

The background of the cover is a painting. In the foreground, there are several large, flat, green and yellowish cactus pads with dark spots, some with small spines. Behind them, a white ledge or railing is visible. In the middle ground, there is a vast, bright blue sea. In the far background, there are dark, rugged mountains or hills under a pale sky.

THE
WINE-DARK SEA
LEONARDO SCIASCIA

INTRODUCTION BY
ALBERT MOBILIO

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THE WINE - DARK SEA

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 Day of the Owl*, *Equal Danger*, and *To Each His Own* (also published by New York Review Books), works in a genre that Sciascia could be said to have invented: the metaphysical mystery.

ALBERT MOBILIO is a poet and critic. His books of poetry include *Bendable Siege* and *The Geographics*, and his criticism has appeared in *Harper's*, *The New York Times Book Review*, and *The Village Voice*. In 1999 he won the National Book Critics Circle award for excellence in reviewing.

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Leonardo Sciascia



Translated by

AVRIL BARDONI

Introduction by

ALBERT MOBILIO

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

LEONARDO SCIASCIA, DESPITE the catchy melody of his name and his several translated books, remains largely unknown in America. Famous in Europe for politically sophisticated detective novels buffed to a high literary gloss, replete with meditations on Mallarmé and “Pirandellian” characters, he never benefited from the vogue for Italian fiction that spotlighted Calvino, Levi, and Eco. Partly to blame may be the decidedly political character of his work. Sciascia began his career in the 1950s when social realism was the order of the day for Italian writers. His first book, *Salt in the Wound*, seemed to fit the bill by providing an acid-edged portrait of life in a Sicilian mining town. But Sciascia proved too cagey for the party line; he snapped sharply at profiteering as well as Leftist orthodoxy. His fondness for the unsettling,

enigmatic Sicilian folk tale (a taste he shares with fellow countryman Pirandello) further distanced him from the social-realist goal of political message writ large.

Sciascia's skepticism was hardly unearned. Stints as a Communist Party member of Palermo's town council and as a Radical Party MP in the European Parliament sparked his sly wit. The armchair anarchists, scheming priests, closet mafiosi, and political hacks that people his tales have been lifted whole from the ongoing circus that is Italian and, especially, Sicilian politics. The stories in *The Wine-Dark Sea* delve into this contentious world where church, state, and family make war on each other to ensure that no one comes out ahead. "Privilege, to the Sicilian," Sciascia instructs in one of his early essays, "is not so much the liberty of enjoying certain things as the pleasure of forbidding them to others."

Such vintage malice is on view in "Demotion," a story set in the late 1950s which recounts a crisis of faith for both Catholics and Communists. When the local party boss discovers his wife has joined a prayerful throng at the Cathedral of Saint Filomena he's embarrassed and outraged. Church scholars have announced that the saint never existed, but the town's women pack the pews to halt removal of her statue. The man berates his wife harshly: "She does not exist and she never existed . . . and they will take her down from the altar and put another saint in her place and you will continue to have masses said." Unable to shake her piety, he retreats to his

Communist newspaper only to discover, in small print, shocking news: Stalin's tomb has been moved outside the Kremlin walls. He flings the newspaper aside yet refuses to answer when his wife asks "What's the matter?" A Stalinist Ralph Kramden, he would rather stew in his own bile than allow his wife the smallest satisfaction.

Strategically situated at the crossroads of Europe and Africa, Sicily has been occupied by foreign powers almost continuously for over 2000 years. A succession of Greek, Roman, Spanish, Norman, French, and Arab invaders leaves open the question of what really is a Sicilian. If it isn't a bloodline, perhaps it is a disposition. In *The Italians*, Luigi Barzini writes: "Everywhere in Italy life is more or less slowed down by the exuberant intelligence of the inhabitants, in Sicily it is paralyzed by it."

This sense of life being fought to a standstill, which permeates Sciascia's view of his homeland, is the subject of his retelling of a popular folk tale, "The Ransom." When the famous judge Don Nicola casts an acquisitive eye at Don Raimondo's daughter, Concettina, Raimondo sees an opportunity to free his son-in-law from prison (he killed a peasant with a single kick). The girl recoils from the bargain but her family's expectations prevail—she marries the old judge. Six months later she wakes to find her husband dead beside her; she then returns to her father's house a widow, albeit a very rich one. Another six months pass and she defies her father by eloping with a young man ("Don Raimondo only forgave them on his death-bed").

The economies of love, duty, and betrayal are delicately calibrated to maintain a kind of existential stasis. The judge gets his child-bride but also, perhaps from exertion, finds his death; Don Raimondo sacrifices his daughter to free the husband of his other daughter, then, miraculously Concettina returns, but only to pay him back in full (and punish herself with the loss of her father) by fleeing him for good. In each relationship, the heart is fought to a draw. At the end of the story Sciascia wryly notes how the “Catholic concept of vicarious payment...has become, in Sicily, a cardinal dogma of the agonizing religion of the family. The guilty ransomed by the innocent.”

Sciascia's Sicily is a Gothic locale; its lush, sun-worn landscape, rural inhabitants, and subterranean histories make it a world not unlike Faulkner's South. Sicily too is a land of insurrection, tribal fiefdoms, and baroque rites of honor. With their stiff-necked pride in the face of defeat's long shadow, Sciascia's characters are cousins to Faulkner's. Both groups of “Southerners” have been (and still are in Italy) regarded by many “Northerners” with undisguised disdain. Southern Italians and Sicilians are sometimes called “the blacks” of Europe because of their poverty and perceived backwardness. Although Sciascia's loyalties are hardly in doubt, he sketches out the battle lines of this North–South antipathy without indulging in political agitprop. We follow the adventures of Mr. Blaser, a Swiss recruiter for an electrical company, as he travels around Sicily in “The Test.” With his hired

driver he moves from town to town administering a dexterity test to young women desperately in need of work. Matter-of-fact in his depiction both of the imperious Blaser as well as the alternately suspicious and obsequious locals, Sciascia locates the resolute heart of cultural and economic difference: "They don't seem to see us," says a young man whose girlfriend is leaving for Switzerland. "It makes you feel like a fly in a spider's web." And, Blaser, coming out of the church where he's given the test, "girls swarming out after him," crisply pronounces, "Primitive place."

What a Sicilian might see as primitive in a non-Sicilian is suggested in another story in which a wife, worried about confessing her adultery to her husband, writes a letter to a women's magazine: "Every priest, except one (but he was a northerner) has told me that if my repentance is sincere . . . I must remain silent." Secrecy, for the Sicilian, is the civilized alternative to brutish honesty. Sciascia shows the Mafia's code of silence, *omerta*, to be diffused throughout the society—the mother who refuses to say a word to the carabinieri about the man she knows murdered her son is close kin to this guilty wife. Both dwell in a sub rosa world of the implicit word and the cloaked gesture. It is a world where deception is only frowned upon to the degree it lacks artfulness. "This is a country," declares one of Sciascia's mafiosi, "where the left hand doesn't trust the right even if they belong to the same man."

“The Long Crossing” recounts a deft and hilariously sad betrayal. Beginning on a empty beach, peasants dig their life savings from shoes and shirts. (The cunning ones have borrowed money, certain they will never have to repay.) Signor Melfa collects the cash and assures a safe landing in New Jersey (between 1890 and 1920 one-quarter of Sicily’s population left the island). After eleven days below deck, he summons them up: “Have you ever seen a skyline like this in your part of the world?” Peasants who have never left their village all agree. Once ashore, they soon discover the ruse: they’ve landed at the other end of Sicily. “Silence descended once more,” is how Sciascia describes their reaction. This time silence is not meant to deceive or conceal but rather it signals a profound and melancholic resignation, one which allows the world its duplicities but retains the Sicilian’s right not to acknowledge he’s been duped. Again, spite proves a divine elixir healing all wounds.

The Sicilian language is the only one in Europe that has no future tense. The island’s bitter legacy of conquest and revolt seems to have stunted its inhabitants’ ability to conceive of a time outside this recurrent cycle. At the source of Sciascia’s conflicted love for his compatriots is his acute understanding of their paralysis, this need to find victory in denying triumph to others. A latter-day Voltaire (his novel *Candido* is an homage to a mentor), Sciascia is at heart a cynic, a descendant of an ancient culture who, in his own lifetime, has witnessed his

homeland occupied by the Fascists, the Germans, the Americans, and then returned to the Mafia. History has made him a poet of disillusion. But, like a jeweler displaying gems he values precisely for their defects, Sciascia presents his people and their history for our detailed inspection. In *The Wine-Dark Sea* the specimens come unadorned, dug straight from rocky Sicilian turf, and amply reflect the island's soul, a barbed composite of honor and treachery, brutality and wit.

—ALBERT MOBILIO