

The ‘Essential’ Ravello

by **JOHN EAMES**,
Resident & Friend of The Garden

The Garden is located in the village of Ravello overlooking the historic, famously scenic Amalfi Coast in the Italian Deep South. It’s an officially gazetted a *World Heritage Site*.

It’s also been a writers’ & artists’ place of pilgrimage back to Homer. (*So we say, without too much exaggeration.*)

The location is “inspirational,” as one eminent Lady poet described it in a Biblical line that seems to resonate like the tolling of the big Cathedral bell in the Piazza.



“A Place – that hath Not – it’s Like – in All – the World.”



The (family) *Albergo* (& fine) *Ristorante Garden* is at the heart of the village, within the sound of the ancient sentinel bell, and set on a steep fall of mostly olive & lemon groves to the sea half a mile below. We look down, metaphorically speaking, on a petrified, green & white cascade of rocky terrain that threatens to break over and inundate a ragged shoreline of headlands, spits and numberless coves. It’s petrified at the point of impact



◀ Odysseus (*the Roman Ulysses*) made landfall there 8, 9, 10 millennia ago - who rightly knows? But it wasn’t easy. In fact, it was famously dangerous after he and his flimsy ships were waylaid by Homer’s deadly *Siren* mermaids adorning a floating island of black rock.

Today, all those ages later, we see safe havens down there from our terraced *Belvederes* (lit. “*Beautiful to Sees,* ” of which the hotel has three.) Or what we actually see in small places, between the inshore rocks & the rent & riven falls of limestone & is a broken shoreline of toy-sized fishing ports & beach resorts.

After dark, on a moonless night, we wouldn’t see anything at all but for the illuminations of strings & knots of flickering fairy-lights - or they’re more mellow, like amber candle lights.

On a normal sunny day, from the terraces, the more elevated gaze, as it were, is over an infinite arc of *blue-blue* Med. half-way to Sicily. (*Or maybe that does exaggerate it a bit.*) But note the adjective for the colour of the sea in our *Golfo di Salerno*, (*which from a marketing standpoint ought to be changed to the classical Greek Tyrrhenian Sea.*)

I’m anyway “indeterminate” on the colour, not wishing to specify one of an infinity of shades, hues, tints & water-colour washes of blue,



depending on the season of the year & Nature's ambient mood. Its "airs & graces" of the day.



The Lady's fine words are not all about the scenery & weather, however. There is also an element of living history in the alchemy back to the ancestral Greeks and, latterly, the Imperial Romans, who took to the local hills around 500 A.D to escape Attila's actually rather benign Barbarians

**Shards of their Vesuvian red brickworks, bits & pieces of arches & walls, etc., are still littered around Ravello. Also in our elder sister village of Scala, within hill-walking distance across "Dragon Valley" as it's picturesquely called. They have preserved intact, more or less, the Crypt under the first Roman Christian Temple on the Coast, over-built in the 12th Century with the region's oldest, most monumental Catholic basilica, or Duomo.*

The barbarian Hun, incidentally xxxxxxxxxxxx

But for many of us Ravellese, it's neither geography nor fragmentary history that constitutes the "essences of the old elixir" in its present refinement. It's *the People! Us Ravellese*, not to be too modest about it. *Us* & our old-fashioned, largely unspoiled *paesano-Napolitano* culture (including the food & wines) is what most visitors remark on in particular. The best of it, that is, of course - not the notoriously "roguish" element in & around Napoli itself.

In some ways, the village culture has lightened up a lot since, say, the totemic (*also titanic*) Richard Wagner wrote much of his last grand opera, *Parsifal* – his mightily heavy swansong - right next door to the hotel. Or rather, since he was here in the late 1880s, we were just a future hotel site – an un-detached corner in the luxuriant, be-flowered grounds of the medieval Villa Rufolo.

That's the "Magic Garden," as one designer painted it ► for a stage set. In the script, the beautiful, blond Teuton "Knight of the Holy Grail" was sorely tempted by imported Rhine-maidens out of Götterdämmerung. They were laying about in the leafy bushes, posing as virgin wood-nymphs.



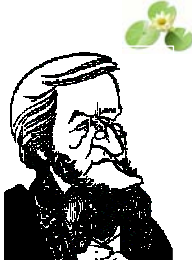
Seventy years on, our Family Mansi forebears named their enterprise, rather cryptically, in *English*. More logically, it would have been an *Italian: Il Giardino*. We don't know why, but suppose they were tugging their *paesano* forelocks at the eminent German, who transported a legendary, wholly English "Enchanted Garden" to Ravello from 12th Century Wessex. Or to be precise, from King Arthur's Court of Camelot.

Interestingly, our own most distinguished visitor to the hotel was the American "Queen Jackie" at the *Camelot Court* of the Kennedys at Hyannisport, Mass, in the 1960s. She left her children to play with our young Mansi's.



Commercial break! That's me, standing in for a priest or *Sindaco* (Mayor.) in marrying couples "symbolically," sternly advising a bride of the perils of matrimony. The celebrants are mostly romantic Americans, who – however else they might have married (or entered into *loving partnerships*) - still want an *Italian Dream Wedding*. Or maybe just renew their old vows.

In any case, we're having to realise the dream for a seasonal procession of these *dreamy people*, which grows longer every year. Me & my adopted family at *The Garden* are, of course, at the service of anyone – usually the sappier, romantic female - who might read this shameless advertisement.



Back to Wagner. Interestingly, *der* incomparable *Meister* initially relocated his enchanting garden to the *Villa Rufolo* to compose and write the lyrics for the *Opus*. He also entirely reconfigured the Arthurian romance - “a bit of a “liberty,” in the opinion of most English musical mythologists of the day. The garden, as a matter of fact, was the property of the *Mago Merlin* – legendary sorcerer-sage at the Knightly Round Table & consiglière to the English Catholic Crusaders.

But we’re talking here of the Führer of nationalist *Musik und Kultur*. He - who would be a talisman of the baleful Hitler. Not one, therefore, to worry about giving offence to the English of his day – nor anyone else on Earth. He blithely took our Merlin off to Bayreuth in Bavaria, made him an Honorary *Herrenvolker* & re-christened him *Klingsor*. (Maybe after a bar of the same name in the Piazza, near the Rufolo.)

He did the same with the hero (*heldentenor*), Sir Percival, the true, Knightly Quester for the Holy Grail & made him a “Von Parzival.”



◀ Plácido Domingo is the triumphant Sir Percy bearing the font of the Catholic Faith - the simple wine cup of Christ, here theatrically transformed into a grandissimo, blood-red punch-bowl. Of suitable dimensions, of course, for the great man & his aficionados, of whom the celebrated, Spanish opera-singer was one – albeit with a lyric tenor voice quite unsuitable for Wagner.

Oddly born José Plácido Domingo Embil, he rather smartly took the Christian middle names – “Quiet Sunday” – as a marketing brand name for his professional career. Which is not actually beside the point, because he’s a favourite brand in Ravello. Also a great aficionado of the village, where, one occasion, he serenaded a party of international glitterati at the opening of our prestigious Palazzo Sasso Hotel.



I have taken time & space in making & offering this random “little confection” of Ravello, which is what it is, like a Neapolitan *pasticcino*. There’s a whole feast of other stuff from which I might have selected for a colour piece on our incomparable place. But to extend the line of implied comparison, the “sweetest” part of it all is *Us, La Gente, the People*.

Us locals includes the village’s celebrated Honorary Citizen, the American writer & trenchant wit (US = wise guy), Gore Vidal. ▶ (Also, before he departed Ravello, a regular at The Garden, who required & received special service from our own august Augusto.)



*That’s Him, Vidal, now past 80, * bidding a Final farewell to Ravello after 30-odd years’ of residence at La Rondinaia, his palatial “Swallow’s Nest” that looks like it’s bolted onto the sheer face of the highest cliff.*

He’s retired for the duration to what used to be his Winter Palace in the Hollywood Hills. “To spend more time with the family,” we believe, as is the way of many rebel politicals on the way out for whatever reason. Weasel words. though, are not his thing. Certainly not – never have been, In lieu of close family, he just wants to spend more time with his trusty doctors in L.A.

I last saw The Great Gore pushing a zimmer-frame across the Piazza on his way to the Post Office to collect his latest batch of royalty cheques. Or, to be fair, it could have been the galley proofs for his latest book-in-progress. He's still writing, and, no doubt, will go on doing so until he takes his high place in the literary Pantheon. The legs might be giving out, but the laser brain, I'm told, is still firing away as lethally as ever.

Anyway, to retrieve the point of the “sweet” people of Ravello. *Poets all!* Certainly onwards from our own Giovanni Boccaccio & his friend Dante Alighieri. We named our street after the ribald, sinful one of the two, whose *Decameron* tell-tales of what was going on between the Brothers & Sisters in the local convents very nearly got him excommunicated.* ▼

**Dante gave him hell, so to say, and he ended up, penitently & soberly reflecting on his sins in one of the local hostelrys. Would it were The Garden (for the publicity value), but our advent 600 years away.*



Who else was here? Everybody of cultural note or notoriety, really. The hotel guest lists are full of them.*

**Of whom just a random few are Lord Byron, Keats & the whole following train of cultured Victorian Grand Tourers, including Virginia Woolf & her set of Bloomsbury literary pseuds. Others (not pseuds) were Goethe, Wagner's greater compatriot. André Gide, E.M. Forster, Somerset Maugham & many others of Gore Vidal's "orientation."*



Scandalously, the Swedish screen vamp Greta – “I Vont to be Alone” – Garbo was just that – secretly alone at the fabled Villa Cimbrone, with her runaway lover, the married Maestro, Leopold Stokowski. The village knew all about the affair & smiled benignly upon the couple.

◀ Garbo??? In fact, it's not. It's an extraordinary look-alike, the Baroness Karen von Blixen, another celebrated visitor & Nobel laureate Lady who wrote so poetically (*if about somewhere else, who cares where?*) of “The Place that hath Not its Like in All the World.”



Also scandalous, was the “rough diamond,” working-class D.H. Lawrence, who also stayed at the Cimbrone with his wife, Frieda, an aristocratic Von Richthoven, to whom he was famously ever-faithful. Lawrence was preoccupied, however, salaciously writing about a fictional Lady Chatterley's wanton behaviour with her “bit of rough on the side,” the game-keeper, Oliver Mellors.

He was miserable in Ravello – suffering a black-dog depression - but his sojourn was more of a signal cultural event for the village than Wagner's, although, until now, nobody's given him credit for it

It was nevertheless a time of great Shakespearean “pith & moment,” or would be after the manner of the manly Oliver's service to Her Ladyship and his foul, working-class language were read at an obscenity trial in London in 1963.

He was then 30 years dead - he & the novel brutally rejected. But at the famous hearing, the immortal Lady Chatterley's Lover was acquitted of all charges and, wondrously, English Lit. was freed forever from censored sex.



That's quite a distinction for literary Ravello – the old-world Carmel-on- the-Med. The village has the official soubriquet of La Città della Musica. Clearly it should be Del Discorso Libero, or Letteratura Libera. (Mr Mayor, take note!)

There's one other distinctive, curious thing about Lawrence in Ravello. He was the only sublime poet in the local annals to gaze forlornly - miserably - over the Cimbrone's splendid, Roman busted, "Belvedere of Infinity." A verse he wrote at the time is etched on a tablet in one of the romantic Victorian garden follies; a leafy grotto of a lovers' bower, wherein the lines are writ.

"Lost to a world in which I crave no part. / I sit alone and commune with my heart. /
"Pleased with my little corner of the Earth, / Glad that I came, not sorry to depart."



This - would you believe? - was the grim-glum "little corner of the Earth" ▲ Lawrence was pleased to depart. Poor man was either as homesick "as a dog" for his "black satanic mills" of mid-England Nottingham, or just sick of this "stale, flat & weary life." It has to be the former, because as the very wise Dr Samuel Johnson wrote, to misquote him a little:

"No, Sir, you sad fellow, When a man – or a woman, for that matter – is tired of Ravello, such a person is tired of life."



The Great Gore, as of right, would normally have the last word of a literary nature on Ravello. But not this time. I'm making the self-convinced Greatest American give way to the more certain Greatest Englishman, "Sir Churchill," as our Italians quaintly call him.

Portly, cigar-puffing, tippling, the old Warrior loved it up on our airy heights, sat out in some garden, shaded by an enormous sun-hat, tippling G&T & Amalfi lemon, contentedly painting the grand seascape. What, I wonder, might he have said about Ravello. Maybe what he'd already said about things & places in general...



"I am easily satisfied with the very best!"



And so it goes on, famous name after name, story after story, flattery after flattery. But when all is said & done, it's still the local *People who make a Place*. That includes the *in situ, cultivated* visitors – as they are. No Spanish *Costa*-types here in Ravello. They will be coming in legions as I write in early primavera, 2007, for the summer-long "*Wagner Festival*," which it's really not these days. Now greatly expanded & varied

We'll still hear the thundering *Ride of the Valkyries* up on our terraces, but also the melodic waft of a Neapolitan love song and even the air-beating, hip-hop "pop" that, unaccountably,

the *ragazzi/e* like so much. (*It all stops Cinderella-like at midnight, by the way, when the Law says "the villagers shall sleep." They do & they don't.*)



Extraordinary performance. ▲ World-famous orchestras on a stage hung out over the "big drop."

The more *polifarious* Festival and village culture in general has to some extent made more of a light, heady cocktail out of the old, sober concoction. It's again *the People – la Gente, gli Napolitani* – we think (*to extend the metaphor*), who are the refined, "sweetening" additives to contemporary, quintessential Ravello.

La realtà – "the way a thing really is" – about the peerless place is that the present essence really is a "refreshment of the soul." Or the spirit. Of, if you're a Vidal, natural, biogenic mind. Anyway, a pleasant mix of old-fashioned, country hospitality & modern urbane - *laid-back, liberal* - civility. Although, come to think of it, that's also what it was where this piece started, back with Homer & the original Greek alchemists.



It's funny, though. Up in my Napiltano runt end of the village, on the mini-*belvedere* of my damp but otherwise commodious bachelor's cave. Over-looking the one-time *Tyrrhenian Sea*, imbibing the essence. Pondering the vexed question of just why I, an old Englishman, would happily live in permanent exile in Ravello. Conveniently next to the *Cimetero*. Then one day it dawned - *Bill Clinton* - was the sudden, random thought:

"It's The People, Stupid!"

There's not one of us – me & the adopted family at *The Garden* - who doesn't get up in the mornings, peer over the balustrade &, if not consciously *think*, then somehow *feel* in the abstract, like the Lady poet I started with...*Io stóng cá. Addó.aggiá stá.* (We feel it, of course – *or they do!* - in our native, vernacular *Napolitano*). *Eccorei dove dovrei essere!*

"Here I am. Where I ought to be!"



