INTRODUCTION

Like all works of genius, *The House by the Medlar Tree* is rich in permanent significance. Its being again made available in English must be saluted as a literary event. Although it first appeared more than a hundred years ago, it is still extraordinarily fresh. Its main themes and more so the novelty of its narrative technique identify it as one of the first, if not the first, of the most "spontaneous," and most strenuously sought, narrative forms developed and mastered by the greatest European and American writers of our own century. In Italy it is a classic, and as a classic it deserves to be read in the context of modern literature.

Critics no longer marvel at Verga's "leap into genius." Some find its seeds scattered in various passages of his early novels and others are satisfied with the great works of his maturity without attempting to account for their origins. The components of genius are many: among them are a profound awareness of human destiny; a knowledge of social truths reached through observation, meditation, and reading; and, not least, an expressive medium, through which characters, springing from the private realm of memory, claim independent life on the page and relate their inner vicissitudes effortlessly in words so full of implications that each one of us can recognize himself in them. These are the apparent components of Verga's genius—as suggested by our perception of his works and by the scanty documentation he has left us.

We can say with a measure of certainty that, like others before him, Verga attained the stature of a great writer by relentlessly pursuing a literary ideal. After publishing a number of undistinguished novels of passion, he became convinced that his generally bourgeois characters and the social milieu within which they moved were false at the roots and that he needed to return to the fundamentals of human existence to find a voice free of the redundancies which do not contain life but distort it. In *Eros*, the last, the most complex, and the most thought-provoking of his early novels, he wrote: "The whole science of life consists in simplifying human passions and in reducing them to their natural proportions." Thus he was implicitly rejecting the artificiality of the late romantic narratives, including his own, and proclaiming the necessity for renewal by focusing on the fundamentals of life.

It was certainly as a result of this insight that in 1874, at the age of thirty-four, he interrupted the composition of *Eros* to write a short story, "Nedda," in which for the first time he let his memory lead him back to Sicily, the land of his youth, to relive in his imagination the unglamorous trials and tribulations endured by an illiterate peasant girl. Although chronologically a pivotal work, "Nedda" is not a masterpiece; it is at times marred by saccharine compassion and by unreticent social polemics at the expense of objective narrative. But it is a beginning, the moment at which the writer turned his attention to the type of character and social milieu that would become the living feature of all his mature works and masterpieces.

Verga himself must have realized the significance "Nedda" had for his literary career. Shortly after completing it, he began to write a longer story framed in a similar Sicilian environment, in which the characters belonged to generally the same social class and were moved by equally elemental passions and by the same impulses for sheer survival. In 1875 he wrote to his publisher, Emilio Treves of Milan: "Soon I'll send you *Padron 'Ntoni* (Master 'Ntoni), a novelette about fishermen." But the novelette never reached the publisher, due to Verga's dissatisfaction with it. It was repeatedly rewritten over the next six years, until it was turned into one of the great novels of the century, *I Malavoglia* (The House by the Medlar Tree).

During those six years Verga broadened his vision of life

and of society and deepened his search for an appropriate narrative style. He read Balzac, Flaubert, and the first volumes of Zola's *Rougon-Macquart*; and he followed as closely as he could the development of French naturalism and the many discussions reported in French literary journals; he also read Darwin. He participated in some of the debates on the need for a new literature that took place in Milan within the group of writers and artists who called themselves *Scapigliati* (The Disheveled) and who may be defined as the "Lost Generation" of nineteenth-century Italy. Revolutionary in the arts as well as in their manner of life, they paid heed to the ideas coming from beyond the Alps, just as they found inspiration and revelatory power in the music of Wagner.

Verga was profoundly interested in those same ideas. He accepted the Flaubertian theory of impersonality, but also felt it was no great discovery, since he had always tried to be objective by putting himself, as he would say later, "under the skin of [his] characters, trying to see with their eyes and speak in their words." But he rejected the basic principles of French naturalism, especially the positivistic theory of heredity, the treatment and analysis of characters as "clinical cases," and the deliberate exploration of city slums. After considering the visions of other writers and welding some of their beliefs onto his own, he planned a cycle of five novels, each one presenting a successive stage in the human effort to gain financial well-being and then to assert it in an ever-widening social context. The plan became clear to him in the early spring of 1878, when he wrote to his friend Salvatore Paola: "I am thinking of a work that I consider great and beautiful—a sort of phantasmagoria of the struggle for existence, extending from the rag picker to the cabinet minister and to the artist—taking all forms, from ambition to greed, and lending itself to a thousand representations of the great human tragicomedy."

The phenomenon of a cycle of novels, as that which Verga planned after the examples of Balzac and of Zola's work in progress, developed in Europe along with the concept that common people could slowly rise to wealth and power and thereby reach a social level previously exclusive to the privileged few. The French Revolution, which declared the rights of all citizens and resulted in the ascent of the bourgeoisie, and the subsequent wave of socialist

thought, which focused on the cause of the proletariat during the first sixty years of the nineteenth century, were instrumental in nourishing such a concept and in drawing the attention of writers to it. Whether or not Verga's thinking was influenced by widespread social theories, it appears that he had always been convinced that the accumulation of wealth is an essential prerequisite for respectability and power, because wealth rules the world (as one of his main characters, Mastro-don Gesualdo, likes to repeat). The poor are subjected to all kinds of adversities and abuses simply because they are poor. Yet they keep trying to better their condition in the hope of reaching financial security. Verga called this effort "struggle for existence," thus applying the Darwinian theories of the survival of the species and natural selection to human society.

The "struggle for existence" was to be explored within the framework of the society of Sicily, the society he knew best. But he also equated it with the motivating force of human activity, which produces the current of progress. He saw it as a movement that appears grandiose if regarded from a distance and as a whole. In the glory of its totality, Verga says in the preface to *The House by the Medlar Tree*, are lost all the anxieties, the ambitions, the greed, the selfish compulsions that prompt it on an individual level. Like a great tide, it sweeps everyone away. The novelist is nothing more than an observer, himself carried away by the flood; he may be interested in those who fall by the wayside, in the doomed who raise their arms in despair and bend their heads under the brutal steps of those who are hurrying on—the victors of today, who will be the doomed of tomorrow. Such is Verga's vision of mankind's march toward progress. There are no winners, only losers. Through Verga's eyes, the Darwinian struggle for survival turns first into a struggle for progress and then into a universally devastating effort to realize one's own greed and one's own ambitions. The five novels were to be collectively entitled *I vinti* (The Doomed). Verga completed only two of them: *I Malavoglia* (The House by the Medlar Tree), which concentrates on "the struggle for the bare necessities," and *Mastro-don Gesualdo,* which deals with a middle-class character fatefully driven by an irresistible compulsion to accumulate wealth through all the means at his disposal, so that his children and grandchildren can enjoy

the power that wealth assures. Although they were designed as parts of a series, these novels may be considered independent masterpieces. Of the third, *La Duchessa de Leyra* (The Duchess of Leyra), Verga was only able to draft the first two chapters.

The foregoing should not suggest that Verga conceived his novels as sociological dissertations, but rather that he gave himself an ideological platform on which to stand and from which to report the actions and reactions of the people he was "observing." He devised a somewhat massive, and yet elastic, frame merely because he initially felt that to give purpose and direction to his work he should not lose sight of a comprehensive human landscape. He never let his characters elaborate on the logic or nonlogic of the human condition, but simply let them live it; he never let them analyze their impulses, but simply let them be driven by them.

The preface to *The House by the Medlar Tree* was written in January 1881, when the text of the novel was being printed. It was sent to the publisher together with an alternate preface; of the two, Emilio Treves was to select the one he thought more appropriate. Treves's choice stands to prove the exceptional literary insightfulness of a nineteenth-century publisher. The preface he chose has become indispensable for the understanding of the novel and of Verga's intentions in writing it. The opening paragraph defines *The House by the Medlar Tree*:

> This story is the sincere and dispassionate study of how the first anxious desires for material well-being must probably originate and develop in the humblest social conditions, and of the perturbations caused in a family, which had until then lived in relative happiness, by the vague yearning for the unknown and by the realization that they are not so well off and that they could indeed be better off.

Although this passage appears saturated with a specific social purpose, there are phrases—such as "anxious desires," "relative happiness," and "vague yearning for the unknown"—that betray the writer's effort to look inside the individual members of the family and bring their emotional complexities to light with the greatest possible objectivity. Such an effort is also expressed in the first two adjectives, "sincere" and "dispassionate." Further on Verga

states that his goal can be achieved by leaving the picture "its clear, calm colors and its simple design," thus insisting on the means through which he can realize his purpose. He is obviously referring to what he calls "form," that is to say, to narrative style and to language: "one must be truthful in order to present the truth, since form is as inherent a part of the subject as each element of the subject itself is necessary to the explanation of the general argument."

Verga must have conceived and developed the fundamental concept of the oneness of characters and style over the years he spent writing *The House by the Medlar Tree.* He soon translated it into the principle that the writer should limit himself to the essential by eliminating all that is superfluous and all that could be suggested between the lines, thereby charging every word with nuances and implications that open vast horizons before the reader's eyes. Much later he told a Roman journalist the following anecdote:

> I had published some of my first novels. . . . I was planning others. One day I happened to lay my hands on a logbook. It was a rather ungrammatical and asyntactical manuscript, in which the captain related certain difficulties his ship had faced—in a sailor's style, without a word more than necessary, briefly. It impressed me. I re-read it. It was what I had unconsciously been looking for.

We do not know the time of this incident; we do not even know if it really took place. I would conjecture that it indicates no more than a point of consciousness, the moment when the writer clearly realized that to be himself he had to abandon the romantic forms—the authorial intrusions; the endless descriptions for the sake of description—so that the characters would narrate themselves.

Almost one year before completing *The House by the Medlar Tree,* Verga sent a journal a piece entitled "L'amante di Gramigna" (Gramigna's Mistress), prefacing it with a letter to the editor in which he tried to justify the extreme compression of the narrative:

> Here is not a story, but the sketch of a story. It will at least have the merit of being short and of being factual—a human document as they say nowadays. . . . I shall repeat it to you as I picked it up along the paths in the countryside, with nearly the same simple and picturesque words

> characterizing popular narration, and you will certainly prefer to find yourself face to face with the naked, unadulterated fact, rather than having to look for it between the lines of a book, through the lens of the writer.

This time, by means of a complex terminology of which we can detect the source, Verga reveals his slow search for a narrative style. "Factual" and "human document" are further developed when he mentions the "science of human passions" and "the perfect novel of the future," whose "every part will be so complete that the creative process will remain a mystery . . . its manner and its reason for existing [will be] so necessary that the hand of the artist will remain absolutely invisible [so that] the work of art will seem to have made itself." Some of these statements, as well as their terminology, resemble fairly closely some of the tenets of French naturalism as assimilated and modified by the writers of the Italian *verismo* "school," of which Verga is thought to be the greatest exponent. This is especially true of the emphasis put on impersonality, that is to say, on the absence of embellishments and personal intrusions by the narrator. But the "science of human passions" repeats what Verga had stated several years before in *Eros*. Still greater emphasis falls on the essentiality of the story and on the elimination of the superfluous, reminding us of the prose of the logbook ("without a word more than necessary"). Verga had discovered the power of the words left unsaid.

During the same period, he tested his literary convictions in a number of short stories (soon to be collected in the volume *Vita dei campi* [Life in the Fields], which must be rated among the best produced in Europe in the last century). One of them is "Cavalleria rusticana," which was later turned into a one-act play and won universal acclaim due to Pietro Mascagni's opera. This story is very probably the reelaboration of an episode expunged from an early draft of *The House by the Medlar Tree*. Others, such as "La lupa" (The She-Wolf), "Rosso Malpelo," and "Ieli," are equally celebrated. Although not all marked by the same narrative compression, all are governed by a tempo born of the world of their protagonists and retain some of the features of "popular narration," as Verga understood it.

In Verga's day popular narration of folklore was considered by many a fresh and powerful manifestation of hu-

man creativity that could serve as an unparalleled model and an inexhaustible source for writers. This romantic tenet was widely accepted in Italy during the second half of the nineteenth century and it became a logical component of the *verismo* principles. Verga's interest in popular narration was awakened and nurtured through his friendship with Luigi Capuana and through the works of the greatest contemporary Italian scholar in folklore, Giuseppe Pitrè, who collected the oral traditions of Sicily. It is a matter of record that the stories of "L'amante di Gramigna," "La lupa" (The She-Wolf), and possibly "'Cavalleria rusticana" and "Rosso Malpelo" were told again and again by the people of the area in which Verga spent his youth. When Luigi Capuana wanted to pay his highest tribute to "L'amante di Gramigna," he claimed that its author had recreated the events with an "artistic power rivaling popular narration." It is also possible that some of the events occurring in *The House by the Medlar Tree* are based on fact. But what must be kept in mind is that through a specific social view, by amalgamating fact and vision and by pursuing his ideal of the oneness of form and subject matter, Verga created extraordinarily powerful works.

Either in 1878 or in 1879, when the project for *The House by the Medlar Tree* became clear in his mind, Verga prepared a detailed outline of the action, including definitions of the main characters and a chronology. The novel is set in the period immediately following the conquest of Sicily by Garibaldi (1860) and the subsequent annexation of the island to the Kingdom of Italy, after centuries of feudalism under the Spaniards and the Bourbons. With the new government, most Sicilians looked forward to radical social reforms, but they saw very little accomplished and felt cheated in their expectations. *The House by the Medlar Tree* does not go directly into these problems. Occasionally, there is a feeling of suspense between the old and the new: on one side the nostalgia for the good old days and on the other the hope for a more just society. (This theme was to be dealt with much more visibly nearly a century later by Tomasi di Lampedusa in *The Leopard,* although from a totally different angle.) In *The House by the Medlar Tree* the characters—with the exception of the pharmacist—do not discuss politics as such. Even when they are personally affected rather than thinking of a political and social system,

they normally take a fatalistic attitude, as though stricken by a mysterious power, which at most is identified with "the king." Young 'Ntoni feels the need for change, but exclusively in personal terms.

Verga presents the effects without debating the causes; otherwise the narrative would not be born of the world of the characters. One of the springs of the action resides in the Kingdom of Italy's institution of compulsory military service; this and other new laws weigh heavily on a village of fishermen. Even though the head of the Malavoglia family and the other villagers believe in earning their daily bread according to their traditional ways and would not think of rebelling, no one can remain immune to external forces. Historical events that may appear remote have a decisive effect even on the inhabitants of an obscure village of fishermen on the eastern coast of Sicily.

The chronology of *The House by the Medlar Tree* encompasses approximately thirteen years, from 1864 to 1877. But Verga mentions only one date: he writes in the first chapter that in "December 1863 'Ntoni, the eldest of the grandchildren," had been called up "for service in the navy." Shortly thereafter he tells us that it is the following September. Some other dates are merely suggested. Toward the center of the novel, for instance, we can infer that it is 1866 because the family is informed that Luca was killed in the battle of Lissa (fought between the Italians and the Austrians on July 20 of that year). While *The House by the Medlar Tree* hinges on a set of dates, it is not a historical novel. The dates are nothing more than points of reference intended to place the narrative within a believable temporal frame, simply because every human being is grounded in time.

The story of the Malavoglia family is also the story of the community in which they live. Hence the great number of minor characters and the apparent complexity of the plot. This has led many critics to assert that the real protagonist is the entire village, rather than just one family. I do not think that such a view can be shared. The Malavoglias live in a well-defined environment and constantly interact with their friends and neighbors. It could not be otherwise. The villagers thus exert a distinct influence on the Malavoglias' destiny, which necessarily makes them an integral part of the story. The village itself, less than ten miles north of

Catania, is never described; yet we feel familiar with its every corner. From the very beginning we are immersed in its atmosphere, as if we had moved there and were not merely spectators, but villagers ourselves.

The novel is also the story of the house by the medlar tree—a house that symbolizes the family's very roots and its unity—and of how it was lost. Together with the house there is the fishing boat—the *other* house, the home away from home, which makes survival possible. If the village is the world in which the Malavoglias move and express themselves, the house and the fishing boat are the more intimate parts of this world; they are a source of comfort, nourishment, and rest; they are essential, for they represent life itself. The house and the boat make the Malavoglias respected in the village.

The patriarchal grandfather, Master 'Ntoni, is the skipper. He is firmly planted in tradition, and when he speaks he utters proverbial maxims, because old sayings never lie. He knows that whatever is done now has been done an infinite number of times in the past, that life is but the perennial repetition of the same gestures in the constant purpose of survival, that in our voyage we can travel no other path than that marked from time immemorial, and that whoever tries to change paths will reap sorrow and perhaps even death. Such truths are found only in the words that have always contained them.

Yet at one point in his life this solidly conservative man, so fond of repeating "Stick to your trade, you may not get rich but you'll earn your daily bread," gives in to the natural yearning to be better off: he risks a speculation on a cargo of lupins, which he buys on credit from the village usurer. This deviation from tradition is ostensibly motivated by the fact that the eldest of his grandchildren is in the navy and Master 'Ntoni is trying "to find ways to make ends meet"; but it is a deviation nonetheless. The speculation brings disaster, with his son, Bastianazzo, dead and the fishing boat wrecked. It is the beginning of a series of grave losses, all of them spawned by that first step outside the established path. Maruzza too will try to change trades so that she may contribute to the meager finances of the family. She will take advantage of the outbreak of cholera in Catania to sell eggs to those who have fled to the haven of the countryside; but she will catch the disease herself and die of it. Like the

heroes of ancient Greek tragedies, she too seems to do everything possible to aid the hand of destiny.

Master 'Ntoni is extraordinarily resilient. He fights against the disaster he has brought upon himself: he returns to his normal trade and tries to rally the family, but he is not able to put together enough money to pay his debt. True, Uncle Crocifisso's lupins were nearly rotten and therefore worthless; yet Master 'Ntoni never gives this fact any serious consideration. For him what counts is the obligation he has incurred, which is a matter of conscience; the rest is not his business, but Uncle Crocifisso's. Against the advice of the lawyer, Scipioni, he mortgages the house to buy time. But the house will be lost, and so will the boat together with all the fishing implements. The latter loss brings Master 'Ntoni intense physical suffering, for he has identified with them: "but when they carried off the lobster pots, the nets, the harpoons and poles and everything else, Master 'Ntoni felt as though they were ripping the guts from his belly." Even after taking a job on someone else's boat, he keeps fantasizing about the house by the medlar tree, of how they will buy it back, and of how they will put together a dowry to settle the girls. He is indeed Verga's hero. His entire world collapses around him, yet he stands like a giant, indomitable in his courage, unbending in his confidence. Only one thing will crush him. When disgrace befalls a member of the family, everything is lost, and Master 'Ntoni is finished, for poverty can be lived with and overcome through hard work, but disgrace cannot. Thus he will invoke death as liberation.

Different from his grandfather is young 'Ntoni, who has been in Naples and has seen people who wallow in luxury and never have to break their backs working. He complains about being a poor devil and cannot accept Master 'Ntoni's philosophy. After the first third of the novel, he acquires enormous relevance. Grandfather and grandchild become antagonists representing two widely different generations with a gigantic gap between them—both of them doomed to defeat. Young 'Ntoni is a hero too, the one who embodies the beginnings of what Verga calls "progress."

In spite of a deviation which confirms the rule, Master 'Ntoni is basically the same throughout the story and like tradition he does not need to be explained. Young 'Ntoni, however, is very carefully prepared and developed. He is

fundamentally good, attached to his family and understanding of their needs. What he cannot understand is the passive acceptance of an unrewarding and hopeless life. He believes that it is possible to find fortune in the world. He fancies opportunities but does so nebulously, without a specific program and without realizing that even to catch opportunities requires ability and hard work. In him we recognize the determining power of "the vague yearning for the unknown." His inner motivations are essentially the same as those of many restless poor, who rebel against the establishment because they can no longer stand the straitjacket in which they are confined, only to end up as social outcasts precisely because society does not tolerate those who threaten to usurp material benefits rather than earn whatever benefits are to be had by following the rules.

The episode of young 'Ntoni's leaving home to seek his fortune elsewhere is possibly based on Verga's observation. Sicily, traditionally a land of extreme poverty for the many, has seen her children leave in large numbers. The late 1870s and early 1880s was the time when the great migrations to the New World began. A few of the emigrants later returned, generally well off and ostentatious with their wealth, but most were never to be seen again. This theme had already entered the romantic literary traditions of several countries, especially in northern Europe, where mass migrations had begun much earlier. In Italy, Alessandro Manzoni, although referring to less remote lands, had noted it in *I Promessi Sposi* (The Betrothed); later, in England, Emily Brontë had given it great relevance in one of the most celebrated novels to deal with the theme, *Wuthering Heights*. As a rule, the hero realizes his dreams by returning rich. Young 'Ntoni, on the other hand, comes back home shoeless and in rags, poorer than when he left. Here, as throughout the narrative, Verga follows the stringent logic of human reality, which can be neither deflected nor modified, because it coincides with the substance of the character. For him it is another way to abandon romantic artificiality and pursue facts rather than dreams.

Young 'Ntoni carries his destiny within himself; at times he may ignore it, even negate it, but ultimately he will not be able to resist it. Circumstances will, of course, favor it, but he will always take the fatal steps. Yet the reader cannot help being moved by both compassion and admiration

for a man who, in his own way and within the serious limitations of his background, could feel in his bones a manner of life that would be attainable only many decades later. It was to be men like him—though much better prepared, with much more practical objectives and with a much clearer vision—who over a long period of years were to make reality out of his aspirations.

Verga himself must have had the indistinct perception that with young 'Ntoni he was creating a man projected toward the distant future. At the end of chapter 10, the pharmacist speaks of his favorite subject, social revolution, and adds that "new men" are needed to carry it out. The town clerk rebukes him by drowning in sarcasm the names of some of these "new men," especially 'Ntoni Malavoglia, whom he judges irresponsible and inept. Through the town clerk Verga voices his conservative conviction that one should stick to one's trade without being seduced into unproductive fantasies. But that "new man" label suddenly, if sarcastically, attached to young 'Ntoni may indeed signify Verga's historical perception of his character. It was precisely this aspect of young 'Ntoni's personality that Luchino Visconti developed and emphasized in his 1948 film version of *The House by the Medlar Tree,* entitled *La terra trema.*

Young 'Ntoni's belief that society overflows with injustice, complicated by his desire to make money without hard work and by his natural restlessness, causes him to ignore tradition and to choose a way of life that clashes with it. As a result, he becomes instrumental in his sister's disgrace and ends up in jail for five years. During that time he learns about himself, about the roots he has forsaken, and about why he cannot replant himself in the village. At the end of that last chapter, where Verga so masterfully concludes the stories of all his characters, young 'Ntoni reappears in the village, only to leave it forever. He walks the deserted streets for the last time, "now that he knows everything," and when at dawn he sees life continue with the same voices and the same gestures, as if nothing had ever happened, he picks up his bundle and walks away, alone with his alienation. It is the end of *The House by the Medlar Tree.* There is no house and no family for the one who has ostracized himself from them. We are left with the feeling that young 'Ntoni is embarking on a long and mysterious journey, as

if he were not leaving just his village but the planet itself, to wander forever in the vacuum he has created. But he will remain with us, not only as the personification of the "vague yearning for the unknown," but also as an intensely complex human being who has been destroyed by his own unbridled and untimely aspirations, and above all as the first, and certainly one of the best, examples in Western literature of the alienation of modern man.

Of the other characters that are an integral part of the mechanism of the novel, Uncle Crocifisso is the first to come to mind. He is the ultimate symbol of the dire economic realities by which everyone is governed. A known usurer and an exploiter, he has a definite function in the village, for in times of need he can be of help, although in his own way. Everyone respects him, not only because he is rich, but also because he "sticks to his trade" and does a good job of it. In a society ruled by the struggle for survival, the one who manages to acquire money and property is both understood and admired. Uncle Crocifisso is solid and does not let himself be fooled. However, such people as Master 'Ntoni and the Malavoglia family, who have allowed themselves to plummet from near prosperity to near indigence, must be avoided like lepers. That Master 'Ntoni has done all in his power to pay his debt and has been brought to a desperate pass only because of his unflinching honesty is irrelevant; and so is the fact that Uncle Crocifisso has acquired the house and the boat by totally unscrupulous means. What counts is that Uncle Crocifisso has won and that Master 'Ntoni has been trapped. And since the Malavoglias no longer have property with which to protect themselves, no lasting relationship can be established with them —this is what Master Cipolla, who breaks his son's engagement with Mena Malavoglia, accusing Master 'Ntoni of having cheated him into agreeing to the marriage, tells the old man; and what Barbara will tell young 'Ntoni.

But Uncle Crocifisso too carries his pecular destiny with him. To pick up a plot of land, he marries Vespa, who in turn is after his money and soon gains control of everything he owns. Thus he is punished by the very greed that has guided his life. Uncle Crocifisso is the prototype of the protagonists of two other Verga works: Mazzarò of "La roba" (Property) and especially Mastro-don Gesualdo, the ex-

tremely complex man who falls victim to his compulsive desire for wealth.

The sexual mores of the characters significantly determine the course of some events. During young 'Ntoni's trial, the lawyer tries to justify his client's knifing of don Michele as an attempt to restore the honor of the family after don Michele had supposedly "seduced" young 'Ntoni's sister Lia. It is a common line of defense in Sicily; the lawyer utilizes it, whether it corresponds to the truth or not, for he knows that such a motivation will be not only accepted but expected. As a consequence Lia, although innocent, has to leave town and in order to survive must become a prostitute in the city. In such a society, a girl is supposed to guard her virginity until she is allowed to give it to a husband; any appearance of distraction or of looseness is blown out of proportion and equated with prostitution. Don Michele had been seen entering the Malagvoglia cottage one evening to tell the girls to urge their brother 'Ntoni to steer clear of the smugglers. This, added to the lawyer's "defense," is enough for the villagers to believe that Lia had indeed behaved like a prostitute. The girl's reputation is permanently ruined and she has no choice but to leave. Thus, in order to avoid the appearance of dishonor, she is actually forced to become a prostitute by the same people who abhor prostitution. It is one of the paradoxes of human interaction: in its blind intransigence, society often creates for the individual the very destiny it vehemently condemns.

Lia's plight also deeply affects her sister's future. Some of the most beautiful passages in the novel are devoted to the intensely lyrical, tender, and sad story of the love between Mena, Master 'Ntoni's older granddaughter, and Alfio Mosca. In the last chapter, when he returns to the village, Alfio is no longer poor and can marry Mena, who is still in love with him. But she has to refuse because of what has happened to Lia. And he must agree with her; all he can do is curse fate. The disgrace of a woman weighs heavily on her close female relatives. It is a remnant of the tribal system, under which the sins of one member were visited on the entire tribe, and even on future generations. Should Alfio marry Mena, the villagers would say that his wife is a prostitute's sister, one who must have the same

inclinations in her blood, and he would be ridiculed and despised by the very group in which he has his roots.

The entire novel is constructed with a supreme sense of equilibrium. Each chapter is magnificent in itself but cannot be separated from the whole, very much as Master 'Ntoni's five fingers cannot be separated from his hand. The interaction between events and style is prodigiously effortless. Reading is like following the rhythm of life as it reaches into the most intimate, capillary ramifications of the village. Everything seems obvious; but it is the highly difficult "obvious" that only great artists can attain. The transitions from one character to another and from one chapter to the next are accomplished by means of association: a name occurs in the narration, and soon the corresponding person is before us in action. The dialogue has the crucial function of revealing events, thoughts, and emotions.

As already indicated, Verga's effort to place himself "under the skin of his characters" so that he could "speak in their words" and his fascination with some of the features of "popular narration" led him to narrate in the words of the characters. Previously even the most poignant stories had carried in every sentence the visible imprint of the author, and the reader had to look at characters "through the lens of the writer." Verga's texts often sound as though they were related by a popular narrator who belongs to the same social milieu as the characters and who has been witness to the events. More often the very thoughts and words of the individual characters are audible in the narrative stream. We are under the impression that the characters are painting their own portraits. This feature has caused some critics to speak of "dialogued narration" and of "free indirect speech." In reality we are confronted with an embryonic form of interior monologue. In our age, after Joyce and Faulkner, when even the stream of consciousness seems to have been surpassed, this narrative technique may not sound so noteworthy, but in 1880 it was a remarkable achievement indeed.

In addition to narrating in the words of his characters, Verga's desire for objectivity led him to the creation of a language that was to be the most "real" for them. As Sicilians they would express their emotions in dialect, in expressive patterns that could not carry the same weight if translated into the existing literary language. Verga refused

to let his Sicilian peasants and fishermen speak the shallow bourgeois idiom of the time, but he had to write in Italian. Thus he created a linguistic medium by which those poor, illiterate people could live with all their emotional freshness: he adopted many local expressions and grafted them onto the old trunk of standard Italian. With very few exceptions, every word in the works of the mature Verga can be found in a common Italian dictionary. As a matter of fact, he uses a rather limited vocabulary, and yet every word sounds new and original. However, the cadences and the rhythms evoking emotions and environments are often unusual, not quite Italian; they may sound translated. Of course this observation does not concern *The House by the Medlar Tree* in an English version. But it carries some significance if we consider that such an expressive texture makes translating any Verga work a particularly difficult undertaking.

Besides speaking in the words of his characters, Verga also tried to "see with their eyes." Hence his avoidance of all descriptions per se, contrary to the modes of the romantic writers and of his own contemporaries. For him the outside world is not a mere construct of the author, but an integral part of the characters' lives. It therefore should be presented through their reactions and their feelings, not through the writer's eyes. In *The House by the Medlar Tree* we learn of the landscape, of the weather, of the sea, of the houses, and of the village only from the people who live in them. The first sea storm, in which Bastianazzo perishes, is suggested through an atmosphere created by the reactions of the villagers; it is never described directly, for none of those who suffer its consequences had personally experienced it. Thus it is much more tragic. The second storm is depicted through the eyes of the survivors; it is not cheapened with a bravura description by the writer.

Indeed Verga never forgets "the naked and unadulterated fact," and his novel does appear "to have made itself." But because of its language, because of the associational method applied in every page, and because of its extraordinary evocative power, *The House by the Medlar Tree* is also a work of poetry, as William Dean Howells asserted in 1890. As in a poem, certain recurring images run through the entire text and stay with the reader. In the theoretical introduction to "L'amante di Gramigna" Verga