

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 45

Article 17

4-1-2014

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Recommended Citation

Fontana, Ernest (2014) "*The Leopard: A Classic from Italy*," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 45, Article 17.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol45/iss1/17>

The Leopard: A Classic from Italy

By Ernest Fontana

More nuanced than James Joyce's representation of the formidable and authoritarian Jesuit pedagogues in his *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is Giuseppe Di Lampedusa's presentation of Father Pirrone in his novel *Il Gattopardo*, published in Italy in 1958 and in English translation as *The Leopard* (Archibald Colquhoun, trans., New York: Pantheon Books, 1960). In this historical novel, set during the invasion of Sicily by Garibaldi's 1,000 Redshirts in 1860 and the consequent collapse of the Kingdom of Two Sicilies and its incorporation into what will become the unified modern Italian state, the Jesuit Father Pirrone serves as the private chaplain for the Salinas, an ancient, princely Sicilian landowning family. In contrast, Joyce's pedagogues are educators of an aspiring but politically and socially subjugated Irish lower middle class.

Father Pirrone, the "sheep dog" of the Salina family, functions as a mediator between the Salina woman and the prince, Don Fabrizio (played by Burt Lancaster in Luchino Visconti's memorable 1963 film version). In this role Father Pirrone resembles his father, who worked as overseer for a large monastic agricultural estate, mediating between the peasant laborers and their distant, privileged employers.

Father Pirrone is treated with affectionate disdain by the prince, who tauntingly invites him to share his carriage so that the Jesuit can visit his confreres in Palermo while he visits his mistress. On their return the prince will silently contrast the stale body odor of the Jesuit with the remembered fragrances of his mistresses' perfumes. The following morning Father Pirrone discreetly invites the prince to make his confession, to which Don

Fabrizio curtly replies, "Confession? It's not Saturday."

Father Pirrone's stale body odor (perhaps too obvious a metaphor) emerges again in the scene in which he, sweating profusely, visits the prince, who is enjoying a luxurious bath. In this scene, the splendidly nude prince will suggest to an awkward and embarrassed Father Pirrone that the Jesuit would be wise to have for himself an occasional bath.

Father Pirrone's mission in this scene is to suggest, in his role as gender go-between, that the prince's pious daughter Concetta marry the prince's penniless but dashing, orphaned nephew, Tancredi, who has joined the invading Redshirts. The prince, who is ambitious for his nephew, hopes instead to marry him to the daughter of the vulgar, aspiring, and wealthy mayor of Donnafugata, an ally of the new political order. He impatiently dismisses Father Pirrone's proposal that has been communicated to him on behalf of his daughter Concetta.

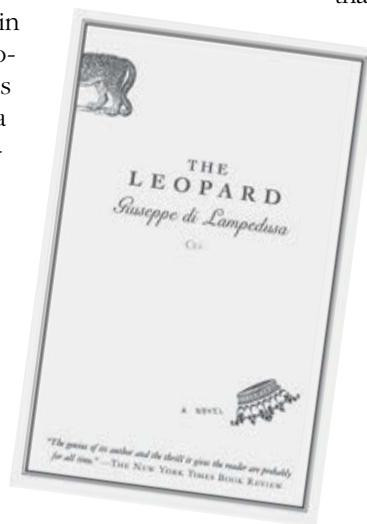
Yet the prolix, shy, pedantic, and odiferous Father Pirrone is, in the later chapters of the novel, proven to have been, surprisingly, prescient. Years later a comrade of the now-deceased Tancredi will reveal to Concetta, living unmarried among dubious and inauthentic religious relics, that Tancredi was in fact in love with her rather than with the woman he was encouraged by the prince to marry.

A foil to the terse, authoritative

prince, the pedantic and prolix Jesuit, whose long discourses put even his humble relatives to sleep, will also prove himself more politically prescient than the cynical, worldly prince, whose guiding paradox is "if we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change." In a scene in the palace observatory (the prince is an amateur but published astronomer) Father Pirrone, a dogged and inflexible reactionary, speaks of the dire consequences of the political and social modernization that will follow from the absorption of the sclerotic Kingdom of Two Sicilies into a united Italy: "our property, which is the patrimony of the poor, will be seized and carved up by the most brazen of their leaders; who will feed all the destitute who are sustained and guided by the Church today?" Later in the novel, after the prince has witnessed the rapacity of the new order in the figure of Don Calogero, he ruefully admits to himself that "what the Jesuit has predicted had come to pass."

Though obviously a mismatch, temperamentally and physically, the prince and his Jesuit chaplain come together in their pursuit of otherworldly astronomical knowledge. Father Pirrone, a trained mathematician, assists Don Fabrizio in his astronomical calculations. The novel also delicately suggests that perhaps Don Fabrizio might

have also called upon the pedantic Father Pirrone more readily in both his familial and political calculations. Although not a completely flattering fictional portrait of a Jesuit priest, Di Lampedusa's Father Pirrone reminds us that the Jesuits of the 19th century often attempted to serve the powerless by ministering to the powerful and the privileged. ■



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