



**THE DAY  
OF THE OWL**  
LEONARDO SCIASCIA

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INTRODUCTION BY  
GEORGE SCIALABBA

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## THE DAY OF THE OWL

LEONARDO SCIASCIA (1921–1989) was born in Racalmuto, Sicily. Starting in the 1950s, he made a name for himself in Italy and abroad as a novelist and essayist, and also as a controversial commentator on political affairs. Among his many other books are *The Wine-Dark Sea*, *Equal Danger*, and *To Each His Own* (all published by New York Review Books), works in a genre that Sciascia could be said to have invented: the metaphysical mystery.

GEORGE SCIALABBA writes about books in the *Boston Globe*, the *Boston Review*, and other journals.

# THE DAY OF THE OWL

LEONARDO SCIASCIA

Translated from the Italian by

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## INTRODUCTION

Leonardo Sciascia (1921–1989) was born and grew up in the central Sicilian town of Racalmuto, near the sulfur mines where his grandfather worked from the age of nine. The family was not prosperous, but it nurtured a modest literacy in the boy, as well as a robust skepticism about fascism and all other matters political. The young Leonardo became a schoolteacher, a job he held for many years. His first significant book, *Salt in the Wound* (1958), was a series of witty and penetrating essays about his Sicilian hometown, its history, mores, and variegated human fauna. His next book, *Sicilian Uncles* (1960), consisted of four novellas, each one politically barbed, soberly humanist, and exquisitely funny. With these two short, masterly works Sciascia joined the front rank of contemporary Italian writers.

After this promising start, Sciascia embarked on a career in crime—crime fiction, that is. *The Day of the Owl* (1961) was the first of his many detective novels and stories, the most straightforward and, perhaps for that reason, the most satisfying. Its characters are distinctive but not idiosyncratic, individuals but also figures—of age-old degradation, of folkish cunning, of refined corruption, of barbaric or civilized virtue. The plot has the directness of allegory; the conversational interludes among unnamed eminences form a kind of chorus; and the narrator's comments have a sarcastic cogency not yet jaded by too-long contemplation of the unchanging Sicilian blight. Sciascia's subsequent detective fiction is a little more enigmatic. But in writing *The Day of the*

Owl he already knew, as he notes sardonically in the coda, that “in Italy, as is well-known, some things must not be made light of”—except very obliquely.

“All my books taken together form one,” Sciascia wrote in the preface to a later edition of *Salt in the Wound*, “a Sicilian book which probes the wounds of past and present and develops as the history of the continuous defeat of reason and of those who have been personally overcome and annihilated in that defeat.” *The Day of the Owl* recounts a double defeat: chiefly of its hero, the carabinieri Captain Bellodi; but in the first place, of the murder victim.

Unlike most of Sciascia’s victims, the contractor Salvatore Colasberna is neither bad nor even merely innocent but actually brave and upstanding. He refuses the Mafia’s demands not from greed or foolhardiness but because he wants to compete fairly, pay his workers decently, and do a solid job. He is that freak of nature, an honest Sicilian. So of course he must be killed off on the first page, struck down while stepping onto a bus by an “invisible hand.” “They’ve killed him,” the bus conductor announces; and that characteristic “they” registers Sicilian malignity as pervasive and anonymous.

The evil “they” are at least active. The rest of the Sicilian humanscape is a nullity. The bus passengers are a mere backdrop to the murder, their faces “blank as the blinds . . . mute . . . as if disinterred from the silence of centuries,” those centuries of intimidation and defeat. The victim’s partners—his brothers, no less—pretend ignorance and are so relieved when the police interrogator pretends to believe them that “they went out quite forgetful of their mourning . . . longing to run and skip” like the children they are, morally speaking. The street vendor under whose nose the shooting takes place is a virtuoso of canny cowardice—what else could he be, caught between the almost equally ruthless forces of Sicilian law and Sicilian lawlessness?

Only an outsider can disturb this immemorial inertia. Captain Bellodi, formerly an antifascist partisan, is a cultivated man and a dedicated professional. A native of Emilia, one of Italy's best-governed regions, he finds himself assigned to one of its worst-governed ones. His courtesy and impartiality confuse ordinary Sicilians, for whom authority has never had anything to do with justice or public service. One of the townsmen—an informer, the craftiest of all—drops his guard for a moment and tells the Captain more than he meant to. It is enough: the threads are skillfully drawn together, the crime is solved.

But not, of course, punished. The opposing forces are too unequal: one honest officer is easily balked by the unidentified Excellencies and Honorable Members who inhabit the shadowy upper reaches of "they." Briefly the Sicilian silence is broken and a dark corner or two illumined; then silence and darkness re-descend, and the inertia of impunity is reestablished.

Not completely, however: the source of the disturbance, the Captain, will remain in Sicily. "They" had expected and intended that he would leave in disgust and return to the safer, saner North. It almost happens. At home in Parma for a rest, he looks back on the morass of the South and resolves, as he was meant to: "To hell with Sicily! To hell with it all!" But something changes his mind, and the novel ends with his recognition that "he loved Sicily and was going back." ("Even if it's the end of me," he adds wryly. Sciascia must always balance optimism and fatalism.)

Why return? What does Captain Bellodi feel about Sicily, and what does Sciascia feel? The emotional climax of the novel, the moment of the Captain's most intense engagement with any Sicilian, occurs during his interview with the Mafia chieftain, Don Mariano Arena. The Captain probes, Don Mariano parries. Then, spontaneously, a brief current of mutual admiration passes between them. "'You're a man.' . . . 'So are you.'" It is an

acknowledgment, on one side, of the Northerner's integrity and disinterestedness, his humane sympathy and devotion to justice; on the other, of the Mafia leader's own peculiar integrity, "beyond the pale of morality and law, incapable of pity, an unredeemed mass of human energy and of loneliness, of instinctive, tragic will." Later on, after being "cleared" through the intervention of his allies in government, Don Mariano repeats publicly his laconic tribute to his outmaneuvered adversary. Reading this in a newspaper injects "a note of ambiguity, of pleasure mingled with irritation . . . [into] the turmoil of Captain Bellodi's feelings."

Presumably that brief glimpse of the Sicilian's tragic solitude, with nowhere to direct even superior energies except into violent self-assertion, is what moves the magnanimous Captain to remain. There is, too, his affection for the region's landscape and literature, which comes out at odd moments and endears him to the otherwise mistrustful natives. But he must also have been charmed, as the reader is, by the Sicilians' unflagging, unembarrassed wit—the recoil, perhaps, of their usual abjectness. *The Day of the Owl* is, among its other merits, very droll. The grumbling of the carabinieri sergeant over his commanding officer's high-mindedness; the antics of the street vendor and the other frantically evasive murder witnesses; the perfect pitch of the conversations among faceless, highly placed fixers; a raucous altercation in the Italian Parliament, observed by two scandalized visiting mafiosi: these are all comic tours de force, even if they leave one smiling a little crookedly.

Sciascia's feelings about Sicily are, naturally, even more complicated than his protagonist's. In *Sicily as Metaphor* (1979), a book of interviews, he says: "I hate and detest Sicily in so far as I love it, and in so far as it does not respond to the kind of love I would like to have for it." Sciascia's is an unsparing love. For Sicily is not, in his writing—or in Verga's, Pirandello's, Lam-

pedusa's, or Vittorini's—very lovable. An unbroken history of rule by irresponsible elites—landowners, the Church, and the Bourbon monarchy—has left the island without civil society or the virtues it makes possible: no solidarity, no trust, no enterprise, no public spirit, not even simple honesty. The law, as one character broods in *The Day of the Owl*, is “utterly irrational, created on the spot by those in command,” all of them exultant “in the joy of being able to abuse their powers, a joy the more intense the more suffering can be inflicted on others.” Even fascism, the ex-partisan Bellodi reflects bitterly, was an improvement on this intractable Sicilian anarchy:

. . . his anger smouldered on, his Northerner's anger against the whole of Sicily, the only region in the whole of Italy actually to have been given liberty during the fascist dictatorship, the liberty of safety of life and property. How many other liberties this liberty of theirs had cost, the Sicilians did not know or want to know. In the dock at the assizes they had seen all the *Dons* and *zii*, the election riggers and even those Commanders of the Order of the Crown of Italy, the doctors and lawyers who intrigued with or protected the underworld. Weak or corrupt magistrates had been dismissed; complaisant officials removed. For peasant, smallholder, shepherd and sulphur-miner, dictatorship had spoken this language of freedom.

Sciascia lived long enough to see the democratic state, too, begin to take on the Mafia, though so far with mixed success. He deserves much credit for this. The brilliant portrait in this novel of an organization whose very existence virtually no one else at the time was willing to acknowledge has made *The Day of the Owl* a classic in Italy. Sciascia was universally revered in the years before his death, and one of the leading figures in the

anti-Mafia campaign was a carabinieri general, Alberto Dalla Chiesa, whom some people compared to Captain Bellodi.

So it is all the sadder that the writer's inveterate and invaluable skepticism may have betrayed him, at last, into a grievous mistake. Two years before he died Sciascia published an ill-natured and almost entirely wrongheaded attack on the magistrate Paolo Borsellino and the politician Leoluca Orlando, two of the bravest and most effective anti-Mafia crusaders. He accused them and unnamed others (generally assumed to include Giovanni Falcone, the chief architect of the Mafia "maxi-trial") of careerism. They had become "anti-Mafia professionals," he charged. The attack was, unfortunately, extremely influential. Eventually he apologized to both, but the very considerable damage was already done. In mitigation, it should be said that Sciascia was in failing health, was badly misinformed by friends, and was understandably concerned about the wide latitude granted to prosecutors in the Italian judicial system.

Perhaps even this lapse teaches a useful lesson, one that Sciascia himself would no doubt have approved: an arch-skeptic, too, must be read skeptically. And as Borsellino (whose assassination in 1992, three years after Sciascia's death, was to convulse the island) said: "I can't be mad at Sciascia. He's too great."

—GEORGE SCIALABBA