeople stand by in complicit, self-protective, decorous silence.

Sciascia is the rare novelist who has been well served by movie makers, in part because the directors who turned his work into film—Elio Petri (A ciascuno il suo), Damiano Damiani (Il giorno della civetta), and Francesco Rosi (Il contesto, released as Cadaveri eccellenti)—had similar leftist leanings and social concerns. But there’s another reason. In his childhood and adolescence Sciascia was not only a reader of prodigious, Coleridgean appetites, he was also a great movie fan, especially of the silents, and he once admitted that his way of writing owed more to the cinema than to literature. Although the final line of Petri’s very good 1967 movie adaptation, released here under the silly title We Still Kill the Old Way, doesn’t appear in the novel, it’s true to Sciascia’s merciless and icily comic vision of evil. The line is spoken by a cynically admiring townsman at the wedding of Rosello and Roscio’s widow who, it turns out, are cousins raised in the same house and in love since childhood: “Hanno fatto un vero capolavoro.” They pulled off a real masterpiece.

—W.S. Di Piero