

The Literary Club of Cincinnati
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Iris

For Anya

We travel a dusty road lying east of the via Cassia and the via Francigena. All are ancient roads; all are paths of power and commerce; all pass Etruscan ruins and modern villas. We come to a shade tree; park; enjoy the vista of a World Heritage site, the Val d'Orcia, the now plush valley of the now dry Orcia River. We turn, cross the road and find six shallow travertine steps. At the top of the steps, with a small effort, we can lift and push open an iron gate wide enough to enter.

Iris Cutting was of Society but did not live her life in it. Her paternal grandfather, William Bayard Cutting, of Old New York, descended from a gang of English rogues and adventurers who came to the New World to cultivate careers and establish the family name. Together with such men as John Cadwallader, Stanford White and Pierpont Morgan, Bayard was a founder of the Metropolitan Museum, the New York Public Library, the New York Botanical Gardens, and the Metropolitan Opera. He was a trustee of Columbia University and his Madison Avenue brownstone hosted the likes of our own Alice Longworth, Henry James and Edith Wharton despite her comment that it was the “ugliest stone every quarried,” placing the Cuttings, by her calculation, a little further down the Social Register.

Iris' father, Bayard, was bright and ambitious in all good ways. At Groton, Dr. Peabody, the headmaster, judged him “by far the most remarkable scholar we ever had.” His Harvard philosophy professor, George Santayana said: “His intellectual life was, without question, the

most many-sided and sane that I have ever known in any young man” Before attending Columbia Law, Bayard enjoyed London as private secretary to Ambassador Joseph Choate. While in service to the ambassador, he met Lady Sybil.

Sybil was a daughter of Hamilton Cuffe, Lord Desart, an Anglo-Irish peer of no inconsiderable lineage. His Irish estate, Desart Court, was built on lands held in the family through an original gift from Oliver Cromwell for services rendered – a history of mesne conveyances not forgotten. Lord Desart, Gabba to Iris and dearest to her, was a man of public commitment. For his efforts to bring peace to his two countries, he was rewarded during the Troubles when a raiding party from Tipperary burned Desart Court to the ground. He never returned to Ireland.

Bayard and Sybil married in London in 1901 and, shortly after, Bayard’s health became a concern. He took what treatments were available traveling to more conducive climes like California and the New Mexico visiting his brother Bronson, the first Senator from that state. Iris recalled the last family trip to Egypt sailing up the Nile on a private ship in search of relief from the disease.

While afflicted, Bayard could not resist traveling to Messina as a representative of the American Red Cross to aid the victims of the great 1908 earthquake, a call to service that Iris would repeat during World War II. He succumbed to tuberculosis when Iris was still young. Edith Wharton, with whom he had developed a warm friendship, expressed a common sentiment: “I have never known an intelligence in which the play of ideas was so free . . . yet . . . so tinged by the elusive thing called ‘character.’”

In his dying letter to Sybil, Bayard advised her to raise Iris "somewhere where she does not belong I'd rather France or Italy than England, so that she should really be cosmopolitan, from deep down" Iris' bloodlines assured that outcome and signaled the woman she was to become – a woman of intellect and curiosity; a woman of taste and culture; a woman of public awareness and service.

We push aside the iron gate and enter. Inside, we see that this place is ordered, neatly proportioned and arranged, and sits below a large property – the 15th century Tuscan estate La Foce.

La Foce is a story of many beginnings, the most immediate being Lady Sybil's property in Fiesole that hill north of Florence on which Boccaccio's tales of *The Decameron* were told while waiting out the Black Death.

Florence was refuge and home to a colony of Americans and Britons until the end of World War I. This was truly the last stop on the Grand Tour; that upper class secular pilgrimage of in search of Classical culture and cosmopolitan refinement. The Anglo-Florentines became Sybil's crowd, especially upon her purchase of the Villa Medici. The Villa was designed and constructed by the architect Michelozzo for Cosmo de Medici, father of Lorenzo the Magnificent. Lorenzo, carrying on Cosimo's dream of a Florentine Platonic Academy, charmed his friends such as the poet Angelo Poliziano, the critic Cristoforo Landino, the philosophers Pico della Mirandola and Marsilio Ficino, and others at the Villa. In these gardens, Renaissance humanism was discussed and formed.

In the early decades of the 20th century, the Villa Medici, together with other estates such as Horace Walpole's La Pietra and I Tatti, the home of Mary and B.B. Berensen, hosted the

continuing social conversation. These homes entertained the Anglo-Florentine crowd and their guests the Jameses, the Whartons, the Lawrences, the Huxleys, the Nicolsons, minor European nobility, and who knows whom else. For pre-teen and teenage Iris, the ceaseless talk of brushstrokes and masterworks, of personalities and gossip was a bit much. Those conversations, especially with Bernard Berenson, were something to be relished later, but were something to be endured then.

The Villa needed repair. For the restoration, Sybil hired the architects Geoffrey Scott and Cecil Pinsent with whom she, and Iris, would have decades' long relationships. Scott, the author of the still well regarded treatise, *The Humanism of Architecture*, would become Sybil's second husband. His affairs and inattention, however, led to divorce. She would marry a third time, an old friend – Percy Lubbock. The general sentiment was that the marriage would be a disaster. The general sentiment was wrong as Percy loved and comforted Sybil as her increasingly delicate condition (read hypochondria) ultimately lead her to bed dying in Switzerland in the middle of the Second World War.

The relationship with Cecil Pinsent would last longer for it was Pinsent who traveled to La Foce to reconstruct that fallen property and design and build the gardens that, today, under keen eyes, grow more striking with age.

Iris' childhood in Fiesole ended with her "coming out." Against her deeper desire, Iris entered Society at the Villa among some friendly faces. She was also introduced in London and New York where the faces were much less familiar. Instead of the whirl of debutante balls, Iris would have much preferred taking rooms at Oxford. Whether due to Sybil's lack of interest or it was "just not done" with young ladies at the time, Iris did not have the formal education she

wanted. She did not, though, lack training. Her tutors, particularly Professor Solone Monti, instilled an intellectual curiosity and a passion for and dedication to learning she would carry with her all her days.

One other thing occurred to thwart her dreams of Oxford's lofty spires – Antonio Origo. Antonio, ten years her senior, came with the title of Marchese. The title did not attract Iris, Antonio's handsome elegance did. The families disapproved. Antonio did not come from a wealthy family, he was Catholic, and he was not Anglo. He did have other qualities. He was a man of the world, his family was cultivated, and his home was a center for painters, musicians, and writers of no less distinction than Gabriele d'Annunzio Italy's most famous (infamous?) and fiery writer and close friend of his father Clemente. The gentleman Antonio made the required rounds and charmingly won over both the English and American families.

Prior to their marriage, Iris and Antonio began to look for a property not only for a home but also for a life. Iris writes that they "both wanted to get away from city life and to lead what we thought of as a pastoral, Virgilian existence." The neglected estate of La Foce, in southern Tuscany, would fulfill that dream but not without considerable blood and sweat and a fair share of tears.

Inside the gray walls, we walk on a path of square stones laid in the form of a Latin cross. On either side of the path, there are markers, some with fresh flowers. We are in a cemetery. The first markers are those of former workers and farm hands. The fresh flowers mark the graves of the departed citizens of the commune of Sarteano the nearby town.

Neither Iris nor Antonio came to their marriage with wealth to speak of and all resources went directly to the purchase and improvement of the property. On purchase, La Foce consisted

of 3,500 acres scattered about with two dozen small farm houses. The acquisition of Castelluccio – a neighboring property notable for refusing refuge to a fleeing pope – added 2,000 acres and another dozen or so farms all situated in the then alien landscape of Val d’Orcia.

Val d’Orcia consists of rolling hills that have been inhabited and cultivated at least since the Etruscans. The once fertile land had gone fallow and the remaining farm families barely subsisted. Photographs reveal bald domes of land exposing the infamous *crete senesi* – grey Sienese clay – a clay that grinds exceedingly fine infiltrating every space around it. Returning your car to the *noleggio auto* in Rome, the attendants know where it, and you, have been.

The valley was bare, dry, and eroded. The topography reminded Iris of “elephant backs, as treeless as the mountains of the moon.” It was to her a "lunar landscape, pale and inhuman." Iris and Antonio had work to do; neither any agricultural expertise. Antonio, though, did have an affinity for the land and his clever intelligence and cultivated confidence proved invaluable.

These inhospitable lands housed farmers still operating under a land tenure system known as the *mezzadria*. Dating to the 12th century, the *mezzadria* was simple and workable. The landowner entered into contracts with tenant farmers. The landowner was responsible for the construction of the farms, their repair, and for half of the capital necessary for livestock, seed, fertilizer, machinery and other necessities. The contracts were detailed and unchanged for six centuries even down to the specification of the customary gifts that tenants gave the landowner on certain feast days such as two fowls, a brace of pigeons, a cured ham, or so many dozens of eggs. The landowner, and his estate manager, the *fattore*, managed the farms in exchange for half of the revenues from each.

The farms were in gross disrepair. Many lacked roofs; electricity and plumbing were unknown; and, erosion had virtually wiped out all growth. The early years challenged both tenant and landowner. Antonio needed to learn and develop a system of agriculture; the tenant farmers needed to relearn their craft; and, both needed to work out the sensitive psychology of foreign city owners working alongside resident peasant farmers. Iris needed to learn the customs of that unknown territory, lessons learned from wiser farm wives.

Antonio drafted a revitalization program that included crop rotation, new irrigation, flood control, erosion prevention, and the rebuilding and modernization of the existing farms. Still, the Origo acreage needed new roads, new farms, and increased planting for feedstocks, as well as education and healthcare facilities. These later responsibilities belonged to Iris.

Antonio's agricultural project received substantial support from what might appear to be an unlikely resource – Benito Mussolini. Peasant populism was central to the Fascist platform. To win over these citizens, Mussolini aggressively pursued a program called the *bonifica agraria*. *Bonifica agraria* financed large-scale public works to prevent land erosion, improve drainage and irrigation, build new roads and schools, and provide financial assistance for other improvements. Under Mussolini, worn estates were confiscated and redeveloped. Additionally, local land owners associations were created. In the Val d'Orcia, Antonio was its president for over 30 years.

Under the Origos' care, the farms were productive and the families prospered modestly – until the war came to Tuscany.

If we look closely at the gravestones in our cemetery, we can read the dates of death. Men, young and old, died in 1942 and 1943 and 1944 – the years of The War in Val d'Orcia.

Iris Origo's war diary – *The War in Val d'Orcia* – arrestingly portrays the times. These were the waning years of Mussolini's regime; the change in power from Fascism to nationalism; the bloody retreat of German forces; and, the movement of the Allies north through Italy eventually touching Tuscany, touching La Foce.

The farmers in the valley had "faith" that Mussolini would keep these humble servants out of the war. That faith was shattered as conscription took the young farmers and the sons of the old. The Origos sat in a delicate balance. They were beneficiaries of the *bonifica agraria* on the one hand. On the other, they had family ties with the Allies and were close with the intellectual elite of Italy. The elite, at first, were dazzled by Mussolini, mistaking authoritarianism for progressive reform. They grew suspicious, then, if too often too quietly and too cautiously, antagonistic towards his rule.

Living ordinary farm lives under the regime became as much a game as a daily worry. The German occupation presented another complication; even the Italian Fascist bureaucrats could not warm themselves to the German style. The Italian game of war was complex because sentiments were so mixed. It was necessary to know where sympathies lay. Which Fascists were committed to the war and which were half-hearted? Which anti-fascists were moderate, Republican, Monarchist, or Liberal? Which clerics were aggressively anti-fascist or simple sympathizers? Mistaking one for another could be fatal. Her diary shows that Iris was a particularly keen observer. She had to be.

There were moments when the war in Val d'Orcia must have seemed like an absurdist version of *Commedia dell'Arte*. Antonio negotiating with local fascist bureaucracy instead of directly reporting to the German command; German officers standing in the front yard of La

Foce demanding provisions as Iris hides hams and cheeses and valuables behind a false wall; a woods dotted with partisans and Allied prisoners; German officers demanding to requisition cars while meters away British POWs were retreating out La Foce's back door and into the woods with provisions; Antonio telling a German officer that no tires were available just as one of his farmers proudly walks into the yard with two of them one on each shoulder. This particular absurdity was not lost on the officer who was going through the motions himself and said: "For God's sake tell that silly ass to go away! I haven't seen anything but tell him to go away anyway." A brief light of humanity in a vulgar, cruel occupation.

While Antonio managed the operations of the farms, Iris helped school the children, operate a day hospital, and work for the Italian and American Red Cross in Rome. She also gave comfort and aid to the partisans and prisoners that hid on the farms and in the caves of their property. Years later, these gifts of blankets, food, wine, and precious English conversation would be warmly remembered in letters of the survivors from that the theater of war.

When Mussolini fell in the summer of 1943, the door was open for a declaration of peace and for rapprochement with the Allies. The King, however, delayed and that delay allowed the Germans to consolidate and then wreak their havoc in their particularly ugly retreat. The bombing intensified, looting was rampant, and reprisal was swift and mean. In town after town, German revenge murders occurred with ten men executed for every German injured or killed and public hangings were intended to send an obvious message of brutality and domination. To this day, these towns remember, with plaques and with their stories, these atrocities.

The net of war tightened around Iris and Antonio but never quite closed. At one point, Iris learned that all English and American women were to be placed in concentration camps and

she was advised to go into hiding. Warnings she, of course, ignored. The local fascist newspaper identified her as the woman secreting Allied prisoners. Antonio too was suspect. Both were under surveillance.

The bombing was particularly fierce in Northern Italy. The devastation of Turin and Genoa produced a refugee population with two dozen children reaching La Foce and living in Iris' children's home the Casa dei Bambini. Bombing reached the Orcia valley, soon, the children were directly in harm's way. There was no choice but to march north. As dozens of men, women, and children evacuated La Foce, Iris writes "The babies were howling. . . . Each of the children carried his own coat and jersey. The grown-ups each carried a baby, or sack of bread. And so, in a long, straggling line with the children clutching our skirts, half walking, half running, we started down the Chianciano road."

She continues: "I did not think, then, that we should get all the children through safely. We had been warned to stick to the middle of the road, to avoid mines, and to keep spread out, so as not to attract the attention of the Allied planes Some corpses lay, uncovered, by the roadside. A German Red Cross lorry came tearing up the hill, nearly running us over. And all the time the shells were falling, some near, some farther off, and the planes flew overhead." On arriving at Montepulciano, 15 kilometers away, Iris wrote: "We left behind everything that we possess, but never in my life have I felt so rich and so thankful as looking down on all the children as they lay asleep."

Who's to say that the children's march to Montepulciano did not end the war – at least the War in Val d'Orcia?

Returning home, the Origos found that shells had hit La Foce – the “Germans’ parting gift,” said Iris. Their house stood but was ransacked. Valuables were looted; clothes, books, and letters were scattered and stained; food and water and wine lay everywhere; the stench from the filth was palpable. Still, no damage was left that could not be repaired.

Our cemetery sits below the main house. It sits across from the valley, is bordered by woods, nestled into a hill, and becomes its own retreat. As we walk, we note the graves of friends and family – family most poignantly.

Before the war, Cecil Pinsent had redesigned the estate. He expanded and opened up the residence and constructed a terraced garden that incorporated English and Italian elements. The harmony between buildings and gardens and the adjoining woods is masterful. Boxed hedges and flower beds surround a fountain and other statuary and appointments. His design includes a lemon garden, a rose garden, and a massive wisteria covering a long wall. The garden runs along the slope of the hill with a path leading up the hill into seemingly infinite woods – a perfect transition. At the end of the garden, a stone fence, a statue, and a panorama of the now fertile valley and below the formal gardens, away from the Villa in its own reflective setting – the cemetery.

The cemetery was a special commission for Pinsent. One of the sad, most likely saddest, ironies of Iris’ life, was the she lost her father when she was seven years old. She also lost her first born, her son Gianni, when he was seven. The cemetery was built as a memorial for the beloved, radiant child.

The Origos’ work with Pinsent included a bit of whimsy. On a hill, one over from La Foce, the Origos asked him to design and build a serpentine road bordered by cypress trees on

either side winding to the top. This road is the iconic picture of Tuscany; it is on every postcard; it deserves to be.

On the farm, alongside Antonio, Iris lived the *vita activa*. She also lived the *vita contemplativa*. From the age of 10, she was a writer and was drawn to history and biography but to call her either an historian or a biographer underserves her writing. She is a writer of particular literary sensibilities. She invites you not only into the lives of her studies but invites you into their works. When she writes of the 19th century poet Giacomo Leopardi, you want to read his poetry. So too, Lord Byron's "Don Juan," and the novels, speeches, sermons, and lectures of the others described by her pen.

In her memoir, *Images and Shadows*, Iris reflects on her writing life. In response to a question she poses to herself as to what connects her several books, she says that her writing falls into "studies of figures of the 14th and 15th centuries in Italy, and of the 19th century both in England and Italy." This, of course, is too superficial. Slightly more reflectively, she writes "I did not choose them because I felt especially drawn to poets, merchants or great ladies, to the disabled, or even to Saints, but because of an avid interest in *people*." This assessment is, still, too modest.

Iris' books were well received. Barbara Tuchman called *The Merchant of Prato* "one of the great works of historical writing in the twentieth century[.]" George Santayana said of *Leopardi: A Study in Solitude* that Iris captured the poet's life "with a fine perception of character and a deep knowledge of Italy" and that with her "We are transported out of ourselves . . . by a vision of truth." On bringing her book *Allegra* to be published by Leonard Woolf at Hogarth Press, Virginia had to meet its author. On reissuing *The Last Attachment*, Iris'

study of Byron and his lover, Teresa Guiccioli, the nonpareil editor Jonathan Galassi, writes that her book is an “invaluable study [that] deepens and humanizes this quintessential Romantic.” Galassi also called her *Leopardi* the “best biographical study” of the poet.

Iris enjoyed good fortune through hard work. Her research for *The Merchant of Prato* uncovered over 150,000 letters, bills of sale, contracts, and other documents stored for 300 years in a house once owned by Francesco Datini, the Tuscan merchant of the story. Through family friends, a descendent of Teresa Guiccioli handed her a box of Byron's relics – a lock of hair, a handkerchief, a preserved flower – together with 157 love letters. For her study of San Bernadino, she was able to draw on then contemporary biographies and on the texts of speeches he delivered over 500 years ago. In lesser hands, perhaps in the hands of an academically trained historian, these materials might read a bit drily. In her hands, the documents drive her narratives and give lives to her subjects.

The Merchant of Prato chronicles not only Datini's businesses, it also describes nascent capitalism. Iris tells us about the creation of guilds and limited liability corporations; the use of factors and insurance; the imposition of trade restrictions among Italian city-states; and, the “peculiar” relationship between merchants and governors. A century and more after Datini, the Medici, the Pazzi, the Pitti, the Tornabouni, and other merchant princes would indeed rule Florence but not in public offices; such was the power of the rising commercial class.

The bulk of her primary sources tell the story of Datini's daily business and most contracts end with a prayer, of sorts, “In the name of God and profit.” Datini's activities were varied. A 1387 account book lists the silk vestments, spices, ceramics, jewelry, and painted panels being traded, it also notes the arrival of “a little slave-girl of 13 from Pisa.”

Datini wrote as incessantly to his wife as he did to his partners. He gave her detailed instructions about how to manage the house, care for the livestock, and cultivate the lands and gardens. Through this correspondence, Iris informs us about family life, the care and feeding of relatives, arranged marriages, and the like. In one instance, she tells us, that Francesco instructed his notary to write and tell one of his "daughters" of his gift to her. "Be advised, dearest Ginevra, your father has betrothed you to . . . a good young man with a fine appearance . . . All the town has shown singular delight. May God Bless you, and pray for our loving father." Ginevra was Francesco's daughter by one of his slaves and this "loving father" gave her a dowry of 1,000 florins, a considerable sum even for the city's wealthy.

Ginevra's wedding feast was no small affair. Francesco hired a special cook and the additional servants needed for a banquet of 310 pounds of fish, 31 pounds of lardo, and dishes of ravioli, tortellini, roast pie, pigeon, capon, goose, chicken, etc. etc. etc. all creatively divided into three courses to evade prevailing sumptuary laws.

The Merchant of Prato knew he was obsessed with business; he knew he had neglected his family; he knew he had lacked piety. As he reached the end of his life, Datini exchanged his silks for the cloths of a penitent; took his last pilgrimage; and, sought the salvation of his soul. After providing for his family, he left the bulk of his fortune to the poor of Prato. His foundation continues 600 years later.

Iris was as adept writing about saints as she was about merchants. Her description of San Bernardino of Siena and his novitiate at Il Columbaio, on the hillside of Monte Amiata, tempts us to visit those ruins. San Bernardino's life traversed the late Trecento and the first half of the Quattrocento. Ghiberti and Brunelleschi were in competition for the Baptistery doors – the doors

of paradise; Fra Angelico was painting the frescoes in the San Marco convent; the della Robbias were creating their ceramic alterpieces; and, Fra Bernadino found himself in the middle of a debate that has tumbled down through the centuries. The issue: Whether a fervent humanist could remain a good Christian.

In the bookstores of Florence, Bernadino would meet scholars who would quote Dante and Petrarch as facilely as they would quote Sts. Augustine and Aquinas. Iris writes: "standing in the shadows of the back of the shop turning over the pages of the codices, Bernadino could hardly fail to hear the acrimonious disputes" One of Bernadino's biographers said that "He was neither for humanism nor against it He traveled by a different path." Iris warns: "One should, however, be careful not to draw clear-cut lines of demarcation which were not perceptible to the people concerned." There was no bright line dividing theology from philosophy in Renaissance Florence.

Fra Bernadino was popular, greatly revered, and was canonized shortly after his death. He was man of the people – a trait, no doubt, that attracted Iris to him. She writes: "San Bernadino's love for his flock was . . . neither soft nor sentimental; he had no illusions about either their follies, their sins or their desires. He loved them not at all with the withdrawn impersonal benevolence of some monasteries, a fire at which no man could warm his hands, but with a fault-finding, perceptive, humorous family love which never, in condemnation of the sin, lost sight of the sinner." In Iris' hands, Bernadino was a saint. He was also a humanist.

Iris treats the poets as reverently as she treats the saints.

Giacomo Leopardi was born into an aristocratic, reactionary family. He led a cloistered life and was not allowed out of the house alone until he was 21. He was physically deformed which made relationships, particularly romantic ones, difficult. In his father's great library, he

nurtured a devotion to learning together with a profound romantic pessimism. Today, he is remembered for the emotional depth, as well as for the Nationalist fervor, of his poems that sing a song of a noble and united Italy that inspired the Risorgimento.

In Iris's hands, Leopardi's life is not romanticized. Rather, it is made human even in the poet's darkest moments: "To all sensitive and intelligent human beings a moment comes when they become aware that life is a dangerous and painful adventure, that ugliness and cruelties lurk behind every corner, and that only by shutting the door upon that knowledge, is it possible to proceed. This door in Leopardi's mind was never closed."

Iris' portrait is perceptive, insightful, and sensitive to Leopardi's (which is also to say to our own) human complexity. Her biography transports the reader to the early 19th century and, as dark as Leopardi's home in Recananti must have been, Iris draws you to that old papal town in the Marche. She also draws you to his poetry.

Leopardi is most famous for his several thousand page day book the *Zibaldone* and his *Canti*. An early ode, "To Angelo Mai," captures Leopardi coming into his own. The poem is dedicated to a cleric who discovered original texts of Cicero's *Republic* in the Vatican Library. In the poem, Leopardi's erudition shows as he recalls classic Italian poets and then weaves together his Nationalist desires as well as his personal struggles.

Clearly it is the high will of the gods
that just when we
have wholly lost
the memory of our heritage,
our fathers rouse themselves to lead us on.
Heaven does have charity for Italy;
some god still cares for us

Then in the next stanza:

Glorious ancestors,
is there still hope for us? Are we not wholly dead?
Can you see the future? I'm exhausted,
nothing shields me from suffering,
the way ahead is dark, and all I see
makes hope phantasmagorical."

For Leopardi, the personal was the political as it was for Iris as well as for her next subject the extraordinary George Gordon, Lord Byron.

In *The Last Attachment*, Iris tells the story of Byron and his final great love Teresa. Teresa, 19 to Byron's 30, had recently married a man many decades her senior. Her husband, the count, was often described as "eccentric," but eccentricity does not explain the mysterious, convenient deaths of his two previous wives.

Byron met Teresa one evening at a Venetian soiree. They became lovers the next afternoon. The relationship lasted 3 years before Byron went off to the freedom fights in Greece during which he contracted his fatal illness.

Iris quotes Teresa's reminiscence of her fickle lover: "Lord Byron,' Teresa herself admitted, 'began to play his role with pleasure, indeed, but not without laughing at it a little... One would almost have thought he was a little ashamed – that in showing himself kind he was making an avowal of weakness and being deficient in that virility of soul which he admired so much... This' she firmly added, 'was a great fault of Lord Byron's.'" Teresa understood their relationship; Iris understood their humanity.

Iris's political awareness is sharply displayed in her book *A Need to Testify*. The book is a story of four interrelated lives: the professor Gaetano Salvemini – who traveled to and taught in the US to gather support for the anti-fascist movement; the aristocrat and patriot Lauro de Bosis

– who flew a suicide mission dropping anti-fascist leaflets over Rome; his lover the American monologist Ruth Draper – who supported him financially and intimately; and, the novelist Ignazio Silone – whose novels of peasant life were intended to expose the darkness of Mussolini's rule. The lives of these four people crisscrossed in the late 1930s and early 1940s. All were committed anti-fascists driven by different desires: the desire for freedom for peasants and the common man; the desire for a nationalist government; and, the desire that the world know the plight of Italy under Il Duce. Each story stands on its own; each life to be savored. Together, Iris paints an era.

The 2001 edition of the book opens with Iris' essay on biography that may well be unsurpassed. She quotes Carlyle and Johnson, Quentin Bell and Boswell, Harold Nicholson and Leslie Stevens among several others. She articulates her rules for biography including the process of selection, questions of evidence, and the limitations of capturing anyone's life. Iris sets a standard for herself: each biography "should be, a completion of life, finding, in the routine triviality of daily experience, the universal pattern that gives them harmony and meaning. . . . Perhaps this is the most that a biographer can ever hope to do, to clear, in the icy crust of each man's incomprehension of other men, a little patch, through which a faint, intermittent light can shine."

Iris attained her goal. She wrote of poets and politicians, philosophers and preachers. She opens us to their lives and to the complexities of the human heart (and mind) – complexities she knew from her own experience and reflection.

It is time for us to complete our pilgrimage. At the end of the path, we find Cecil Pinsent's small, square, delicately proportioned Chapel with a familiar triangular pediment; the Chapel built in memory of, and dedicated to, Gianni.

The cemetery, the gardens, the estate is an immersion in architectural space and history. The dimensions would be familiar to Vitruvius and to Alberti; the decorative detail familiar to Palladio; and, the gardens set against the receding hillside are the essence of the Anglo and Italian traditions. This history, this design is of a piece with the life of Iris Origo.

The Origo-Cutting heritage traversed two paths – the political and the artistic. Iris married these two worlds through her life and her literature. Her life embodied the humanist conversation of Lorenzo de Medici, the literary discussions of Washington Square, and the high aesthetic of Bloomsbury and I Tatti. Iris would have been a formidable conversant in any of those parlors, salons, or gardens.

As we reach the Chapel, to our left lie three markers – Gianni and Antonio and Iris. On Iris's simple gravestone are the words of Italy's patron Saint Catherine:

Chi piu conosce piu ama piu amando piu gusta.

“The more you know, the more you love, the more you taste life.”

Post Script. One year ago February, my wife and I were enjoying a fine Brunello (or was it a Vino Nobile?) in the wine cellar of the Villa Muri Antichi. The Villa sits in Castiglioncello del Trinoro, a burgo that lies on our pilgrimage road just south of La Foce. About midnight, a lovely young woman walked in carrying a newborn girl – Anya. Anya, the future is largely hidden; it is not ours to possess. Still, having met your mother Sofia, your grandparents Antonio and Margaret, your great-grandmother Benedetta and your great grand aunt Donata, there is one thing about the future that we can know – your life will be filled with the family grace, the grace that was your great, great grandmother Iris.

Thank you

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By Iris Origo:

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