

Walter Arndt

## Grace-Notes From Sicily

The Taormina Post Office is a spacious, hygienic-looking structure just outside the old Porta di Catania, at the south end of the congested cloaca maxima of town life and tourism, the Corso Vittorio Emmanuele. Despite its guileless exterior, one never fails to approach it—unless one merely has to buy stamps—without a twinge of that slightly queasy zest provoked by an impending test of one's mettle. Yet it is just this state of mind and diaphragm which places one in culpable and counterproductive disharmony with the aura of the place. The genius loci is piscine; the atmosphere the imperturbable, barely undulating calm of a multivascular aquarium inhabited by five grave, not unkindly but profoundly preoccupied fish.

The most temperamental of the stock is a fortyish female bloater, beaded around the gills, who hovers nearest the guard-rail and is, one soon gathers, not fully smoothed down as yet to the aquarium's ways. She is still distracted at times by the restless world beyond, she is still inclined to shiver and blink at an intruder's brash or dissonant demands, even throw up her fins with a bubble or two to convey "did you ever!" to a calmer superior; only then subsiding again with a bemused spawning motion to the tearing off and precise aligning of the gummed margins of stamp sheets. The others, Fernandel, Vittorio de Sica, and Primo de Carnera, are fully matured. They have grown the very ample hooded eyelids which almost cover the opaque jelly underneath, and they seldom speak or meddle with the spectators at all.

Sometimes, to be sure, there are exceptions even here. There do arise occasional issues of constitutional import, like that of the postage-presumptive due a four-ounce package to Turkey, which may gradually draw the college of elders into deliberation and ultimate judgment. Turkey is not Europe, they opine, unsheathing a larger segment of jelly, and yet . . . Might it not be *mercato commune*, which would grant it a special dispensation? Two of the justices incline to find against it, but one pumps his gills dubiously. Vittorio de Sica suggests rotundly that Turkey should be treated like the other Mohammedan countries. This sweeps the panel and is passed by soundless acclamation; but some time

later it is discovered that there are now more Saracen countries than anyone remembers from a few years ago in the brittle pages of the postal index—some sounding quite far away and positively African. A new impasse ensues. Indian states? No, no—Fernandel hoists imperious eyefolds and gives off a short submarine whinny: much too far away, and what is worse, in any of several possible directions; there was West and East there, at the least. He appears to remind the others privately, with minatory facial play, that this is a loaded destination which has disturbed the peace before. Ultimately, after some weighing of the claims of Istanbul, Constantinople, which is probably European, and the parcel's ostensible destination, Izmir, which perhaps is not, a serviceable category of quasi-European, non-Arabic, only slightly Indian countries, to which belong South Africa and Australia and other insoluble remnants, is found. Two of the justices float out for an espresso, and complete calm reigns again the rest of the day.

Besides the three elders, there is also Buster Keaton, perhaps the maturest of all; but he is suspended in a thicker aspic in a distant back grotto with a separate street entrance, and one does not view him unless one has a major parcel to send abroad. Should one be in such grave case, though, one has hours to become familiar with him. One learns that in the postal sphere harmony is all, decorum of the utmost delicacy and rigor, and nothing is as rankly pernicious as haste. That packages may not only be, and usually are, overweight, but may be underweight, like neglected children. That they often evince too weak a grade of string, but also at times too strong. That the little metal *piomba*—the regulation clamp-on seal thing of shiny tin like a cheap denture set for a tree frog—is available on many Fridays in the future and past at a stationer's just across the street at the other end of the Corso. That this *piomba* must firmly grip the two loose ends of the string over the knot, than the former of which, however, there must not be more than two, and of the latter, by contrast, no more than one. And how, in the name of reason and the tranquility of the Republic could anyone but a heathen Finn, perhaps, or a Turk emerge from the *emballazione*, the proper postal ensnarement, of a three-dimensional object with *three* string-ends? This could only happen if the main or master string should, in a flagrantly flibbertygibbet or even underhand

manner, have been eked out with a subsidiary or false string! Which cynical procedure must in turn inevitably give rise not only to the illicit surplus knot, or even two, but also tempt the culprit to hide them in one of the intersections of the main or master string. Oh, one had seen cases . . .

The goggle rims widen slightly, the proboscis, a straight and bitter line at rest, forms a soundless censorious O; a minute tail twitch propels him closer to discover, appraise, and castigate the malformation. One murmurs that one has, as a matter of fact, lived ten years in Turkey and can do this sort of thing without trying; and baffles him by casually picking up his scissors, an heirloom from Hephaistos' nearby Aetna plant, and pinching the third string-tail off. This, changing the given data in a wayward manner, is obviously not water cricket, verges on fraud and sedition, and occasions some agitated expostulatory fin-work. Paah! one may try to disavow the third end, but it is still there nonetheless, wreaking its stealthy emasculating work within the sturdy-looking knot; in fact it is more insidious than before and might easily cause the whole *consegnamento* to become totally uncorseted on its way. He tugs at the string with both fins, hoping to produce this effect prematurely, but is deftly intercepted and appeased by two, not one but two, glittering *piombe* swiftly flicked from last week's pocket hoard: and lo! with grudging benevolence he adds some water wafers of his own and proceeds to transubstantiate the parcel into strait-laced beatitude.

He then yaws over to an aquatic prie-dieu at the tank's far end to settle down to the serious part, the business of writing out bills-of-lading in quadruplicate; one plicate of which is destined to be eased with a watchmaker's precision and a pot of primordial glue onto a certain site on the parcel's face. This takes a little more of that negligible quantity, time, than one might budget for. Not only is it found, with more bubbly paah!s, that one has marshalled and deployed the address in an outlandish and irrational order and crammed it full of pagan words which strain belief and call for agog verification and prolonged musing proboscal mimicry; but both the granite ball-pen and the venerable half sheet of carbon (extant by the look of it from the eponymous era) which jointly dizzy up this otherwise tedious stage are mislaid or in use somewhere amidtanks.

Near what begins to look like the end, an interlude of bog-gling consternation, not untinged with grave renewed suspicion,

intervenes. It is discovered that (since books are being sent home) the sender's and addressee's names are exactly alike. This smacks of comic error, if not obscure intrigue and abuse of the postal process, and the pat explanation is received with a cold fin-washing motion and a string of judgment-reserving alternations of — and O. By this time, though, the majestic climax of the epic is at hand: the infinitely painstaking separation with the aid of a massive sharp-edged iron ruler, much later than the carbon or the glue in epoch, of the requisite amount of minute unperforated National Aquarium Service stamps as reserved for authorized consignments to foreign principalities and powers. Primo de Carnera's mask around a bulkhead—the rest of him is too large for this part of the tank—with ponderous piscine camaraderie lends murmured assistance with the arithmetic, though not the plane geometry, which this calls into play.

It comes time for payment, the toy stamps have been added up successfully; but there is no change, glugg GLUGG glugg glugg. When after propitiatory, adjuratory suspending gestures one has whipped over to the bank (open almost every morning and sometimes for a teasing movable moment after the siesta) to assemble the exact cash amount of the postage and has cantered back with it before the grotto closes at noon, one is finished and still has the whole afternoon to memorize the nodal points of the scenario for next time.

The limp elation which floods the system after a completed despatch must be cherished. For a long time it quite blunts the mind to the harsh fact that fully as vital to real communication as the launching of an *entità postale* is its arrival. And for that matter this aspect tends to dwindle even in retrospect. There are some things in the world worth doing for their own sakes, and unforgettable.