The Fire in the Sea

LEONARDO SCIASCIA

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Translator's Introduction

These are hard times for Italy. Along with economic woes, the country is experiencing a more diffuse malady, a soul-sickness. Italians, while (until recently) stubbornly voting in ample majorities for Silvio Berlusconi, nevertheless seem almost unanimously convinced that their country is adrift in a sea of moral corruption. It's not only a question of bribes and public contracts or offices exchanged for sexual favors, though both have been frequent if not rampant in recent years. There is a more generalized sense that Italian society—both the private and public sectors—is on the verge of moral and intellectual bankruptcy, devoid of ideas and proposals for positive change, incapable of offering its young people any real hope for a better future.

In times like these it is good for people to be reminded of their better selves, to hear from someone who can put them back in touch with those aspects of their cultural identity that can serve as resources for renewal. One such voice belongs to the Sicilian writer and public intellectual Leonardo Sciascia (1921–1989), perhaps most famous among anglophone readers for his highly literary and penetrating mystery novels, The Day of the Owl (1961), To Each His Own (1966), and Open Doors (1987). In 1973, while preparing to publish a collection of his short stories, The Wine-Dark Sea, Sciascia discarded a number of previously published stories in order to give the volume a “profound internal cohesion.” The story presented here was left out of that earlier volume. Sciascia's reworking of a classic Sicilian folktale, it has now become, just at the right time it seems, the title story for a new collection of his short prose, Il fuoco nel mare

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(Adelphi Edizioni) and a heartening reminder of the best features of the anarchic Italian spirit.

The legend of Nicola Pesce (Nick Fish) is almost a thousand years old, and versions of it are known across the northwest shore of the Mediterranean basin, from Italy to France and Spain. The first news of the existence of a man living in Sicily endowed with an extraordinary talent for swimming is reported by the English courtier Walter Map, who wrote his De Nugis Curialium in Latin. Another twelfth-century version of the legend was written by the French troubadour Raimon Jordan (D’amor no m puesc departir ni sembrar). Nicola’s story and his tragic death are associated for the first time with the reign of Frederick II in the chronicles written in the thirteenth century by the Italian writer Salimbene de Adam.

From Italy and France the legend made its way to Spain, where Nicola Pesce is the hero of a poem written in 1608, and even before that he is mentioned by Cervantes in volume II, chapter 18 of Don Quixote. Describing the qualifications for a practitioner of the “science of knight errantry,” Don Quixote says, “I say that he must know how to swim as well as the fishman Nicolás, or Nicolao, could swim…”

In the centuries since these first recorded references to his story, Nicola Pesce has been a constant figure in Sicilian and Neapolitan folklore. In the twentieth century, several of Italy’s most renowned authors have published their own versions of Nicola’s adventures: Benedetto Croce, Italo Calvino, Raffaele La Capria, Cesualdo Bufalino, and the author of the version that we have chosen to present, Leonardo Sciascia.

The story’s centuries-old popularity can only be explained by its treatment of themes that have always appealed to children: the love of adventure, affection and respect for nature and the animal kingdom, the willingness to lend a helping hand tempered by a democratic suspicion of overbearing and corrupt authority. Finally, Cola appeals to children—and adults—because his origins and his fate remain a mystery, left to our imagination.

G. C.
During the reign of Frederick II, at the tip of Italy's foot, where, if it moves just slightly (distracted or furtive) it strikes Sicily with a kick that sends it bouncing over to Africa (gold or lead, it's heavy, Italy's foot); at that point where the lighthouse stands and for which it is known (a village of a few houses) as Lighthouse Tower, Cola Pesce was born.

Nicola, Cola; and Pesce (Fish) was a nickname, because he took to the sea like a fish. And not only to swim in the Strait between Sicily and Calabria, and from Messina down to Catania and Syracuse, and on to the sea of Agrigento, but also to skin-dive for hours on end in the marine depths. He knew everything about the sea: the forests and the caverns; the fields of algae and the coral heaths; the liquid, transparent houses; the hideaways, the traps, the snares.

The fish that travel in schools and the solitary and sedentary ones that never swim upward toward the sunlight (and toward the nets and spears of fishermen); the ones that swish by in a polychrome flash; the ones that disguise themselves as flowers or rocks; the ones that wound or poison.

And he also knew the sirens, green-eyed, green-haired women, with their golden-scaled bodies of fish. All mariners were afraid of the sirens, of their song that was an invitation to descend to the bottom of the sea, and those who heard it succumbed and obeyed.

Even Odysseus, knowing of that sweet deception, of that mortal spell, doubted himself and his companions, whose ears he sealed with wax, and had himself tied to the mast, because he yearned to hear it but didn't want to risk ending up in the sea forever.

And he heard it: harmonious and sweet as honey. He wanted to untie himself and dive down to them, but his companions, who could not hear, tightened the knots that bound him to the mast. And so he passed through the Strait of Messina, the only man, until Cola Pesce, who had heard the song of the sirens without meeting his ruin.

But, truth be told, Cola Pesce couldn't be called a man. He was, to be precise, a fish-man. And, it is said, even his body had something of the nonhuman about it: the fingers and toes joined like the webbed
feet of certain water birds, like the rubber fins that underwater fishermen strap to their feet; and something between his cheeks and ears that looked very much like gills. But as a man he wasn’t ugly; all the coastal fishermen loved him and bragged about his abilities as though he were one of them. Nor as a fish was he ugly; when he dived into the sea the fish gathered round him and they all romped about like boys on a lawn.

Now, it happened that Frederick II, curious as he was about all things—on land, up in the sky, under the sea—and about people, heard tell of Cola Pesce and wanted to meet him and put him to the test. Waiting for him, Cola was full of anxiety and fear, but when he set eyes on him, that king whom everyone described as great—great his wisdom, great his ferocity—and instead he was small, a sickly face amidst a mop of red hair, soft spoken—he felt as confident and free as ever. And then they were standing on the king’s ornately carved and gilded ship, in the sea that Frederick feared and surely did not love. Right then it was blue and calm but with a single wave, one of those that Cola used to ride like a roller coaster, it could have swallowed up that vessel and all of the king’s unseen greatness.

“Here’s the first test,” said Frederick, showing Cola a gold goblet adorned with emeralds. “I’ll throw it into the sea, and if you can find it, it’s yours.”

He walked over to the ship’s parapet, let it drop, and stayed there to mark the point where it disappeared; then he signaled Cola to go after it.

Cola dived off the ship and vanished.

The king stayed there staring at the point where the goblet and Cola had disappeared. But a few minutes later he heard Cola’s voice at his back—he was already back on the ship, goblet in hand.

He offered it to the king. Inside the goblet was a wriggling red mullet.

“It’s yours,” said the king.

“The mullet, not the goblet,” said one of the king’s courtiers, under his breath, so the king wouldn’t hear but Cola would.
Cola heard and understood.

After all, he already knew that what the king gave away, his ministers, courtiers, and police took back.

Or was it the king himself who took it back, pretending not to hear and not to see?

Anyway, the goblet didn’t matter to him—the bottom of the sea was full of jewels made of gold and silver and precious gems, and the skeletons of those who had loved them and worn them. He grabbed the mullet and threw it back in the water; and the goblet he put back down so whoever wanted it could take it.

“The second test,” Frederick said. And he threw into the sea a ring whose stone was the same color as the water.

Cola dived in. He stayed under water a little longer than he had for the goblet, and when he came back up he was holding a grouper.

“Where’s the ring?” Frederick asked.
“This grouper swallowed your ring, Your Majesty,” Cola said.

“Let’s see if it’s true,” said Frederick, pulling out his sword to split open the grouper, still alive.

Cola stopped him—he rubbed the back of the fish gently, almost a tickle. The grouper seemed delighted, lifting its mug and closing its eyes like a cat when someone rubs the back of its neck, and out of its mouth came the ring.

“It’s yours,” the king said to Cola.

Cola threw the grouper into the sea and left the ring where it was.

The ring vanished instantly, but Frederick didn’t notice.

He was thinking.

And after thinking a good long time he said he wanted to know from Cola what there was under Sicily—“beneath my kingdom of Sicily,” he said—and that he believed there were caves that collapsed every so often, and that’s why the ground shook and cities were ruined.

“Your Majesty,” Cola said, “beneath your kingdom there is a kingdom of fire.”

“In the middle of the water a kingdom of fire,” the courtiers cackled, mockingly. “And how is it possible that the water keeps the fire going rather than putting it out?”

But Frederick didn’t laugh. He extinguished the laughter of the courtiers, saying to them, “And where do you think Aetna’s fire comes from?” and to Nicola, “But you have to show me some proof:”

“Give me a piece of wood,” said Cola.

It was given to him, and he dived into the sea with it. A few minutes later he resurfaced, and one end of the wood was burnt, blackened by fire.

“That’s not enough,” said Frederick.

Cola plunged under the water again and resurfaced showing his hands were burned. The king examined them attentively.

“Yes, they’re burned,” he said. “And this means there really is fire in the water. But now I want the material that is burning down there, or at least its ashes.”
“Your Majesty,” said Cola, “I can touch the fire but I can’t grab hold of it. If I tried the fire would eat my hands.”

“The ashes,” said the king.

“There are no ashes, it’s a fire that doesn’t make ashes,” said Cola.

Frederick thought for a moment, then he said, “If you grab hold of it that fire will turn to ashes in your hands.”

“But I won’t have hands anymore,” Cola said.

“Let’s try it,” said the king.

“I’ll try,” Cola said.

He slipped back under the sea, and Frederick stood there waiting for him.

Night fell, the moon rose. Cola didn’t come back. The courtiers all fell asleep. Only Frederick stayed awake—he gazed out at the calm sea, and every time he saw a dolphin jumping through the waves he thought for a moment it was Cola bringing him the ashes from whatever material it was that was burning beneath his kingdom.

At dawn he woke the courtiers, saying, “The fire has eaten him. Let’s go back to Messina.”

Now he knew that beneath his kingdom there really was a kingdom of fire, and that a brave and devoted man obeying his orders had confronted it and gone to his death. He was satisfied. Nor would he ever believe, afterward, that Cola was still living in the sea, and that many mariners had sighted him playing with the dolphins, straddling swordfish like a broncobuster.

And that’s how he can be seen even today, on certain sunny days, on certain moonlit nights, when the ferry between Sicily and Calabria comes to the place where Frederick’s ship was—from where Cola dived into the sea for the last time, determined, after meeting that great king and his ministers, to become a fish forever.