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‘Thomas More, he thought, was a spoiled monk, obsessed with sex, offensive to his wife, malicious and not much of a scholar’
G. R. Elton reappraised by **John Bossy**

I fly to Catania in eastern Sicily on assignment for a travel magazine. My subject is a celebrated vine that is cultivated in a small area on the north slope of Mount Etna. After being harvested and carefully treated in a cellar, it yields a stony intoxicating juice that is markedly superior to any like it in Sicily.

In Catania I pick up a rented car and drive north towards the volcano, dusted with snow and shrouded in its own steam-like exhalation. At Fiumefreddo, I meet up with the winemaker Andrea Franchetti. A Roman in his mid fifties, Andrea is powerfully built and mysteriously genteel. His manners remind me of those of Count Greffi from *A Farewell to Arms*. Out of consideration for his guest, the Count insists on speaking "American", and treats him to two bottles of champagne. His hands are torn, from the vineyards. He ushers me into his beat-up Renault and we climb through the cramped villages of Etna. Pen in hand, I assume the role of admiring pupil. Self-mockingly grave, Andrea is the perfect instructor. A bald hound lopes towards us along the side of the road, looking hungry and exposed. "The *cinco*", Andrea informs me. "Etna's dog."

At an elevation of about 2,000 feet we come to a mound of dirt by the side of the road. Andrea stops the car and pours a few ounces into my hands. The soil is light, fine, with a hollow, powdery feel. It contains little chunks of gravel, "from the cooling lava", says Andrea, "good for the vines. It gives the roots breathing

room so they sink deeper". I drop the soil and several clumps of it stick to my fingers. "Tar", he says approvingly. "It clings to the roots and force-feeds them the way you thrust a spoon into the mouth of a baby."

We continue our ascent. The settlements grow smaller. The light seems magnified yet soft, a studio light without shadow. "Like a kind of paste", says Andrea. "It's what you want for your vineyard but almost never find. The plants are illuminated equally on every side." The Renault wobbles along in second gear. The cracked narrow road is empty. With grim adoration, Andrea identifies the lava spills that have devastated whole swaths of the mountain. "Nineteen eighty-three", he says, indicating acres of pocked ashen stone. A few feet away, cows graze on a patch of grass that was spared. "A constant dichotomy of fertility and desolation."

We arrive at Andrea's vineyards, at 3,300 feet the highest point for the cultivation of grapes or anything else on Etna. There appear to be no neighbours for miles. The winery burned down after it was abandoned sixty years ago. Shepherds set fire to the brush. In 1947, a spill halted less than 100 feet from what is now Andrea's land. Lava follows its own course, like a stream, but the flow is slower than water, sometimes no faster than twenty or thirty feet an hour. Andrea moved to Etna four years ago, and its obliterating possibilities, I realize, are

FREELANCE

partly what attracted him. "It provides you with a breathing god." The year he arrived there was an eruption at 9,000 feet. "You could hear the lava descending, eating up the vegetation with this whispy crunch." He shows me his wine cellar where three men are at work, hosing buckets and draining lees from a vat. They greet Andrea warmly, protective of him, it seems, and vaguely ironic, like soldiers or subordinate members of a gang.

We drive to Castiglione for lunch, a steep medieval village a couple of miles north of the volcano. The streets are deserted; half the buildings look vacant. "There hasn't been work here in forty years", remarks Andrea. A couple appear briefly on a balcony strung with clothes, and then duck back indoors. This is the land of the novelist Giovanni Verga, who was born in Catania and wrote of these Etna towns. I remember a scene from one of his stories: a simple-minded man, playing Christ in a Good Friday procession, murders his mother-in-law, who had seduced him, with an axe.

All the restaurants we try are closed, and we settle for take-away sandwiches from a grocer. Across the way is an enormous black collapsing palazzo. Andrea names the family who built it as if he knows them. We find a caffè in which to eat our sandwiches, to the accompaniment of a bottle of Andrea's wine, from 2003, his first Etna vintage. It is complicated and soft, but he

doesn't seem to think much of it. "Two thousand and four is deeper." As he tells me of prying stones from his vineyard, I picture a man doing penance. The idea is to create *terroir* where it did not exist, he explains, an interpretation of place, an invention. The process is severe – vines planted so close that they stifle one another. The stress keeps the berries concentrated and small, all skin, no water. Exuberance is the enemy of good wine.

On returning to New York, I notice a blurred insignia on the label of one of Andrea's bottles that I have carried home. When I phone him, he tells me that it's his family coat of arms – a pelican in a crown feeding its children with its own flesh. "We're a Jewish family, very wealthy for a very long time."

In the fourteenth century, the Franchetti operated a large Mediterranean fleet and controlled land transportation throughout Northern Italy. In 1858, Andrea's great-grandfather, Raimondo, married a Rothschild of the Frankfurt branch. "After that we only knew how to spend", says Andrea. Raimondo restored the Ca' d'Oro in Venice, decorated it with Titian and Mantegna, then gave the palazzo to the city during the First World War. "We had homes all over. I don't know how to be domestic. Docsn't 'ethos' mean where the mind feels right, where it finds itself at home? Wine gives me a way of being in a place. It supplies an intensity. A focus."

MICHAEL GREENBERG