

"You're not  
a real  
Scotsman,"  
he said.

"How come?" I asked.

"You're not wearing a kilt."

"Oh, I see. And, I don't have a bushel of red hair on my head either, do I? And, I'm not playing the bagpipes."

"You get my meaning entirely," he said, smiling.

"Let's say I'm an evolving Scot," I said.

"That's an interesting idea..."

"You might also say that I'm para-autochthonous; engaged in a delocalized process."

"That's even more interesting."

There was a short pause while we both took a sip of Nicrosi from our glasses, looking up complacently and connivingly into the empty blue of the sky.

"While we're on all this identity stuff," I then resumed,

"You're not a real Corsican."

"No?"

"No. You're not wearing a red, woollen bonnet, you're not cradling a rifle in your arms, and you don't have a *pistola* stuck in your belt or a cartridge belt slung on your shoulder. In short, you don't look at all like a bandit. No novelist would look twice at you."

"But, I *am* a bandit," he said.

"You don't say," I said.

"Yes, I do say. And, there are a hundred bandits all around us, all quietly sipping their *aperitif*, but with their minds up to all kinds of dreaming and scheming."



**DENIS MORETTI** « *Portraits* ».

"Bandits d'honneur?"

"Honorable bandits, business bandits, political bandits," he said. "We've got all the categories. And, inside each category, you've got the big ones, the middle ones, and the small ones. The biggest bandit of them all was Napoleon. He was the imperial bandit. He wanted to get rid of all the rest."

"But, you don't look a bit like Pascal Gallocchio, Theodore Poli, or Andre Spada, alias 'the wild boar.'"

"I see you know your stuff."

"I pick up information here and there," I said.

"Interesting. Nobody does anything like that here. We just laze about, play a crafty little trick now and then, drink our aperitifs, then we die and the newspapers say what great guys we were."

It was five o'clock in the evening, late October, in the good city of Ajaccio. It was Autumn in Corsica: The sky was incredibly blue, every outline neatly edged and, although the leaves of the trees were turning yellow-red, and the starlings were wheeling over the town – making, at nightfall, an unholy late-final racket in the branches of the plane-trees – it was still very pleasantly warm.

I'd got into Ajaccio two days before, from Paris. Since air-traffic was congested in South-Eastern France, the Air Inter plane had deviated from the normal route as it made its way down to Corsica. It was a route that pleased me better – via the Swiss Alps, Turin, and Genoa.

Paris had been wrapped in a dreary, dizzily grey. But, the further south we got, the more the world opened up.

At Ajaccio, I went straight to the Hotel Napoleon. My room looked out onto the mustard-coloured wall of the building opposite and a little grove of orange trees. Down in the hall, there was a black bust of the Man Himself and a large coloured map of Corsica. I spent more time with the map than with the bust.

My plan was to move right round the coast, making incursions here and there into the interior of the country, but, to begin with, I wanted to have a look at Ajaccio and try to get the feel of it.

So, I strolled down that thoroughfare known as the Cours Napoleon. I sat in opulent, copper-and-leather cafés, looking out onto the royally soaring palms. I continued along the quays – the Quai Napoleon, the Quai de la République, the Quai de l'Herminier –



passing the monument to the Resistance on the Waterfront – *À ceux qui ont donné leur vie pour une Corse libre et française*. ("To those who gave their lives for a free and French Corsica"). I drank glasses of pungent Corsican wine (Fiumiciccoli, Polidore, Fiumucini...) in those waterfront dives you have to step down into, listening to conversations: "Hey, Pascal, business going well? – It's not going at all – Not going? Well, get it going." I even paid a lightening visit to the Bonaparte house, where I saw a narrow little bed the young Napo had napped in.

In one of those waterfront cellars, I met a fellow about thirty years old who said he had been waiting for me. His "guide" (a spiritual guide, who existed only in his mind, he explained) had informed him that one autumn, in a dark place by the sea, he would meet up with a foreigner and that this foreigner would give him a sign. He asked me a lot of questions, and when it finally came out that I had been born in Scotland, he said *that* was it: He knew now he must go to Scotland, and to the exact spot where I had first seen the light of day. I suggested he maybe shouldn't rush things and should check with his guide before making any rash decisions. He said he was sure, absolutely sure – wasn't Scotland a country of initiates? I said, well, maybe it was, kind of, a long time ago, but... Brushing aside my post-druidical scepticism, he was already telling me that Corsica, too, was a land of initiates. Take Napoleon, for instance. Had I noticed how, as Bonaparte, he always kept his left hand under his coat, whereas as Emperor, it was his right? I admitted that detail had escaped my attention. It had esoteric significance, declared my companion. And, did I know about Napoleon's one true love? "Josephine?" I said, diffidently, knowing well I would be wide off the mark. "No, no, no," he said impatiently. "Daria – a girl he met at St-Jean d'Arce. Daria – *aria* – air, you see?" I said I was still a stranger to Corsica and a novice in Napoleonica. So, he explained that Napoleon was essentially a mind looking for space and air – hence, too, his obsession with eagles, see? "That's interesting," I said. "Are there eagles in Scotland?" he asked. "Thousands of them," I said. "That settles it," he said.

Later that evening, I noticed in the harbour, alongside the ponderous *Ferrytterrannée* (what some people do with language is culturally criminal), a slender three-master bearing the name *Alexander von Humboldt*. That seemed a good sign for me, an avid reader of Humboldt's *Kosmos*, out as I was, if not for the complete "cosmos" of Corsica, at least for a little preliminary cosmorama.

**STORM OVER BASTIA**

"*Le Jour des Morts, il y a toujours tempête*" (On the Day of the Dead, there's always a storm blowing).

I was seated at the glass front of a restaurant in the old quarter, the *terra vecchia* of Bastia, and this was the proprietor talking. Rain was battering at the windows, thunder was crackling, lightening flashing. The twin towers of the church of St John the Baptist had blurred, also the red and green pillars at the entrance to the harbour. I had a plate of fish and a bottle of white wine on the table before me. At another table close by, two elderly Corsicans were talking about *les colonies*.

I'd got into town that morning. I'd stood on the main square under the palm trees looking at the statue of Napoleon and the other monument *Aux deuils, aux triomphes, aux espoirs de la patrie* (To the mournings, triumphs, and hopes of our land). I'd seen along the streets the high, six or seven storied, Italian-type buildings with the decrepit fronts (though here and there some were being repainted: in olive green, in mauve, in blue), with washing hanging from many a window. I'd passed by the *Quincaillerie Valery* (a hardware store), and the *Agence Maritime Colonna d'Istria*, as well as the *Mobylines* company: Bastia-Genoa-Leghorn. I'd read the *Résistance Corse* (1944) plaque to Jean Nicoli: *Condamné à être fusillé dans le dos, décapité* (shot in the back and beheaded). I'd made out on a wall the old advert of the *Maison Alessandrini: Pâté de merles – fabrication corse – aux parfums du maquis* (blackbird pâté – made on the island – all the fragrance of the backcountry). In the harbour, I'd seen the *Kalliste*, and the *Odyssee* and the *Cipango* swinging at anchor. I'd noted the by now familiar graffiti: "*Corsica Nazione-Autonumia*". I'd drunk coffee or beer in bars named *Le Pied Marin* or *Ciao Bella*. I'd climbed up among the palmtrees and the *lauriers* of the Jardin Romieu to the Citadel, where it was written in stone that such-and-such a governor had purged this island "rife with criminality" – *insula rapinis et latrocinis plena*.

It was just after I'd come out of the Citadel that the storm started. The sky took on a deep violet blue, and a wind sprang up from nowhere, howling, raising dust and leaves in great suffocating clouds. There was the noise of shutters clattering and of cafe terrace chairs and tables being hurriedly stacked away. The sea had white horses by the thousand. Noon tolled from the Citadel bell.

It was then I had made for the restaurant.

As I lingered over my meal, I read a musty, yellowed number of the *Bulletin of the Historical Society of Corsica* I'd picked up in an old curiosity shop I'd come across in the backstreets of Bastia. There it was, lying beside a phonograph with Italian records, a school map of the New World, and a pack of Marseille Tarot cards. What had attracted me as I flipped through its pages was an article on a literary society that had existed in Bastia in the XIXth century, the *Accademia dei Vagabondi*. The Academy was so called apparently because its members had all travelled abroad, mostly to Italy, where they'd studied at Pisa, Genoa, Padua, or Bologna. The literature quoted (they seemed to go in a lot for sonnets) didn't interest me that much, but there may well have been other work this particular article hadn't thought fit to consider. Anyway, it was the name itself, *Accademia dei Vagabondi*, that intrigued me. Maybe Corsica was close there to intellectual nomadism. Even to geopoetics. An island like this was *made* for geopoetics. Maybe it was at least initial strands of this I was trying to get at in this autumn of the blue light and the clean lines – and the storms!

Three hours, two coffees, and a bottle of Nicrosi later, the storm was abating. Pigeons were flying again around the towers of St John the Baptist. Gulls were moving out to sea again.

I went back out into town.

The harbour was bathed in a blue and golden light. On clear days, you can see from Bastia the island of Elba and the island of Monte Cristo. But, that evening on the horizon, there was only a dark, smouldering blueness.

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