

## "La Sirena": Lampedusa on Greek Literature and Immortality

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (1896-1957) is well known as the author of *The Leopard*, a novel that chronicles the demise of the Italian aristocracy in the latter half of the 19th century, just as the Italian nation was being born. But Lampedusa's shorter works, including a memoir, the first chapter of a second novel, and a novella, "La Sirena," are less well known (Lampedusa 1961/2012). It is also not widely known that, while Lampedusa was an avid student of literature throughout his life, he did not begin to write until 1955 (Tomasi 84), and he died before any of his works were published (Warner xvii). (This includes *The Leopard*, which was first published in 1958 and won La Strega, Italy's most prestigious literary award, for 1959 [Gilmour 162].)

Lampedusa's delightful novella, "La Sirena" (translated into English as "The Professor and the Siren"), is his last work; he finished it only a few weeks before his death (Warner xvii). The story takes place in Turin, in 1938, and the plot centers on a classics professor, Rosario La Ciura, described as "the most illustrious Hellenist of our time" (Lampedusa 2014: 5), and his brief friendship with the narrator, Paolo Corbera, a young journalist who writes for *La Stampa*. The story begins as Corbera — a handsome and cosmopolitan young urbanite — is unexpectedly dumped by a girlfriend, and, as a result suffers "a severe case of misanthropy" (Lampedusa 2014: 1). Corbera retreats to a café, "a sort of Hades filled with the wan shades of lieutenant colonels, magistrates, and retired professors" (Lampedusa 2014: 3), where he meets the secretive and intriguing Greek literature professor, La Ciura.

As a friendship slowly develops between the older and the younger man, La Ciura confides to Corbera that, fifty years earlier, while renting a cabin on a remote beach in Sicily, he had had an encounter with a beautiful and seductive Homeric siren. (The Italian word for siren,

"la sirena," also means "mermaid," and in fact these two mythical beings share a common history; Gilmour 147, Rachewiltz 85-93, di Paolo 119.) La Ciura was completely transformed by his affair with the immortal siren (Reale 43), and now, as the elderly classics professor prepares to leave this life for what he hopes will be a joyous reunion with his lover (Henrot 51), Corbera, too, begins to change his view of human life and its meaning (Lampedusa 2014:12, 37-38).

"La Sirena" has received little scholarly attention, perhaps because it seems, at first glance, to be nothing more than a delightful flight of fancy (Biasin 31). Furthermore, of those few scholars who have commented on the story, no one has systematically investigated the many classical references in it, e.g., to Homer, Hesiod, and Plato, to Sicilian archaeology, Greek mythology and its influence on European literature. Once all of these classical references have been identified and understood, however, together they form a profound meditation on ancient Greek concepts of life, death, and immortality. As Lampedusa himself was facing the end of his life, he wrote a story in which a modern day Socrates, exemplifying the idea of a well-lived human life, encourages a young sophisticate to emerge from the Cave.

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