

*“The Whole Shadow of Man”: Alessandro Spina’s  
Libyan Epic*

THREE MONTHS AFTER ALESSANDRO SPINA’S DEATH in July 2013, Ilario Bertoletti, his Italian editor, published a memoir where he described his first near-encounter with the notoriously reclusive writer: “It was June, 1993. The bell rang in the late afternoon; moments later, a colleague entered my office: ‘A gentleman dropped by. He looked like an Arab prince, tall and handsome. He left a history of the Maronites for you.’” The editor made some enquiries and discovered that Spina had been quietly publishing a number of novels and short stories since the early 1960s which charted the history of Libya from 1911, when Italy had invaded the sleepy Ottoman province, all the way to 1966, when petrodollars sparked an economic boom, exacerbating the corruption and nepotism that eventually paved the way for Muammar Qaddafi’s coup d’état in 1969. It took Bertoletti, who runs an independent imprint based in Brescia, fifteen years to persuade Spina to let him reissue his books, or rather to assemble them into a 1250-page omnibus edition entitled *I confini dell’ombra: in terra d’oltremare / The Confines of the Shadow: In Lands Overseas* (Morcelliana, 2007), a cycle comprising six novels, a novella and four collections of stories, which Spina, who’d only settled on a definitive structure and title in 2003, summarized thus:

The sequence of novels and short stories takes as its subject the Italian experience in Cyrenaica. *The Young Maronite* (1971) discusses the 1911 war prompted by Giolitti, *Omar’s Wedding* (1973) narrates the ensuing truce and the attempt by the two peoples to strike a compromise before the rise of Fascism. *The Nocturnal Visitor* (1979) chronicles the end of the twenty-year Libyan resistance; *Officers’ Tales* (1967) focuses on the triumph of colonialism – albeit this having been achieved when the end of Italian hegemony already loomed in sight and the Second World War appeared inevitable – and *The Psychological Comedy* (1992), which ends with Italy’s

retreat from Libya and the fleeing of settlers. *Entry into Babylon* (1976) concentrates on Libyan independence in 1951, *Cairo Nights* (1986) illustrates the early years of the Senussi Monarchy and the looming spectre of Pan-Arab nationalism, while *The Shore of the Lesser Life* (1997) examines the profound social and political changes that occurred when large oil and gas deposits were discovered in the mid 1960s. Each text can be read independently or as part of the sequence. Either mode of reading will produce different – but equally legitimate – impressions.

A year later, *The Confines of the Shadow* was unanimously awarded the Premio Bagutta, Italy's highest literary accolade. It was an impressive achievement, especially for an author who'd insisted on publishing his books in limited editions with tiny outfits, all of which had fallen out of print by the early 1990s. However, the Bagutta nod only caused a faint ripple: a single radio interview, a handful of glowing reviews and a conference in his honor, which he didn't attend. Lacking a persona to grapple onto—the back flap doesn't even feature a photograph—the book receded into obscurity, and although Spina remains little known even in Italy, where he spent the last thirty years of his life, *The Confines of the Shadow* belongs alongside panoptic masterpieces like *Buddenbrooks*, *The Man Without Qualities*, and *The Cairo Trilogy*.

Spina died two weeks before I concluded an agreement with a London publisher to translate the entirety of *The Confines of the Shadow*. Denied the privilege to meet him, I was faced with a conundrum: the translation of such a monumental opus in the immediate wake of the author's death meant any afterword I produced would have to deal with his life, of which I knew next to nothing, save that 'Alessandro Spina' was a nom de plume adopted in 1955 when Alberto Moravia published his first story, 'L'ufficiale' / 'The Officer' in *Nuovi Argomenti*. Sporting an English reticence and safely ensconced behind his pseudonym, Spina had spent half a century eluding the limelight, refusing invitations to make public appearances or to concede interviews. Consequently, I realized any clues would have to be culled from the work itself. I therefore retreated to the books, sleuthing through *The Confines of the Shadow*, a 300 page diary Spina kept while composing that epic, as well as three volumes of brilliant essays, and thanks to quasi-involuntary slips on Spina's part, I slowly began to assemble a narrative.

Alessandro Spina, né Basili Shafik Khouzam, was born in

Benghazi on October 8, 1927 into a family of Maronites from Aleppo. His father, a wealthy textile magnate, had left his native Syria aged 17 to make his fortune and arrived in Benghazi, the capital of Cyrenaica—then a quiet city of twenty thousand Turks and Arabs ringed by Bedouin encampments—a few weeks after Italy and the Ottoman Empire signed the Treaty of Ouchy. Ratified in October 1912, the Treaty brought 360 years of Turkish rule and 13 months of war to a close and formalized Italy's possession of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica. A latecomer to the scramble for Africa, acquiring Eritrea and Somalia in the late 1880s, barely a couple of decades after it had been cobbled out of squabbling fiefdoms, Italy had long sought to lay her hands on the *quarta sponda*, or 'fourth shore'. After all, the Libyan coast—the last remaining African territory of the Ottoman Empire, which as Baron Eversley put it, had grown used to having "provinces torn from it periodically, like leaves from an artichoke"—lay only 300 miles south of Sicily. With trouble brewing in the Balkans and sensing the sick man of Europe was on his last knees, the Italians seized their chance. Knowing they would only contend with a crippled navy and a handful of ill-equipped battalions, they delivered an ultimatum in September 1911, their soldiers disembarked in October, and by November, the Italian tricolor could be seen flying from every major city on the Libyan littoral.

Nevertheless, what was expected to be a pushover instead turned into a 20-year insurgency that was only quelled when the fascists took power in Rome and Mussolini, in a quest to solve Italy's emigration problem, dispatched one of his most ruthless generals, the hated Rodolfo Graziani (1882–1955), to bring the *quarta sponda* to heel and 'make room' for colonists. Genocide ensued: a third of Libya's population was killed, tens of thousands interned in concentration camps, a 300 kilometer barbed wire fence was erected on the Egyptian border to block rebels receiving supplies and reinforcements, and the leader of the resistance, a venerable Qur'an teacher named Omar Mukhtar (1858–1931), was hunted down and unceremoniously hanged: a chilling story elegantly depicted in *Lion of the Desert* (1981), where Oliver Reed and Anthony Quinn respectively portrayed Graziani and Mukhtar, and which was banned from Italian screens for several years.

In 1939, when Spina was 12 years old, Italy officially annexed Libya, by which time Italian settlers constituted 13% of the population and over a third of the inhabitants of Tripoli and Benghazi, the

epicenters of Italian power. At the outbreak of World War Two, Spina's father dispatched his son to Italy, where he would remain until 1954. Initially leading a peripatetic existence that saw him alternate between Busto Arsizio and the spa town of Salsomaggiore, Spina and his mother eventually settled in Milan, where he became a devotee of opera: as luck would have it, the hotel where they lodged, the Marino on Piazza della Scala, was directly opposite the Teatro. While in Milan, Spina, by then fluent in Arabic, English, French and Italian, studied under Mario Marazzan, penned a thesis on Moravia and began drafting his first stories: lush tapestries of history, fiction and autobiography featuring a cosmopolitan array of characters: Italian officers, Senussi rebels, Ottoman bureaucrats, chirpy grand dames, Maltese fishermen, aristocrats, servants and slaves. Spina nevertheless describing each caste with the same finesse, empathy and intimacy—partly thanks to his immaculate fusion of Eastern narrative quaintness and the passion for encapsulating an entire way of life that informs much 19th century European fiction, thereby distinguishing sentiment from sentimentality.

There is perhaps no better example of this balancing act than 'Il forte di Régima' / 'The Fort at Régima', one of the early stories set in the mid-1930s, where a Captain Valentini is ordered south of Benghazi to take command of a garrison stationed in an old Ottoman fortress that "recalled the castles built in Greece by knights who had joined the Fourth Crusade." Valentini is glad to leave the city and its tiresome peace-time parades behind, but as he's driven to his new posting, Valentini's mind is suddenly flooded with the names of famous Crusaders who had:

...conquered Constantinople, made and unmade Emperors, carved the vast Empire into fiefs, and run to and fro vainly fighting to ensure the survival of a system, which owing to its lack of roots in the country, never destined to survive.

Employing only 500 words, Spina slices across 700 years, showing the inanity of the concept of conquest, as well as the existential vacuum it inevitably leaves in its wake: "As he weltered about in his armoured vehicle, it seemed cruel to the Captain to be forced to undergo the same rigmarole after so many centuries had passed." Our technological genius may be growing, Spina implies, but so is our historical ignorance.

It's no coincidence Spina collected these sketches under the title of *Officers' Tales*. Not a single Libyan makes an appearance here and that is part of the point: it is part of Spina's pointed critique at colonial Italy's refusal to even acknowledge its native subjects. Indeed, the Italians grew so confident in their unchallenged hold over the quarta sponda over these years, that they officially annexed the province to Italy in 1939, by which time Italian settlers made up over a third of Libya's urban population and owned extensive land holdings in the interior of the country.

Those familiar with narratives of the British presence during the Raj will recognize the intimately theatrical scenes Spina sets for his readers as he chronicles an episode in Italian history that has been nearly obliterated from the country's collective memory. Time stands perfectly still in Spina's Benghazi while the ladies chatter and their husbands talk of war. The city's wide avenues are dotted with cafés where people gossip and orchestras play, yet Spina's narrators often take the reader on a tour of the surrounding area's Greek ruins—the remnants of the once-powerful city-states of the Libyan Pentapolis. Spina's tableau is vast: his stories feature haughty grande dames, industrialists, aristocrats, politicians, revolutionaries, servants, functionaries, prostitutes, dressmakers, policemen, school teachers, poets, musicians and knaves—whether in uniform or not.

This section of Spina's epic rightfully retains a militaristic feel: after all, the military was in charge in Italian Libya, and as such, many of the stories are set in the Officers' Club, where the soldiers sleep with one another's wives, plot and scheme, stage one-man shows, eat, drink, philosophize and discuss Italy's chances in the coming war, blissfully unaware that their artificial presence in that conquered land is soon to vanish entirely. Spina's Italian men-at-arms perfectly typify his concept of the 'shadow': their minds are haunted by the maddening darkness of the colonial enterprise, which still adumbrates our supposedly post-colonial times. More than a metaphor intertwining his novels, Spina's shadow can be interpreted as an allegory of how the Italian presence in Libya was both visible by dint of its brutality and yet incorporeal because it sought only to rule, never integrate. Ultimately, the shadow is also life itself: amorphous and mysterious. Mysterious because history has seen us repeatedly fail to envision what lies beyond what we can see, past the horizon of our ephemeral lives and experiences.

At the end of World War Two, Italy relinquished her claim to

Libya, which was then administered by the British until 1951, when the country became independent under King Idris I. Aged 26 and with the ink still fresh on his degree, Spina returned to Benghazi in August 1953 to help run his ageing father's factory. Although typically working twelve-hour days, he would somehow find the time to write and lock himself in his father's office, whose windows looked out onto the 14th century fondouk. Throughout his life, Spina firmly believed he'd acquired his discipline not despite being an industrialist, but because of it, in the same way Tolstoy refused to leave Yasnaya Polyana so as to stay among his people and chief source of inspiration. In his spare time, Spina would pick up the copy of *Le Temps retrouvé* he always kept by his side, or send letters to friends, which often featured pearls encapsulating the transformations his country was traversing:

A young scion of the royal family – “of the highest pedigree” as Hofmannsthal might have said – the grandson of the old king who'd been deposed by the current monarch, has died in a car accident. Having come to convey his condolences, one of the King's cousins also suffered a crash on his way home to his desert encampment, an accident that took the lives of his mother, wife and son (he remains in intensive care at the hospital). I went to convey my own condolences. The Prince is very handsome, around sixty years old. He's extremely tall, his skin's a milky white and he sports a little aristocratic goatee. Eventually, the talk turned to the accident. The old man (his medieval view of the world still unmarred) remarked: “Are automobiles meant as vehicles for this world or the next?”

JULY 26, 1963

During the first decade of Libyan independence, Spina completed his first collection of stories, published a novel based on his days in Milan, *Tempo e Corruzione / Time and Decay* (Garzanti, 1962), and worked on a translation of the *Storia della città di Rame / The City of Brass* (Scheiwiller, 1963), a tale excerpted from the *One Thousand and One Nights*. However, it was only in 1964 that Spina truly hit his stride and began writing the first volumes that make up *The Confines of the Shadow*. From 1964 to 1975, arguably his most productive decade, Spina produced *Il giovane maronita / The Young Maronite* (1964–69), *Le nozze di Omar / Omar's Wedding* (1970–72), *Il visitatore notturno / The Nocturnal Visitor* (1972) and *Ingresso a Babele / Entry into Babylon*

(1973–75), which while occasionally featuring such diverse locales as Milan, Paris or Cairo, are chiefly set in Benghazi, the kilometer zero of *The Confines of the Shadow*.

*The Young Maronite*, the first act of the Cyrenaican saga, opens in November 1912. The new Italian Conquistadors have barricaded themselves inside Benghazi and nervously look on as the Libyans muster their strength in the desert and begin their gallant guerilla war against the usurpers. Meanwhile, Émile Chébas, a young, savvy merchant from Cairo based on Spina's father, arrives in town with a meager cargo. Émile nonetheless lands on his feet thanks to a chance encounter with Hajji Semereth Effendi, one of the city's wealthiest men and a former Ottoman grandee, who takes Émile under his wing and helps set him up, even loaning him one of his servants, Abdelkarim. Although technically the chief protagonist, it isn't until later in the book that Émile fully emerges from Semereth's, well, shadow. Spina's portrait of Semereth is immediately ensnaring:

In Istanbul, [Semereth] had occupied several public positions that prophesied a stellar career, but after plot had been uncovered, the shadow of conspiracy had settled on him and prompted his fall. He had then withdrawn to that obscure provincial backwater and been quickly forgotten. [...] He was very tall and his face was frightening. A gunpowder charge had exploded close to him during a military campaign and he had been left forever disfigured. His hair had been reduced to a few tow-coloured clumps of locks. The wrinkles on his skull emanated a bad smell. He had an inbred seriousness and exuded an authority that made anyone who talked to him bashful and hesitant. It was like a spell that separated him from everyone else, but he was a victim of it, rather than its conscious master, as others instead assumed.

The first section deals with Semereth's unrequited love for Zulfa, the youngest of his four wives, who later betrays him with Ferdinando, an orphan raised in his household. Although Semereth tries his utmost to shield the lovers from blood-baying relatives, tradition ultimately makes an honor killing inevitable: the old politician is forced to watch while Ferdinando is stabbed and Zulfa is drowned. Unbeknownst to Semereth, his family tragedy is being quietly observed by two Italian officers, who, adrift

in a violently hostile land – having arrived assuming they would be welcomed as liberators—grasp onto what they can to try and make sense of their new surroundings. Of all the cast members, it's once again the officers who attempt a systemic understanding of the alien world around them, but perhaps unsurprisingly, the results are never positive. Here is Captain Romanino's take on Italy's African venture during a soirée in Milan, where he is on leave:

Just how a language is only useful in the area in which it is spoken and is pointless outside of it, so it goes with Europe's liberal moral values, which don't extend anywhere south of the Mediterranean. As soon as one reaches the other coast, one is ordered to do the exact opposite prescribed by God's commandments: kill, steal, blaspheme...Once the Turkish garrison was defeated and a few key locations on the coast were occupied, we found a vast, obscure country stretching out before us, into which we're afraid to venture. Therefore we cloistered ourselves in the cities awaiting daylight. Instead, the night is getting deeper, darker, deadlier, and teeming with demons.

Although Spina's initial installments of *The Confines of the Shadow* attracted some notice in the mid-1970s, with several of them, including *The Young Maronite*, making the shortlists for the Strega and Campiello prizes, his presence in Libya began to grow increasingly tenuous, especially once his father's factory was nationalized in 1978. The years following Qaddafi's coup had seen the despot de-foreignize Libya, a process he began in 1970 with the expulsion of thousands of Jewish families and Italian colonists. Thus, at the age of 50, Spina witnessed the Italo-Arab-Ottoman universe he'd been born into flit away into nothingness. While this did not impair his work, it certainly impacted its publication. Case in point: although Spina had penned *The Nocturnal Visitor* over the course of a few months in early 1972, he delayed its publication until 1979 to avoid scrutiny during the turbulent early years of Qaddafi's rule when dissidents—including a number of Spina's friends—were routinely rounded up and imprisoned. In between his novels, Spina had also composed *The Fall of the Monarchy*, a history in the style of de Tocqueville that analyzes the events leading to Qaddafi's coup, which, as per Spina's wishes, will only appear posthumously. Circulated in samizdat among a select group of acquaintances, the

book attracted the attentions of the security services, and when Spina left Libya for good in 1980, he was forced to smuggle the manuscript out in the French consul's briefcase. Safely removed from the reach of Qaddafi's men, Spina sojourned in Paris, and finally retired to a 17th century villa in Padergnone, in the heart of Lombard wine country, where he consecrated his buen retiro to completing *The Confines of the Shadow*, his privacy as jealously guarded as ever.

Like Joseph Roth, another inveterate chronicler of a crumbled empire, Spina had from a young age set himself to resurrecting his lost world on paper, thus ensuring its survival in our collective consciousness. While historical novels habitually focus on the rise and fall of specific castes, very few of them (Roth's *The Radetzky March* being a notable example) ever capture the confused excitement that makes the very earth those characters tread tremble with unregulated passions. As Chateaubriand once put it: "In a society which is dissolving and reforming, the struggle of two geniuses, the clash between past and future, and the mixture of old customs and new, form a transitory amalgam which does not leave a moment for boredom." It is exactly these fleeting junctures in time that infuse Spina's sophisticated prose with such an unbridled sense of adventure. Besides being the 'right' person for such a job, Spina also found himself in the right place at the right time: a Christian Arab born during the apogee of colonial power, who then consolidated his Western education with his intimate knowledge of Libyans and Middle Eastern customs and history to produce the only multi-generational epic about the European experience in North Africa.

Yet despite winning such diverse admirers as Claudio Magris, his closest confrère, Giorgio Bassani and Roberto Calasso, Spina occasionally professed surprise at the utter indifference prompted by his work, or rather his subject. Towards the end of his Diary, he recalls a run-in with the poet Vittorio Sereni at the premiere of a play in the early 1980s and being introduced to Sereni's wife: "Darling, this is Alessandro Spina, who is trying to make Italians feel guilty about their colonial crimes, all to no avail of course." Not that he hadn't been warned. When Spina had sought Moravia's advice about his project in 1960, Moravia had counselled him against it, saying no one in Italy would be interested due to their sheer nescience of the country's colonial past. Twenty-first century readers might do well to heed Solzhenitsyn's warning that "a people which no longer remembers has

lost its history and its soul.” Still, one must chuckle when one can: during the Libyan civil war in 2011, Spina was often approached by journalists on the hunt for sound-bites, requests that Spina invariably declined; nevertheless, I’ve little doubt the coincidence of the civil war being declared officially over 100 years to the day after the Italians conquered his beloved Benghazi would have made him smile.

Two Excerpts from *The Fourth Shore*, Volume 2  
of *The Confines of Shadow*, translated by André  
Naffis-Sahely

*Military Maneuvers*

“I don’t know if I saw any ancient tombs on those mountains. Those tombs also belong to warriors, condottieri whose actions have been celebrated by history. They came from the East and their tombs mark their journey’s exact itinerary. I retraced their steps in the opposite direction just six months ago. I had to stop at the colony’s border, instead of retracing this mighty river to its source: the black stone of Arabia, the mecca of devout pilgrimages. Regretfully, I had to stop my journey far sooner than that. Yet I can’t stop thinking about that long strip of tombs. On days like this, when I hear the general command shouting for war, I see yet another strip of tombs, superimposed on top of thousands of similar strips. The earth, for those who are not ignorant, like the general command, which insists on trampling on virgin lands, is a tangle of roads. Roads that have been travelled on by others before us, and which others will travel on after us.”

Dismantling the camp took up the entire day. General Desiderius Occhipinti didn’t seem to be in a hurry to return to the city.

Atop the camel-hump of a hill, surrounded by a wall in utter disrepair, lay an arid cemetery, where the soldiers had thrown the remains of their peeled oranges. The General hopped over the wall, followed by Captain Valentini. The General approached a tomb, which resembled a sword blade, and using his hand he carefully wiped away the dust caked around the stone. He had knelt down on one knee. The tomb was bare and porous.

“I explored up and down the entire littoral in the past few days: there are few signs indicating our presence here and they are all superficial. The arid earth, the desert, these useless shrubs: everything here contradicts our vision of the world, which, despite Fascism’s guise

of idealism, remains positivist at heart. There is a profound harmony between between the native's vision of their world and their natural surroundings. Our efforts, to borrow from our redundant propaganda efforts, all go to waste in the midst of nature's solemn silence. This land doesn't want us here."

The General stood up. Captain Valentini helped him up with his arm. The youthful Lieutenant Rossi was waiting for them at the bottom of the cemetery.

"What's your opinion on this, Captain? Will the English be the ones who turf us out of this colony, or will be it the natural violence of this very land that chases us away? Last Saturday's sand storm, just before the maneuvers began, was truly frightening. One day I think we'll disappear in exactly the same manner: as though the earth had swallowed us up, or as though the winds had hurled us into the ocean. The colony is an artificial organism, and we are destined to die."

## *A Solitary Duel*

“Literature is reality’s dress uniform,” Major Morelli’s wife said, slipping her foot into a purple velvet shoe.

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Reserved and aloof, as though on display in the shop windows, the ladies were selecting their footwear for the New Year’s Eve Ball in Treni’s cobbler store. Mrs Occhipinti had a golden sandal in her hand.

The cobbler, a ridiculous and repugnant-looking little beast, was sat at Mrs Borletti’s feet. He always struck a gracious pose, light as a pixie. These movements were his exaggerated way of recognizing how ridiculous he looked. There was something pathetic and heartrending in all that ostentatiousness. The ladies were nevertheless drawn to it, as they slipped their feet into the shoe held by his cupped hands with sensual repugnance.

Mrs Borletti laughed. “There’s something death-like and funereal about literature...,” she said, somewhat embarrassedly. “Truth be told,” she added, lifting her index finger, “the spirit freezes life in time. My dear,” she exclaimed, leaning her upper body forward, “aren’t you feeling well?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Mrs Occhipinti calmly replied, raising her hand. She hated compassion. She had spent two months in the hospital; she had been released against her doctors’ wishes so she could celebrate Christmas and new year’s eve with her husband, the General of the Army Corps, Desiderius Occhipinti.

The hospital’s head physician had stammered when he’d told the General: “I refuse any and all responsibility...” Occhipinti had shot him a cold stare. Then he had given his arm to his wife, and as though he could barely notice the pitiful effort it took her to walk, he had left alongside her. The General’s orderly, standing to attention out on the street, while holding the car door open, was filled with terror at the sight of that woman as she walked along in tiny, mechanical jerks.

“Are you sure you don’t need anything, darling? Maybe you’re tired?”

Mrs Occhipinti thrust her leg forward, as though kicking away her friend’s pitiful voice, or wanting to prove her strength. The sandal

flew off her foot and landed in a corner.

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A couple of days later, during the Christmas dinner held at the Prefect's house, the guests paid particular attention to her. Mrs Occhipinti remained impassive and her sentences were cold and curt.

The Prefect's wife had welcomed Mrs Occhipinti with the most unrestrained and intense pity imaginable – as though in a romantic novel, the highlight of the day. Yet she had been rudely refused. Mrs Occhipinti was a dark guest: aggressive and hard-edged, she had not come to put her agony on display, but rather her strength. The Prefect's wife was convinced that Mrs Occhipinti's illness was merely her just punishment for her sins. Thus, her strength – a blatant display of pride and presumptuousness – struck the Prefect's wife as completely sacrilegious. *Our house has been profaned*, she thought to herself, alarmed.

General Occhipinti hadn't kept track of his wife's mistakes. He refused to connect her mistakes to her illness, or to think of her condition as a form of punishment, like the Prefect's wife did. In the same manner, he also allowed her to suffer while he sat next to her, silent. Only his behavior had been normal when he'd accompanied his wife out of the hospital, or taken her to the Prefect's house for dinner, free of all bother and orotundity: it appeared as though he knew nothing of the devils looking to waylay his wife on her path.

The Prefect, who perceived the General as enigmatic, had once asked him why he'd opted for a career in the military. "Because it's the only way of life that is scientifically precise."

He abhorred confiding in people, as though doing so would violate a rule.

The halls of the Officers' Club were brightly lit and empty. They would remain open until four in the morning.

The Cathedral was crowded with people. The Bishop had already made his entrance, having been preceded by his priests. Having descended from his palace and crossed the square, the Bishop had entered through the large gates. All in black, and lined up in serried ranks, the nuns sang choir.

The officers were wearing their dress uniforms.

“His Majesty doesn’t speak,” Captain Sorrentino said. “We would just need a nod of his head to sweep Fascism away like dust.” He took in the club’s hall, crossing it in great strides. He was irritated and restless. “Well, what’s stopping him?”

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“He would certainly prefer a more cautious kind of Fascism,” Colonel Verri said, having a penchant for indulging the Captain’s temperament, “and an even falser and more hypocritical one too while we’re at it. In other words,” he added with a smile, “one that is both more civic and cynical. But maybe he’s worried that any attempt to perfect it will ultimately weaken it, and make it incapable of withstanding an opponent’s blows.”

“Why doesn’t the army take the initiative? If the King’s isn’t able to lead us, he will at least follow us.”

“Alas, my dear friend, don’t fill your head with too many delusions. Nobody’s going to make a move. We have compromised ourselves too much already. The declaration of war is like a messenger who can no longer be stopped. We’ll fight that war, for better or worse! Then, one after the other, the king and his subjects, the army and the fascist dissidents will start to make their move. Or maybe it will happen the other way around. Meaning everyone will show up late! By that time, we’ll probably be able to prove that we had never wanted the war in the first place.”

“But why are we just accepting all of this? Why?” The Captain’s irritation was sharply in relief, and the Colonel observed him indulgently. He was a man at his peak who was hesitant to squander his energies in a time of mediocrity. This contradiction held the key to his destiny.

Captain Sorrentino stopped in the middle of the hall. “Our only hope then is that Mussolini comes back to his senses and stops before he falls over the precipice and just sends us home.”

The Colonel smiled. “Opinions!” he said cheerfully, “Because it might turn out to be the worst solution, prolonging slavery for an indeterminate amount of time. Our lives grow ever more inward and empty. If he pulls back from this abyss, the Duce might assume greater

powers for himself. We'll owe him for that too, for defending us from Fascism's fatal outcome."

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"So we don't have a choice!" the Captain exclaimed in an excessively cheerful manner.

"You're wrong there," the Colonel retorted, "if we manage to save our skins, then we'll have saved everything. There are always plausible reasons for coming to terms with one's past. If in the end we don't come to war, we'll keep living as are now forever: the king, his subjects, the army and the fascist dissidents. There's an empty void inside me and I don't know how I'll ever fill it. I don't expect anything out of war. But if I have to survive it, I don't want the price to be an apology! If they are willing to forgive my sins, then I won't bother them with my explanations and justifications. Maybe I just don't love life enough: trials and explanations strike me as utterly ridiculous."

"This Christmas mass has been going on for ages," Captain Sorrentino said, returning to his seat. He didn't feel like singing hymns anymore.

"The Christmas mass and the military review to mark the anniversary of the Charter, the ball in the Governor's palace and the great maneuvers: without these spectacles, life here would become unbearable. Mussolini keeps us entertained as though we were courtesans."

"Go on, I said, I don't need anything."

The voice hailed from beyond the tomb. Colonel Verri and Captain Sorrentino jumped to their feet. They were barely able to nod their heads to the General of the Army Corps Desiderius Occhipinti, who was on his way out. His wife lay seated in a corner of the sitting room. The dinner at the Prefect's house had been a challenging trial. The tension caused by the people around her was consuming her.

Colonel Verri crossed the sitting room. He bowed. Captain Sorrentino stood next to him, lingering impassively like a guard. The General's wife observed them without moving. She then extended her arm so that the Colonel could hold it devotedly in his to plant a kiss on it.

The General's wife hadn't left the hospital in order to be pitied,

as some of the Prefect's wife's guests suspected, but merely to be able to watch and listen, so that life could start flowing freely before her eyes once again, instead of going around in circles at the hospital.

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The Colonel took a seat next to the General's wife. Counsel and Strength, here they were, the two last loyal men: the General's wife eyed one, then the other, as though probing them.

The sitting room's emptiness was as heavy as sleep. The General's wife felt like giving in to it. The compassionate attention the Prefect's guests had paid her had nevertheless irritated her and thus reawakened her strength. The chatter at the Officers' Club was a spider-web, and it wasn't strong enough to keep her for long.

She suddenly dropped her neck, like a swaying drunk. The Colonel smiled kindly at her and interpreting that nod as a sign, he turned to his friend and said:

"To tell the truth, my dear Captain, we are unable to overcome the *petty religious root of our problem*. From a social point of view, it's a mistake. Few among us are in fact citizens. The army is a mystical body. Hierarchy aside, the exceptional importance we give to form and following the rules imply faith, as well as a *common faith*, which we nonetheless lack."

The General's wife's eyes grew wide. She had grasped the last sentence, like an image caught immediately after waking up, and she had mulled on it without managing to penetrate its meaning. She felt such an intense and unbearable solitude that a cry almost escaped her lips. She pressed a handkerchief against her mouth. Silence! Silence!

The Captain looked at her admiringly.

"Among the most passionate of us, opposites become interchangeable," the Colonel said, "dread and restlessness for war, execration and indifference towards fascism, the anxiety for a renaissance and the certainty of not being up to its task. Even if *good* manages to triumph, meaning that the righteous win (or at least the ones closest to righteousness) can such an outcome change destiny and allow me to reconcile myself to life? I am dutiful when it comes to my work, just like others are. But it's nothing but pride – or just an easy solution. In this confused war, many of us will serve with great dignity,

and perhaps even with heroism when the occasion calls for it. But what will all this praiseworthy behavior really mean? Selfishness is foreign to a religious soul. I shall calmly trust what my superior officers tell me. Yet what others will go looking for when we begin to move towards the enemy, that I don't know. But look they will."

The sitting room was deserted. The stuccoes on the ceiling and walls had a sepulchral magnificence to them. All in all, the room's decoration was of a funereal character, and exaggeratedly consoling.

"What will humanity's fate be, then?" The Captain asked. He nevertheless lacked the earlier spring in his step. The appearance of the General's wife had left him distracted. Was all that agony – and the General's wife clutched her willpower as though it were a sword – noble or sacrilegious? What sense was there to all that effort?

"War is a game to change the way the world is ordered," the Colonel insisted, "but neither camp is capable of reconquering my faith in life. The impulse to commit suicide springs from an inability to hold a dialogue with the events of the world around us. *Self-awareness* is a prison into which we throw ourselves while waiting (or looking) for a purpose. This is as far as our education allows us to go. Or allows us to go."

"What fruitless effort!" Captain Sorrentino angrily exclaimed, coming to a stop smack in the middle of the room. The General's wife was motionless. The Captain looked at that silvery face: he watched it float against the wall like the moon in a limpid sky. "We should instead seek to reach a positive solution, one azure enough to spread around the entire world."

The General's wife smiled with joy. That word – azure – had stirred her.

The Captain crossed the room with only a few steps. "I'm going to tell you a story," he announced.

"This," he said, laying the palm of his hand on the table in front of him, "is the Fortress." He showed her. "It's an orderly and isolated complex," he explained. The General's wife listened attentively. His words seemed clear enough to her. That clarity already heralded the azure that had been mentioned.

The Captain didn't bandy on about what that Order might be, it wasn't necessary. The story would have the brevity of dreams, and share their burning immediacy.

"Against the Fortress, is the Hero." The Captain took two paces to his right, and looking inexplicably youthful, he bowed before his public. Then, standing erect, he headed towards the little table.

"A conflict is born when a hero can no longer endure their isolation, and the repugnance her feels for the intangibility of Order. Owing to its isolation and immobility, the Fortress stands outside of time and experience."

The Captain walked around the table three times, while keeping his eyes fixed on it. With each turn, he bent his knees a little further.

Then suddenly he stood up to his full height and turned on his heels.

"The young man escapes!" and he took a couple of steps away, approaching his spectators and thus subtracting himself from their gaze. The table had been left behind the middle of the room.

"The people of the Fortress refuse to take note of this flight, and feign ignorance: but time and experience seep through and infiltrate the gaps left by the Hero's escape."

"That departure was a wound." The Colonel burst out.

The General's wife was following the story very attentively.

"But the young man," the Captain resumed, stepping back on the scene as though having just returned from a trip around the world and had wound up at the starting point again, "comes back and stays. The opening created by his departure is plugged up by his return. The Fortress welcomes the young man as though it had just emerged from an illness, or freed itself from the germs of an infection, and recovers its initial harmony. Life in the Fortress carries on, in a repetitive circular motion, including: the addition of another young man."

The image of the circle pleased the General's wife. The present was only the darkest hour of the night. But azure was a path. She smiled cheerfully once again. Growing calmer, she nodded: the Captain was

free to continue.

94 Sorrentino launched into it again, yet this time in a threatening tone, and laying his palm on the table again, he said: "The Fortress has been besieged."

At which point he accosted the spectators to explain. "This time it has nothing to do with germs of an infection, or an illness of the organism, or rather of one of its cells (the Hero): it's an external force."

With soldier-like, booming steps, the Captain advanced towards the Fortress. Once he'd arrived in front of the table, he suddenly turned around. His features were tense. "The young man defends the Fortress with incredible doggedness."

The tension on his features left no doubt as to the young man's determination.

Then, loosening his arms, which had previously lain still, he added: "All one needs to notice in this edifying turn is the young man's exaggerated effort, which is vaguely ambiguous, and his loving violence when faced with the enemy; it is so different from the cold, calculating and impersonal determination of the others."

The Captain repeated the same movement many times over: he would spin around halfway and then stop and show only his face. Another half turn and another stop. Both spins were so similar that in the end, partly owing to the speed of his movements, they came to identify with one another.

"The external force, the only external force, appears to coincide with death: and as it happens the young man is killed. His heroic behavior shares the same enthusiasm as the moment of escape. When that journey has failed, especially as an experience meant to renew the Order of things, death appears as the only force, or reality – and place – that is foreign to the Fortress. From the enthusiasm of the journey, and optimism, to the pessimistic heroism of the final battle, polluted by romantic leaps and moody suicides."

"Very good," the Colonel said, smiling indulgently, "that's exactly what I meant to say: you never know what the Hero is looking for when he moves towards the enemy."

The General's wife looked at the Captain with her icy eyes, she could barely even move them anymore, like a puppet whose strings

have all snapped. She nevertheless kept her head straight and her eyelids open.

Once they had left the Cathedral, the officers poured into the club. The ballroom was still empty, and people milled around in the large entrance hall.

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The young lieutenant Mazzei crossed the ballroom. For a moment further, he lingered like a lost messenger in a crowd. Behaving as one who reaches the end of a road, he went to stand before the General's wife and there came to a stop.

After a dramatic silence, he directed his eyes towards hers, which diverged.

The eye staring straight ahead allowed her to see what she was about to lose forever, youth, beauty and life; while the other eye remained enigmatic. She had used up all her strength on the eye looking straight ahead without bringing the other eye in line with it. She made a supreme effort: to keep them firmly fixed in the direction of Lieutenant Mazzei's eyes, maybe this was the solution to all enigmas.

The public flowed towards the ballroom, where a banquet had been laid out.

Now that he had been left alone in the oblong hall adjacent to the main ballroom, Captain Sorrentino crossed it in a pacey manner. Surly and incredibly highly-strung, he had finally found an outlet in the parody of that tragedy.

"I am convinced that Fascism is unequal to tragedy! And it is frightening, frightening! Not only is nobody making a move here, but even the Great Powers aren't moving."

"We do not have a destiny," he added, disdainfully.

"What a great bargain, eh?" the Colonel muttered.

"Without Nazism, Fascism wouldn't be able to bring us closer to tragedy. It's nothing but a minor, mediocre scandal. Without the Nazis, we'll be forced to side with the powers of democracy against the Soviets. And if the Nazis are defeated, the fascist remnants will be incorporated by the democratic powers in their struggle against communism. Nazism is the barrier holding back the tide of that disgrace. We the oppressed will never rebel against the regime, neither will the latter ever exceed the colonial confines of its misdeeds and boldness, nor will

our friends make war upon us, since it would be seen as unforgivably impatient to waste any soldiers' lives in our national comedy, which is so provincial – Hitler will declare war and it will be fought against him. That is a scandal, but fascism isn't. At least it isn't considered a scandal by our collective conscience, which is so accommodating, nor is it deemed so by those well-disposed towards the compromise made by the democratic powers. Hitler has overstepped, and the fire has been lit. Our neighbor's house is about to go up in flames, and we'll wind up burned alongside him. Deceived by the nature of that fire, we drew close to it in order to conveniently warm ourselves up, but by the time we'll want to leave it'll be too late. In other words, we'll suffer the same fate as that of a stupid servant who is in thrall to a diabolical master. Only when our entire house has gone up in flames will we be able to rediscover ourselves. Even the king, who binds us all together via that solemn oath of loyalty, will manage to do this."

General Occhipinti appeared on the scene. "Darling, do you want to come into the next room? A service is being held by the Christmas tree."

He offered her his arm. The General's wife concentrated all her energies on that spot. Her hands stirred on the armrests, and blood slowly flowed through her whole body again. She looked like a snake exerting itself. Yet she stood up, and took her husband's arm. She crossed the sitting room and entered the ballroom.

A few chairs had been positioned right in front of the orchestra. In the middle lay a gigantic Christmas tree. Slivers of silver foil were hanging from its branches. The General's wife sat down. She was alert and felt that she was being watched, just like at the Prefect's house. The presence of people gave her strength – and gnawed at her. She composed her features into a smile.

In order to make the Christmas tree stand out even further, the ballroom's lighting had been arranged in an unusual manner. Almost all of the available light shone on the tree and the few guests of honor. The other guests were nothing more than an iridescent dust cloud of jewels and decorations. The stuccoes appeared to be hanging like festoons off the azure strip running alongside all the walls. The orchestra, which was only composed of string instruments, played a slow, melancholic melody, yet did so discreetly in order not to disturb the mysterious, nocturnal harmony. There was a strong visual character to the service, while the music was instead merely secondary, complementary. Yet the General's wife nevertheless listened to it attentively.

A male voice rang out clear, filling the room and dominating the sweet sounds of the string instruments. The General's wife felt she was hanging by that thread. There was no doubt that this service aimed to bring her in the direction of that divergent eye, to the blue spot that the latter was pointing out. Her composed smile dissolved into cheerfulness. "Aren't you feeling well, darling?" The General asked, bending down towards her.

".....*sparget sonum*  
 .....  
 .....*ante thronum*  
 .....*et natura.*"<sup>1</sup>

The General's wife was hanging by the thread of that hymn.

To the right, the young officers were lined up like priests. The General's wife gaze examined them one after the other. It seemed to her as though she was moving, carried along on a stretcher towards the destination which her sight had denied her, but which her ears had already found. The General, who was now sat beside her, waited for an answer. The General's wife replied with a nod. She feared being distracted, and the service required all her powers of concentration. She kept her arms along the chair's armrests, and followed the slow, musical rhythm of the priests' footsteps. She looked to the left, at the officers and the ladies. The dress uniforms and all that impeccable grooming charged the scene with tension. The General's wife straightened her bust. She dominated the scene with her head.

The General's wife was hanging by the thread of the singer's voice. She barely caught a few words. Maybe she distorted them or misinterpreted them, since she alone heard other words being sung. All of a sudden, making a convulsive gesture, she recognized that hymn, which they were trying to pass off as a sweet, innocent Christmas song.

*"Judex ergo cum sedebit  
 Quidquid latet apparebit..."*

The procession came to a sudden stop, the line of young priests broke up, while the officers and ladies on the right took a step back,

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpts from the Latin Christian hymn, *Dies Irae*, or Day of Wrath.

frightened.

98 The singer took a single step forward on the stage and the General's wife was filled with terror when she recognized Lieutenant Mazzei's divergent eyes. She kept her lids forcefully open. There could no longer be any doubts: that young man was her death.

"Do you want to leave, darling?"

Here was the warrior who had come from afar, the Guest calling out for her, for whom "the use of darling and excuses" were worth nothing at all. The doors swung open, and the Fortress's inhabitants held their breath.

Victory belonged to the other. The fatal duel – the General's wife nursed no doubts as to the final outcome – thus resolved itself into an attitude problem. When it came to duels between knights, reason and outcome had no bearing, but one's attitude, which was equated to one's honor, did have bearing. One could move against the enemy with the kind of loving leap that Captain Sorrentino had described. Or one could oppose the cold light of self-awareness, and push the limits of life to the extreme.

The azure point, the supernatural, is only death – a door which opens only to reveal nothing, a loss which doesn't match up with any purchases. How does one enter through that door?

A lover's tremor, a prisoner's dignity...

A warrior clutching a sword stands by the door.

The General's wife straightened her bust, kept her head level and her eyelids open. The procession of priests reassembled itself. Then it began to move.

The lifeless body of the General's wife was carried out. The General dismissed those friends who had offered to accompany him.

Colonel Verri and Captain Sorrentino were sat on the last empty chairs. "Mazzei disappeared," the Captain said. The Colonel smiled. "I can't think of anything more irritating than this music," the Captain remarked, irked. "I was in the other room when Mazzei started to sing. He took my breath away, and now we're listening to this garbage again!"

"Oh yes," the Colonel replied, "but did you notice the damage

those musical notes inflicted?... they cost The General's wife her life!"

"So let's re-immense ourselves in this garbage then," the Captain said, scanning his surroundings. "At least it won't cost anyone their life."

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Vexed, the Captain stood up and left.

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