

## Sea and Sardinia

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August 24-26, 2020

A trip is like an island in your life, with the same charm of being self-contained and circumscribed, constituting an entity of which you can have an easy overview. Just as an island is a world in miniature but nevertheless being part of the world, a trip is a life in miniature yet being part of your life. And if the trip is to an island itself to boot, an island you have never encountered before, nor never will encounter again, the setting is perfect crying out for a documentation as complete as possible. And this is what Lawrence undertakes, and, I must admit, with bravado. It is written from hour one, taking off from home, traveling to the island, through it and returning, and not stopping before you are back. Back home, if not quite. It is a travel piece in the spirit of those I for many years undertook myself, and as Burgess remarks in a preface, although of travel it is not a travel guide; what it truly is is a report on a certain temperament encountering the world around itself. A trip involves transportation, that is inevitable, but transportation is an essential part of a trip and not something to be swept under the rug. Lawrence is what Isherwood meant by being a camera, registering everything, low and high, but while Isherwood wanted to be as neutral and mechanical as possible, passing no judgment, Lawrence wants to be as personal and opinionated as possible, he is not out to write a true picture of Sardinia, that would be beyond his ambition, let alone his ability, but to make a candid report on his own reactions. This is something I can definitely sympathize with, are not my own travel reports written in the same spirit; the amassing of trivial detail, to create an illusion of reality and presence, just as a photograph is intended and expected to achieve, while at the same time recording my own reactions which are of course paramount in my consciousness, and also provides a *raison d'être* for a trip. But of course Lawrence does it way ahead of me, and in much greater detail, with far more gusto, with a stronger and keener personality, in short much better; although I doubt that his efforts would be appreciated and given their dues by the average reader, reading it from a semi-professional angle as a fellow travel writer, if I may be so bold expressing myself, obviously adds to my own appreciation. It is a text which is not only read out of the joy of digression and entertainment, but also for instruction and inspiration.

First Lawrence is not alone, he has his companion to whom he mysteriously refers to as "q-b" which, it transpires, stands for "queen-bee". She is a woman of course, and she is there, a presence taken for granted, she is not part of the scenery, she is part of the luggage. She is allowed a voice and a remark here and there, and also stands for reference, but so does luggage. She carries a what they call a *kitchenino* while the author himself carries a knapsack on his back. It makes him look as a poor German, which is a blessing in disguise as it saves him a lot of unsolicited attention by cab drivers and others eager to take financial advantage of him. He is mostly dismissed as an irrelevance.

The first leg of the trip is going from their base on eastern Sicily within eyesight of Etna, via Messina to Palermo, by train. What does a train ride involve? Two things, fleet-

ing glimpses of the landscape through a window, and fellow passengers. The landscape passes through you and it is hard to convey in real time, while your fellow passengers are much more conducive to verbal description, and also far more engaging to most readers. You can dwell on their appearances, their clothing, their conversations, and their idiosyncrasies. It is in fact not only an option but a duty to the observer taking everything in, only to be evaded by going to sleep. Then there is the ride across to Sardinia entering on a steamer. You note the quality of your cabin, the frequency and quality of your meals, incidentally leaving much to be desired. Once again you can focus on your fellow travelers and the staff. One woman irks them, because she insists in speaking a highly italianized French that grates on their ears and becomes correspondingly incomprehensible. Luckily her French is limited and she has to fall back on her Native tongue, of which Italy has many a variations. In particular there is a great difference between the fast Sicilian dialect and the more articulate and easily comprehended Sardinian. Lawrence makes the *faux pas* of praising the Sardinians at the expense of the Sicilians to what transpires to be a Sicilian.

And suddenly there is Cagliari: a naked town rising steep, steep, golden-looking, piled naked to the sky from the plain at the head of the formless bay. It is strange and rather wonderful, not a bit like Italy. The city piles up lofty and almost miniature and makes me think about Jerusalem. without trees, without cover, rising rather bare and proud, remote as if back in history. like a town in a monkish illuminated missal. One wonders how it ever got there. And it seems like Spain – or Malta: not Italy. It is a steep and lonely city, treeless, as in some old illumination. [...] And that is Cagliari. It has that curious look, as if it could be seen, but not entered. It is like some vision, some memory, something that has passed away. Impossible that one can actually *walk* in that city: set foot there and eat and laugh there.

But walk, eat and maybe even laugh there they can do, but above all they can see, especially Lawrence. The quote above is typical of the repetitive style so beloved by the author. It is as if he is dabbing paint on a canvas, changing his mind, dabbing some more. What we are witnessing is an approach to pin something down, each attempt being off the mark, but with the hope that there will be an accumulative effect, that what each single sentence fails to do, the collection of them will succeed in doing, or at least to evoke. One knows, or thinks one knows, what he is aiming at. One is reminded of those sacred medieval pictures of a holy foreground but also with a discreet background showing an intriguing landscape often with a town. The sacred picture has a purpose, but there is more to it, it is set in the world, and of that world, both sacred and profane, we are allowed to behold a tantalizing glimpse. It is not real but yet not a fantasy either, but suspended between the two, providing the seduction of the real world of senses, yet frustrated by the inaccessibility of fantasy. I do recall those pictures from my childhood and the effect those backgrounds had on me up to my more maturer years manifesting a suspense created by the almost possibility of a fairy tale.

A similar sensation must have pervaded Lawrence, that of being about to do the possible, namely to step into a picture. And that is what travel is about to go to and visit what up to now you have only read and heard about; because what you hear about may only be another tale, and what you read about just a piece of fiction, no matter how vividly it may have fired up your imagination, no matter how vividly it coheres into a picture.

The tourist is mostly dependent on his eye. He is an observer not a participant. Lawrence tries to engage all his senses, but what he mostly transmits in his travel report is what he sees; he might not be much for sights per se, as he notes later on in his narrative, lucky is the village which can boast of no sights. What the eye seeks, I would say, is intimacy; and intimacy is personal, what you want to look at is not what everyone can see and watch, and worse still is recommended, nay almost ordered, to watch and see. What touches you is the inconsequential detail, that which only is and not displays; because it more than anything else seems to display the very mundaneness of reality, and hence also promises to reveal the inner secrets of the foreign land you have stepped into, to present its very essence, so to speak.

And I see my first peasant in costume. He is an elderly, upright, handsome man, beautiful in the black-and-white costume. He wears the full-sleeved white shirt and the close black bodice of thick, native frieze, cut low. From this stick out a short quilt or frill, of the same black frieze, a band of which goes between the legs, between the full loose drawers of coarse linen. The drawers are banded below the knees into tight black frieze gaiters. On his head he has the long black stocking cap, hanging down behind. How handsome he is, and so beautifully male. He walks with his hands loose behind his back, slowly, upright and aloof. The lovely unapproachableness, indomitable. And the flash of the black and white, the slow stride of the full white drawers, the black gaiters and black cuirass with the bolero, then the great white sleeves, and white breast again, and once more the black cap – what marvellous massing of the contrast, marvellous, and superb, as on a magpie. – How beautiful maleness is if it finds its right expression. – And how perfectly ridiculous it is made in modern clothes.

Once again we encounter this repetition, but now it serves another purpose, namely to convey movement. He describes no mere manikin set-up in fancy garb for mere display, but a living human being actually walking along, and we sense the movement, the purposeful stride, in which the dress exhibits itself anew with each stride, reinforcing the expression of the previous. Whenever Lawrence gets an opportunity he describes peasant dresses in loving detail, as above, and one wonders whether it is really true, as Burgess intimates in his preface, that Lawrence kept no notes but relied entirely on memory; if so it is quite a feat and indicates as well that Lawrence saw deeper, realized that each dress had an inner logic, because otherwise any detailed memory of hapless combinations would be impossible. And those descriptions bring home the fact that those fancy dresses were part of quotidian life, be it of somewhat more festive occasions, such as a visit to a city, or walking from one village to another. It was not just for show for tourists but part of everyday Sardinia. And maybe more intriguing, dwelling momentarily anew with the initial man striding along in Cagliari; the reference to the beauty of maleness. It may be tempting to see her a passing revelation of homosexual longing on the side of Lawrence, after all a Mama's boy seeking a sanctuary in a maternal wife. Lawrence comes across in portraits as a rather prim young man, weak, sensitive and frail, and thus in vain admiring and exalting a forceful manliness of which he has been given but a smaller piece. On the other hand the eye of Lawrence is transsexual, giving both sexes their dues, taking delight in their differences, one non-existent without the other. An appreciation of manliness by a man can be, and often is, shorn of erotic overtones, but almost purely one of aesthetics. In fact Lawrence goes on, now his attention being fixed by another peasant in costume..

How fascinating it is, after the soft Italians, to see these limbs in their close knee-breeches, so definite, so manly, with the old fierceness in them still. One realizes, with horror, that the race of man is almost extinct in Europe. Only Christ-like heroes and woman worshipping Don Juans, and rabid equality-mongrels. The old, hardy, indomitable male is gone. His fierce singleness is quenched, the last sparks are dying out in Sardinia and Spain. Nothing left but the herd-proletariat and the herd-equality mongrelism, and the wistful poisonous self-sacrificial cultured soul. How detestable.

We see how a seemingly inconsequential observation quickly leads to a wild generalization, an ungrounded diatribe and petty quarrelsomeness; yet how typical are not those flights of thoughts and mental figures of the internal monologue of a quick mind, eagerly going drunk on its own cleverness and fertility. This is typical of Lawrence, with his outpouring of instinctive and spontaneous fruits of an uninhibited flow of consciousness, evoking a seductive brew of apparent insight, but without the necessary coherence to back it up. But after all it is not meant as sober reasoning but exuberant expressions of passing emotions, whirling along. It makes for poor philosophy but beautiful literature.

Nothing around evades the author's gaze, eager to take it all in and furnish it with appropriate word-painting sequences. This goes in particular for food. After having marveled at the low price of eggs, 60-65 centimes a piece, down more than half from what they priced in Sicily, moving q-b to exclaim that she must live in Cagliari.

This is the meat and poultry and bread market. There are stalls of new, various-shaped bread: there are tiny stalls of marvelous native cakes, which I want to taste, there is a great deal of meat and kid. And there are stalls of cheese, all cheeses, all shapes, all whitenesses, all the cream-colors, on into daffodil yellow. Goat cheese, sheep's cheese, Swiss cheese, Parmegiano, stracchino, caciocavallio, torolone, how many cheeses I do not know the name of! But they cost about the same as those in Sicily, eighteen francs, twenty francs, twenty-five francs the kilo. There is a little fresh butter too – thirty or thirty-two francs the kilo. Most of the butter is tinned in Milan. They cost the same as the fresh. There are splendid piles of salted black olives, and huge bowls of green salted olives. There are chicken and ducks and wild-fowl, at eleven and twelve and fourteen francs a kilo. There is mortadella, the enormous Bologna sausage, thick as a church pillar: 16 francs: and there are various sorts of smaller sausages, salami, to be eaten in slices. A wonderful abundance of food, glowing and shining.

Note the emphasis on prices. Francs, incidentally, are the same as lire and are used interchangeable. A hotel could be twenty lira a night, and passage on steamers across the Tyrrhenian Sea, about a hundred lira a person, to which you have to pay extra for food. The exchange rate is roughly a hundred lira to the pound. The Italians claim resentfully that the British with their favorable exchange rates can live on nothing in Italy, which angers our narrator, lashing out that this is far from true. Transportation is cheaper in Italy than in England, but not food. Lawrence resents bitterly of being reduced to being an Englishman in their eyes, he is an individual first and foremost, and share little of the attributes they so thoughtlessly bestow on him by such a general, abstract and reductive label. But the food orgy continues.

Peasant women, sometimes barefoot, sat in their tight little bodices and voluminous, coloured skirts behind their piles of vegetables, and never have I seen a lovelier show. The

intense deep green of spinach seemed to predominate, and out of that came the monuments of curd-white and black-purple cauliflowers: but marvellous cauliflowers, like a flower show, the purple ones intense as great bunches of violet. From this green, white and purple massing struck out the vivid rose-scarlet and blue crimson of radishes, large radishes like little turnips in piles. Then the long, slim, grey-purple buds of artichokes, and dangling clusters of dates, and piles of sugar-dusty white figs and sombre-looking black figs, and bright burnt figs. Basketfuls and basketfuls of figs. A few baskets of almonds, and many huge walnuts. Basket-pans of native raisins. Scarlet peppers like trumpets: magnificent fennels, so white and big and succulent: baskets of new potatoes: scaly kohlrabi: wild asparagus in bunches, yellow-budding sparacelli: big clean-fleshed carrots: feathery salads with white hearts, long, brown-purple onions. And then, of course pyramids of big oranges, pyramids of pale apples, and baskets of brilliant shiny mandarin, the little tangerine oranges with their black-green leaves. The green and vivid-coloured world of fruit-gleams I have never seen in such splendour as under the market-roof at Cagliari. so raw and gorgeous. And all quite cheap, the one remaining cheapness, except potatoes. Potatoes of any sort are 1.40 or 1.50 the kilo.

And this is in January. The mouth may water. And the trip continues by train or bus, staying over in small towns, sometimes with good clean beds and cheap and filling food, sometimes with dirty soiled beds and niggardly portions. Lawrence is intrigued by the landscape. There is none of the romantic features of the Italian with its mountains and narrow valleys. Here there is above all space. It reminds him of Cornwall, the same desolate character, and he starts almost to feel a longing for England. A Celtic landscape he notes, whatever he means by that. It makes him feel at home, except there are some features you would never find in Cornwall, like tightly enclosed graveyards. Basically it is very empty, but it is no wilderness. Here in the Mediterranean you cannot encounter wildness, as you still can even in England. History and human presence goes a long way back here thousands of years, it is after all a landscape of human presence. It is this that makes it old. A mountain landscape say in northern Norway may be basically untouched, or at least give the appearance of being untouched and looking as it did at the end of the Ice age. But it has no human relation, it becomes abstract and outside human history, and thus timeless with no deep well of human 'pastness' to it.

There are mishaps and fellow passengers who make a nuisance of themselves. Lawrence can understand Italian much better than he can speak, which is not remarkable; but the people do not realize that and hence he becomes privy to their comments about him and his partner the queen-bee. But mishaps are part and parcel of travel, as is inconvenience and discomfort. At times Lawrence loses his temper but is brought to keel by his partner. Their stay is short, less than a week with only a few overnight stays. They go from Cagliari in the very south up north catching a steamship to Civita Vecchia north of Rome. Arriving at the mainland of Italy Lawrence notes that he has to readjust, to become somebody else.

Yet I cannot forbear repeating how strongly one is sensible of the solvent property of the atmosphere, suddenly arriving on the mainland again. And in an hour one changes one's psyche. The human being is a most curious creature. He thinks he got one soul, and he has got dozens. I felt my sound Sardinian soul melting off me, I felt myself evaporating into the real Italian uncertainty and momentaneity.

And then he reads the newspaper and remarks

I like Italian newspapers because they say what they mean, and not merely what is most convenient to say. We call it naïveté – I call it manliness. Italian newspapers read as if they were written by men, and not by calculating eunuchs.

From Civita Vecchia they go down to Rome to change trains and where they briefly meet some friends at the station and Lawrence changes money. They catch a train to Naples and beyond and get into conversations as always, meticulously recorded. They are warned that the steamer from Naples to Palermo is probably filled up, it is very popular and the informants reveal that they got cabins with high numbers this morning indicating it was selling out quickly. Lawrence and his queen bee contemplate whether they should take their chances at the harbor in Naples or continue on the train all the way to Messina. The latter does not appeal to them. So when the train stops at the station they get off and proceed by foot to the harbor. There is a mass of people in front of the ticket wicket, no line, no structured order every man for himself. Luckily Lawrence has experience of similar situations before and knows how to gently but inexorably edge himself right through a mass of people and finally he makes it to the wicket and manages to get the last first-class berths for he and his wife. Had he not pushed ahead knife-thin he would have been out of luck, or had they not walked to the port but waited for the train to be shunted there, they would likewise have had to return empty-handed.

They have a comfortable crossing but Lawrence gets enough of all those commercial travelers. They had hoped to have a meal by themselves but their table is invaded and they have to put up with it. In Palermo the queen-bee wants to go to a marionette show, Lawrence obliges and gives several pages of description of what goes on. After that the trip is completed, the final ride back to their base apparently does not count.

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