

## The Last Aesthete Harold Acton's uncategorical imperatives

by Milton Gendel

In our categorical times, when no one is allowed more than a single label, Sir Harold Acton masterfully evades the pigeonhole. He is an Anglo-Florentine-Neapolitan-American connoisseur of the arts — a poet, satirist, novelist, historian, biographer, lecturer, and host. To classify this formidable array of talents, Sir Harold casts back to the turn of the century for a suitable term, calling himself an aesthete. What he said about the poetry he was writing in the Twenties and Thirties could apply to the whole of his many-faceted career: "I have not attempted to force fresh flowers from the modish manure."

He has not ever had to. Tradition has been a prevailing element of his life since his birth in 1904 at the centuries-old Villa La Pietra in Florence. The villa and Sir Harold have had a common destiny: both can claim a historic lineage, and both, in their present incarnations, are highly polished productions of the last three generations. Florence, an Anglo-American dreamworld in the nineteenth century, remained even after the First World War a cosmopolis of the arts and letters in a still cultivated Europe that offered a favorable rate of exchange against the dollar and the pound.

His father was Arthur Acton, a member of the well-known Anglo-Neapolitan clan and a painter with antiquarian tastes. Encouraged by his American wife (née Hortense Mitchell, the daughter of wealthy Chicagoans), Acton bought the villa and twelve acres on which it stands a year before Harold's birth. It lies along the Via Bolognese on a height overlooking the center of Florence and since ancient times has been considered a desirable property. From the Sassetti family it passed to the Capponi in the sixteenth century. Cardinal Luigi Capponi gave the palace a baroque cast, but the old quadrangular plan around the central courtyard remained unchanged until the last of the Capponi added a grand spiral staircase and glassed over the courtyard.

It was while Harold and his brother, William, were growing up that La Pietra began to take on its present appearance. Charles Loeser and Herbert Horne, gentlemen scholar-collectors who subsequently left their art collections to the city, were Harold's father's companions on antique-hunting rambles. The Renaissance rooms (the villa has sixty rooms in all) were filled with stately chairs, massive tables, inlaid and carved cupboards, credenzas, and *cassoni* (ornate chests). Gold-ground paintings were hung on the walls, forming an exceptional collection of early Italian pictures. They included the unique Coppo di Marcovaldo *Madonna*, the magnificent polyptych by Giovanni di Bartolommeo Cristiani, Bartolomeo della Gatta's *San Rocco predella*, and *Madonnas* by Bernardo

Daddi, Sano di Pietro, the Bigallo Master, Jacopo del Sellaio, and the Master of the Castello Nativity. Of this time Sir Harold remembers, "In my childhood, Florence was densely populated with art historians, critics, and collectors who occupied strategic palaces in the town and villas in the vicinity. Nearly all the foreign residents had some connection with the fine arts."

For fifty years, while his son established his own identity in England, France, and China, the senior Acton bought and traded paintings, other works of art, and furniture to complete his collection. In

addition, he transformed La Pietra's grounds. The acacias lining the drive to the house were replaced by cypresses to create the effect of an avenue mellowed by the ages. The olive groves where young Harold had played were uprooted to make way for a free reconstruction of the gardens as they might have been in the seventeenth century. The hillside was terraced; parterres were set off by balustrades, arches, fountains, ancient sarcophagi, and a sizable population of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century statuary acquired mainly in the Veneto. One long perspective culminates in a gigantic *Hercules* by sculptor Orazio Marinali, who, with his brothers, made many of the sculptures that are in the garden. There is also the topiary Teatro di Verdura, an outdoor theatre (complete with footlights and wings of greenery) that was one of Arthur Acton's Renaissance fantasies. It is punctuated with Francesco Bonazza's sculpted genre figures - peasants, hunters, vendors, singers - that, appropriately, are like personages out of a play. Of the old grounds a bit of park and the *pomario* remain. The last, a walled orchard, lies in front of the winter storehouse for lemon trees, which also houses farm equipment and an overflow of Venetian statuary. Otherwise, the house and grounds are an Edwardian reverie on the great periods of Italian life and art from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century.

Harold Acton went from these splendors and the spacious life of Florence to be educated in England. The British ingredient in his multinational background became dominant, even though his contemporaries at school and university considered him "dazzling and exotic" for his polished ways, his dedication to the arts, and his international connections. Those connections - especially with the arts - would continue to multiply. After his precocious emergence as a brilliant dandy at Eton and at Oxford, he became a celebrity's celebrity. (Evelyn Waugh drew on both Acton and his friend Brian Howard for Anthony Blanche, the outrageous intellectual in *Brideshead Revisited*.) With an international roster of acquaintances and friends who ranged from writers Robert Byron and Nancy Mitford to Bernard Berenson, Lady Diana Cooper, and movie actress Anna May Wong, his life has embraced most of the literary and artistic lights of the past sixty years. Cyril Connolly saw the young Acton as "a grave Florentine patrician, who is also an English aesthete." The aesthete brought Gertrude Stein to Oxford to meet the undergraduate literary set, and in Tuscany his friends the Sitwells were neighbors.

During this period he wrote several volumes of poetry. Published in 1923, *Aquarium* was rife with jazz imagery set to a ragtime meter, evoking "Red fish that bark like mastiffs at the moon, / Blue limpets, purple jellies, fish that croon / Mauve, melancholy melodies." Such high-colored fantasy, modish at the time, welled out of the compression of family and environment. It has continued ever since to add piquancy to the author's writing and to his conversation. In 1928, another book of his verse, *Five Saints and an Appendix*, also impressed reviewers as being in tune with the times. Said one contemporary critic, "Gramophones, pocket knives, and haloes are mingled in these very modern poems." That same year *Cornelian*, his first prose work, set the pace for a number of subsequent satirical, teasing, and wittily extravagant novels, the latest of which, *Old Lamps for New*, a spoof on the art world, came out in 1965.

But early literary successes did not allay a basic incompatibility with his authoritarian father. As often happens in such cases, the far-off and exotic offered more of a home than the familiar and frightening. In Peking, where Acton lived from 1932 to 1939, he furnished the only real home of his own that he has ever had with a fine collection of Chinese paintings, furniture, and antique objects. All these were to be lost to him as a result of the war. Sir Harold himself described his collections in his autobiographical *More Memoirs of an Aesthete*: "As nobody could have predicted Japan's assault on Pearl Harbor I left my treasured possessions in Peking, expecting to return there. My house in Kung Hsien Hutung, a group of one-storey pavilions between spacious courtyards, was full of the ancient scrolls and furniture I had collected and arranged according to the season until the harmony seemed perfect. They belonged here absolutely and I could not imagine them in any other

setting. Where else could I hang my long silk scrolls of birds and flowers or place my pre-Chippendale chairs and tables of *hung-mu*, my lacquered stools, wooden carvings, brush pots of carved bamboo, and gleaming assemblage of bronze mirrors, nearly all of them pre-T'ang?"

During his time in Peking, Acton supported himself by lecturing on literature, he also wrote sketches of Chinese life that were collected in his book *Peonies and Ponies* and perfected a suave personal style that might be characterized as British mandarin. The literary critic John Gross has described Acton's voice and manner: "He lingers on a syllable, falls to a faint singsong, pauses, underlines a word for emphasis, lets his voice trail away... All this with the merest flicker of a smile, as though he were tempted to put everything he said into ironical inverted commas... the effect is curiously vivid."

Returning from Peking, Acton again took up residence in London. In 1940, travelling briefly to Italy during the anxious and uncertain months of the "phony war," Acton lectured to audiences on "England's Cultural Debt to Italy," a topic subtly selected in the ultimately hopeless attempt to keep the country of his birth out of active hostilities against England. It was not until the end of the war, during which he served with the Royal Air Force, that Acton was finally able to return home to Florence. In 1945, his brother, the favorite of their parents, died. William had been a painter, with a studio on Tite Street in London, where he painted what Sir Harold has described as "portraits of all the reigning beauties who would pose for him." And not until after the death of their father in 1953 did Acton himself become the master of La Pietra and of no less than four neighboring villas - Villa Sassetti, Villa Natalia, Villa Colletta, and Villa Ulivi - as well as a part of the Lanfradini Palace on the Lungarno.

Wedded to La Pietra, which remains exactly as his parents left it, he keeps regular working hours in his library, where he wrote the books for which he is most likely to be remembered. *The Last Medici*, *The Bourbons of Naples*, and *The Last Bourbons of Naples* are historical works of peculiar interest, with their phosphorescent accounts of declining dynasties. They have an air of brave, rearguard history compared with the companionable flow of his two volumes of memoirs, a personal history of our times in which succeeding generations of the avant-garde in the arts appear and mingle with what survives of the old European aristocracy and meritocracy. Having seen it all, Sir Harold maintains a detached attitude toward contemporary vanguardism. "In the old days one's aunt took up petit point, now she goes abstract."

Like the picturesque Medici and Bourbons of his histories, Sir Harold is the last of his line, and, like them, he has made generous provision for the survival of La Pietra. He is leaving it and the five other properties under his care to New York University's Institute of Fine Arts for use as a graduate study center. Sir Harold's gift is the latest of the great donations that Florence has engendered ever since Anna Maria Ludovica, the last of the Medici, bequeathed the family collections to the city in 1737. Another notable example is Berenson's villa, I Tatti, left to Harvard in 1959. Sir Harold's intentions infuse the tradition of Florentine civic munificence with filial piety: "My father was most concerned for the fate of his collection and the maintenance of the garden he had created, and my constant effort is to keep these intact and in good condition (for paintings as well as trees suffer from diseases) as the best monument to the taste and discrimination of both my parents."

Sir Harold's own taste and discrimination continue to be at the service of scholarship and creative effort. The aesthete still dresses in the subdued, rich style of the Anglo-American gentry, as impressive as La Pietra itself. His courtesy and hospitality have always been remarkable, though he can retain an aura of solitariness. La Pietra offers a princely welcome during the year to dozens of callers and guests who range from aspiring young artists to scholars and writers such as Sir John Pope-Hennessy, John Sparrow, Hugh Honour, John Fleming, and such old friends as Princess

Margaret, Lord Snowdon, and Lady Bird Johnson. Sir Harold's house guests sleep in magnificent brocaded four-poster beds and use adjoining Edwardian bathrooms with outsized tubs and with taps almost as big as steering wheels. Good food and wine accompany the host's flow of anecdote, reminiscence, and occasional stinging comments on people and events. The vitality that animates his own elegant timing and stylized effects, as well as the palatial setting over which he presides, bursts to the fore when a manic mandarin impulse seizes Sir Harold. Beating time on his seventeenth-century table with a crested silver spoon, he roars out a rousing rendition of "*San Min Jui*", the national anthem of the China that was.