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A Terrifying Insularity of Mind

Steven Price

Lampedusa. McClelland and Steward \$32.

Michael Crummey

The Innocents. Random House \$32.95.

Reviewed by Claire Omhovère, Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3, EMMA

“This violence of landscape, this cruelty of climate, this continual tension in everything, and even these monuments to the past, magnificent yet incomprehensible because not built by us... All these things have formed our character, which is thus conditioned by events outside our control as well as by a terrifying insularity of mind.” So did Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa famously define the national character of his fellow Sicilians in *Il Gattopardo* (*The Leopard*), his one and only novel, posthumously published in 1958. The historical fresco, which also inspired Visconti a sumptuous movie in 1961, stands in the still center of Steven Price’s latest novel. *Lampedusa* unfolds at a slow, solemn pace, meandering through the last two years in Tomasi’s life which the writer spent wrestling against lung cancer while completing the novel that would ultimately become one of the masterpieces of the post-war era. The monster feeding on Tomasi’s vitality is a shape shifter whose growth comes to evoke the disease eating through the writer’s wasted body, but also the creature of words taking up all the space inside his mind, as well as the decomposition of the old continent that once witnessed the rise of a most brilliant civilization. Although *Lampedusa* cultivates the elegant melancholy of Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*, it stops short of the latter’s despair. Price’s dazzling evocation of the Mezzogiorno, and of the legacy of the many writers who, like Stendhal and Goethe, sought inspiration in its stark contrasts, could be read like a monument to a defunct humanist ideal. This is especially true today, when the name of the island of Lampedusa no longer calls to mind images of superb princely isolation, but that of Mediterranean shores strewn with the drowned bodies of illegal migrants in bright, orange safety vests. The novel, however, does not venture to explore the tragedy of Europe’s recent isolation, but stops in 2003, with the discovery of a letter in Tomasi’s own hand that the prince entrusted to the endpapers of *The Voyages of Captain Cook*, in the private library of his Naples palazzo. The message went on a still journey that lasted almost half a century, before it reached its destination in the prince’s adoptive son, Gioacchino Tomasi, whose gift of youth illuminates the last months of Tomasi’s life. The epilogue confirms that *Lampedusa* is most of all concerned with transmission and the tracing of the wayward circuits that give us an intelligence of the world. Most prominent among them are the exquisite detours through which literature enables human beings to connect across vast expanses of time and space, in defiance of the temptations of insularity.

Michael Crummey’s *The Innocents* takes place in another sea-locked universe, a small cove on the northern coast of Newfoundland where two young children survive through seasons of hardship, after their parents and baby sister succumbed to a sudden disease. “Violence of landscape” and “cruelty of climate” are only two of the shaping forces the orphans need to confront to remain alive in circumstances of extreme deprivation, when the poorly salted cod has softened into a green mush, all other supplies are gone and the winter drags on. With *The Innocents*, Michael Crummey enlarges the exploration of a sensorial connection to the land that has been the hallmark of his writing since *Sweetland*’s memorable tale of impassioned resilience. But although this is also one of the most captivating aspects of *The Innocents*, it would be reductive to view this novel as just another astounding story of survival. The narrative takes on a remarkable inward turn to observe the formation of the boy’s and his

sister's contrasting temperaments, their mental isolation, shy intimacies and fumbling attempts at fighting off remoteness to earn admission into the society of their fellow-creatures whose rituals and customs they glimpse from afar, on the ships and among the crews that periodically visit the cove. The siblings navigate the dangerous passages into adulthood without any maps and little adult guidance. Their parents left behind scanty memories, among which a troubling, throbbingly erotic jam-making scene, and only a handful of relics bind the two children to a lacunary, layered past that bemuses them – a silver button with an engraved *fleur-de-lys*, a Red Indian bone pendant, and the length of knotted string a midwife left behind as a charm against unwanted pregnancies. Crummey ties these strands firmly into a narrative which possesses the strength and pliability of the fishermen's ropes that serve as the novel's central trope, ultimately creating a rich, vivid tapestry, a moving homage to the tiny lives and stubborn wills that have left enduring traces on the shores of Newfoundland and in the imagination of its inhabitants.