

The Spirit of the South: Mediterranean "Otherness" according to the Northerners

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Introduction

Demonised and revered, dreaded and venerated, admired and condemned; the encounter with the South is, apparently, a history of incompatible contrasts and dichotomic poles. But, after all, the Spirit of the South in itself cannot be the expression of a unique voice. The Mediterranean, as a "sea between lands," is by nature a place of contacts, interweaves and clashes between different cultures and peoples. The conflict, then, is multiple from the very beginning. The southern soul has always been fragmented and controversial and so is its perception on behalf of the northern cultures. This essay will focus on how the Northerners' imagination conceptualised the categories of sameness and diversity, otherness and familiarity, inclusion and rejection, when confronting the Mediterranean.

I will first look at the construction of the southern identity, defined by antagonisms; a first, traditional dichotomy sees the world split into a civilised Occident (namely, Europe and Christianity) as strongly opposed to a savage Orient (Asia and Islam). Beginning with Montesquieu and Madame de Staël, however, a disturbing antithesis arose, which shifted the geography of understanding forever. And this time within Europe's own borders: the new latitudinal distinction perceives "North" as rational, ethical, virtuous and a place for civility. "South," on the contrary, is recast as irrational, instinctual, immoral and primitive. According to this initial line of thought, the "Otherness," which can even be internal, is rejected and feared.

At a further stage, the paper will investigate on what happens when curiosity about the alterity prevails over the fear. I am going to explore physical journeys towards the South, and the figurative voyage of its interpretation. The aristocratic institution of the Grand Tour constitutes the first laic and disinterested encounter with the Mediterranean "Otherness". Considered as a sort of necessary rite of passage for educated gentlemen, it might unleash fantasies and imaginations. The Romantic and Victorian writers frequently portray the conflict between a Mediterranean imaginary and a real place; their travel diaries, poetries and letters betray diverse attitudes towards the southern landscape, history and people. Very

different reactions can overlap, ranging from enchantment to delusion, lack of curiosity to contempt. In particular, I will analyse the impressions of two English writers about Italy and Italians: Percy Bysshe Shelley and Charles Dickens visited the peninsula for a few years, sometimes revealing a surprising empathy with the people. Certainly, they started to recognise the transformative power of the Italian environment, as it inspired and awoke their sensibility.

However, this narrative remains somehow stuck in detached, exotic representations of the South. By 1900, the educational voyage had become a traditional solemn trip through convenient pensions, where, sketchbook in one hand and Baedeker in the other, the (self-) educated classes made their way into art, sunshine, music and self-improvement. The tourist, immersed into the Mediterranean life, had to deal with the rise of a subtle awareness. Later interpretations went beyond the narcissistic elitist attitudes of the Romantics, so far from the mere descriptions of the Victorians. They moved from a superficial sense of exoticness to a surprising feeling of belonging. The new perspective wanted to embrace the alterity, aware that the so-called “Otherness” is still part of the Self. Not only is the Mediterranean inherent to the northerners’ collective conscious, but it also becomes a fundamental necessity, a repressed content that struggled to emerge. The modern novelists consecrate this final evolution. *A Room with a View*, for instance, is a tale of emancipation from overwhelming conventions, hypocritical oppositions.

I aim at researching how the northern representations – more precisely, English – of the Mediterranean – in particular, of Italy and Italians – changed over the centuries. I will find evidence in the texts of the viewpoint shift: from fictional illustrations of alterity, as imagined or seen from “high rooms,” to the free, spontaneous immersion into the Otherness. This essay retraces the steps of an evolution, with a particular focus on the most critical moments which contributed to achieve the ultimate realisation. From the conflicting worlds of “we” and “they,” through a first openness, to the final identification, giving rise to what E. M. Forster loved to define as existential “muddle.” Embracing the muddle means accepting complexity and contradiction as part of life. It is the exposure to grey zones, the approximation to that hybridity that characterises the human experience.

The dialectic of “North” and “South”

Traditionally, the genealogy of identity involves establishing antithesis, so as to define and oppose the “I” to the “Other”: “everything, including Europe, exists only by

virtue of its contrast or its opposite” (Rietbergen 21). A first classical dichotomy, which dates back to Aristotle, juxtaposes a free Christian Europe to the despotic Asia of Turks and Persians. As Said argues, in order to imagine and theorise its own identity, Europe has to polarise the distinction between Western and Oriental, European and Arab; in sum, “European culture gained in strength by setting itself off against the East” (Said 3).

The Greek philosopher’s paradigm had a strong impact on the history of collective imaginations. It opposed Europe, whose cold nations are “comparatively free” to a “ruled and enslaved” Asia (Aristotle 30-34). Therefore, Europe was thought to be the only place for civility, democracy, progress, and consequently its inhabitants were rational, wise, virtuous; the Orient was the deviant “Other,” land of primordial passions, populated by immoral, savage barbarians. The longitudinal dialectic, markedly Eurocentric, defined the realm of “culture” and the world of “nature.” In addition to this geographical distinction, another significant assumption seems to emerge, which linked forever people’s personality to climatic zones: low temperatures were given an ethical significance (courage, liberty, rationality), while the warm South was given another significance that is both humbling and demeaning. It was associated with cowardice, lethargy, tameness.

Drawing on insights from postcolonial studies, Roberto Dainotto analysed how the “Occident” versus “Orient” paradigm was reoriented toward a far more disquieting antagonism: the enemy was located not only in the distant periphery, but also within Europe itself (Dainotto 55). The “diabolic alterity” was actually inside the borders, as the old “Orient” became the “Mediterranean South.” Therefore, all those repudiated characteristics were relocated and associated with the South, a place where atavistic instincts could triumph undisturbed. Even if the concept is relative in itself, the connotative distinction is curiously translated from the large to the small scale, as in many countries, the deficient internal Other is a southerner.

It all started when Montesquieu tried to demonstrate scientifically that populations have a specific disposition depending on climate, which is therefore able to influence national inclinations. The 18th-century baron undertook experiments on a sheep’s tongue, with the aim of discovering its reactions to changes in temperature: he observed that the papillae seemed to disappear when the tongue was exposed to cold; on the contrary, they rose again as he defrosted it. Assuming that papillae are the organ of taste, and extending them as representative of all senses, he deduced that pleasures must be correlated to climate. The colder the temperature, the smaller becomes the papilla – and the lesser is the ability to

taste and enjoy. Reversely, the warmer the environment gets, and the higher is the sensibility to pleasure (Montesquieu 476).

This theory had obviously anthropological and political implications, as it implied a natural relation between physical/climatological realities and forms of government. According to Montesquieu, in warm climates, where the urge for appetites is extreme, “despotic power generally prevails”; he continued: “more lively passions multiply crimes that will satisfy those same passions” (477). Heat enslaved people, made them indolent, feeble, vengeful, passive and unable to fight for their own freedom, depriving the body of vigour and strength. Their spirit cannot be curious and independent: it is the victory of self-interest, where the law of the strongest rules.

Contrarily, as Enrico Ferri assumed, northerners’ stubborn confrontation with an ungenerous weather, forces individuals to an endless intellectual and physical exercise; hence, the development of a robust character made them less artistic than the pleasure-seeking southerners, but stronger because they are made of iron.¹ With atrophied senses, the populations of the North are more energetic, courageous and naturally inclined to liberty. The pursuit of ethics and moral values is what drives them; the necessary cooperation leads to democracy, civility, progress. According to Ferri, it is no longer in the West, but in the climates of the North that peoples have few vices and many more virtues; and it is no longer in the East but in the countries of the South that an immoral barbaric stage persists (Dainotto 56-59).

The modern, latitudinal rhetoric of North and South has been recalled in 1800 by Madame de Staël, who tried to trace the influence of social institutions (religion, customs, law) on literature. According to her, there exist “two completely distinct literatures: those that come from the South and those that descent from the North. Those for which Homer is the first source, and those of which Ossian is the origin” (De Staël 203). Therefore, Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish, French literatures belong to the Southern literature; English, German, Scandinavian literatures to that of the North.

The history of Europe is nothing but the story of its development, its emancipation from the amoral South: “The peoples of the South . . . fiery tempers, easily duped, easily fanatical, suffered all the superstitions and crimes that reason ever suffered” (168). The North, then, was modernity, morality, the climax of a progress that defined Europe. The

¹ See *Delitti e Delinquenti nella Scienza e nella Vita*, by Enrico Ferri.

South constituted the past of that same Europe. And it is not by chance that the emergence of all the fears of the rational Northerners are represented in gothic novels set in the exotic South (as *The castle of Otranto*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, *The Monk*). The Mediterranean is perceived as a mysterious place inhabited by peculiar, superstitious people. In this sense, the dialectic of “North” versus “South” reflects the interior struggle of human psyche. The South was a frightening deviation or, put it differently, a repudiated, repressed past. As Dainotto asserts, ‘a modern European identity begins when the non-Europe is internalised – when the South, indeed, becomes the sufficient and indispensable internal Other: Europe, but also the negative part of it’ (Dainotto 4). Echoing Montesquieu, Madame de Staël laid the basis for later theories of a supposed southern backwardness and defective nationalism. She perceived the South as the dawn of civility, but it remained stuck there, static, without any evolution.

So far, therefore, the vast majority of traditional imaginaries saw the Otherness as representative of reprehensible characteristics. The Southerner, whether domesticated or condemned, was feared; a melting pot was never encouraged. What has been said and written for around three centuries is the product of what became a rhetorical unconscious, whose eradication - and overturning - was tough and tortuous.

A first encounter: Grand Tours

The Romantic odysseys towards Mediterranean destinations represent the desire to truly explore the Other, in a brand-new attitude free from religious or political interests. No territorial invasions, no imperialistic projects, no devout pilgrimages are involved this time. It is the first deliberately laic and disinterested encounter with the South. In the eighteenth century, the Grand Tour was considered a highly desirable part of the education of the European aristocracy – principally of the British Isles.

As the fashion for touring developed, young aristocrats, wealthy members of the middle-class and students were all encouraged to travel in order to increase their knowledge of literature and the arts, of ancient and modern history, of commerce and diplomacy; to widen their experience of music and theatre, local customs and folklore, and to become acquainted with cities and countries quite different from their own (De Seta 13). British travellers started then to draw up itineraries and establish the key destinations for their *cursus honorum*. Within a few years, the tours became so traditional as to be thought of as rites of passage for young English nobles. These particular trips, which combined the journey with

enthusiastic learning, were a fundamental experience for scions who aspired to play a leading role in society.

It all began with English Romanticism; born as a reaction to the modern rationalisation of nature, the movement emphasised the intense and pure emotions of the past. Rediscovering simple, authentic feelings, means travelling through our history, to the initial stages of human experience, to the dawn of civility. In an unstoppable industrial growth, a revival of classic uncontaminated forms was felt to be a necessity. According to the spirit of revaluation of ancient perfection, British artists started to feel the lure of the great lost Mediterranean civilizations: Greece and Italy. Byron, Keats and Shelley were particularly attracted to Greek mythology, enchanted by marvellous antiquities, seduced by those works of art and literature. Several poems are inspired by and devoted to ancient myths, marbles and texts. The renovated humanistic culture determined a particular privileged role for Italy. With its unique riches, the peninsula became the most prestigious destination of the Grand Tours.

British travellers' diaries, letters and poetries describe in detail Rome, Florence, Venice, Naples, but also country towns. Their reactions are dissimilar and may range from the vibrant charm derived from the sublime contemplation of the landscapes, to disillusion, anti-climax or limited, slow impressions; from biased, stereotyped depictions of peculiar people, to the disappointment of experiencing tyrannies, corruption, ignorance and poverty. Portraying a "ruined paradise," Romantic and Victorian artists admired the past and scorned the present. The fascinating scenery is often accompanied by a disturbing refrain: the intrusion of the local Italians of that time. In a letter dated 1818, Shelley depicts the country by using these words:

There are two Italies – one composed of the green earth and transparent sea, and the mighty ruins of ancient time, and aerial mountains, and the warm and radiant atmosphere . . . The other consists of the Italians of the present day, their works and ways. The one is the most sublime and lovely contemplation that can be conceived by the imagination of man; the other is the most degraded, disgusting, and odious (Shelley 1964).

What strikes Shelley the most is the submissiveness and passive compliance of the modern Italians, who are unregenerate, unreceptive, and their temper is not strong enough to even

realise an existing injustice. Therefore, Shelley seems to agree with Montesquieu. Italians are seen as incapable of fighting for their own freedom from exploiter foreign kings.

Nevertheless, we can infer the beginning of a subtle empathy with southern people, to even a sort of encouragement, incitement to rebel. In *Ode to Naples*, Shelley celebrates the city incessantly pervaded by a latent though perceivable spirit of the past, that moves the autumnal leaves (Shelley 219). In the background, are the mesmerising slumberous voice of the mountain and the thrilling “oracular thunder” (6). The inner tension is highly perceivable; the situation is static, but at any moment the lava of Vesuvius could penetrate the sky and the sea, the “two heavens of azure” (11). The overall impression is an enchanted atmosphere, lost and immobile in time and space, cradled by a lullaby as in a spell. But one day the mutinous air and the sleeping strength will set Naples free: the city, ‘Heart of men’ (52), cannot be imprisoned for too long. He then adds: “With thine harmonizing ardours fill and raise thy sons, as o’er the prone horizon thy lamp feeds every twilight wave with fire! Be man’s high hope and unextinct desire” (82-85); maybe pre-evoking the forthcoming Risorgimento, Shelley wishes a liberation. Naples will be eventually free, “If hope, and truth and justice can avail” (64). The same pulsating, unseen presence of nature is invoked in the renowned *Ode to the West Wind*, composed in Florence (160). The poem is a vibrant call for a political and moral insurrection: fire and wind, which are “destroyer and preserver” (14) at the same time, must provide the necessary shock that prelude a profound change. The not so far spring is a prophecy for death and rebirth.

The numerous contradictions of past and present, landscape and people, ideal place and real place are all described by the pen of the British travellers; it is in the mirror of the Grand Tour that Italy can find self-awareness. And perhaps a foreigner is able to depict reality much more accurately. At the time, historical and topographical interests developed.

In a journey to the South, Charles Dickens portrays *Pictures from Italy* like impressionist paintings. The English author wrote an account of his extended stay in the peninsula during 1844 and 1845, as a break from novel writing. The recreations of the moments and locations emerged are all filtered through his own personality – at times exuberant, at others caught in a kind of melancholy reverie. He presents his mind as an open screen which receives impressions. Dickens is an observer who walks through the local streets and records every visual experience offered. The country is a chaotic magic-lantern show; he is the fascinated spectator in pursuit of new sensations (Flint, VII). His Italy is made up of violent contrasts. Genoa is “picturesque, ugly, mean, magnificent, delightful,

and offensive”; the city is a “phantasmagoria, with all the inconsistency of a dream . . . an extravagant fantasy” (Dickens 38-40). Venice gives the same hallucinogenic, unreal impression, with its phantom streets/canals and gothic buildings.

The capital inspires controversial feelings. Here, miserable streets are juxtaposed to glittery silver fountains, rich churches to poor, dirty beggars. The architecture probably disappointed him – “It looked like LONDON! . . . with towers, and steeples rising up into the sky, and high above them all, one Dome” (115); however, it is in the Eternal City that Dickens can awake his senses. The power of Rome’s Carnival excited him and this abandon is felt as perfect, contagious, irresistible. For a while, he identifies with Italians and their cheerful energy.

Naples is a city of “rags, puppets, flowers, brightness, dirt, and universal degradation” (177); he is fascinated by the potential destructive energy in the volcano, but intimidated at the same time by the dormant force of violence and vengeance, which reflects the population as well. Like Shelley, Dickens sees Vesuvius as “the doom and destiny of all this beautiful country” (171).

The author goes beyond the stance of the solipsistic or passively receptive tourist, interrogating the overlay of past and present. Inebriated by the aesthetic pleasures that Italy has to offer, Dickens insists on a persistent political cruelty. He is truly sensitive about the injustices and persecutions of contemporary Italy. The book terminates with an extraordinary note of optimism, especially for the people.

Let us part from Italy . . . in our tenderness towards a people, naturally well-disposed, and patient, and sweet-tempered. Years of neglect, oppression, and misrule, have been at work, to change their nature and reduce their spirit; miserable jealousies, fomented by petty Princes to whom union was destruction, and division strength, have been a canker at their root of nationality, and have barbarized their language; but the good that was in them ever, is in them yet, and a noble people may be, one day, raised up from these ashes. Let us entertain that hope!

Italy has the same “wrecked glory” and “immaculate charm” that Byron had described in *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*:

[In] every fragment of her fallen Temples, and every stone of her deserted palaces and prisons, she helps to inculcate the lesson that the wheel of Time is rolling for an

end, and that the world is, in all great essentials, better, gentler, more forbearing, and more hopeful, as it rolls! (187)

In a few years, the privileged wandering community evolves towards touristic trends, searching for *otium litteratum* combined with the benefits of travel and acquaintance with peoples. From aristocratic origins and the permutations of romantic travel, to the age of tourism. This last stage of the cultural encounter determined a final, destabilising sense of belonging. If Romantics loved to identify narcissistically with the gods and heroes of a mythical past, now a new empathy with the manhandled Southerners emerges.

Modern odysseys: reevaluating the South

While living in Italy, the English writers realised that British laws, literature, religion and arts, have their roots in the Mediterranean. Therefore, they recognised themselves in the supposed alterity. Beginning with Romantic poets, a certain sense of appropriateness arises. Not only do the Northerners become aware that their own culture originated in the South; they also started to realise that they lost something in their so-called progress. They were forced to renounce a primordial authenticity, the truthfulness of feelings that makes them humans.

A critical evolution may be observed: from a detached or biased description of Otherness – and its consequent reduction to a spectacle – to the complete identification with it. The Mediterranean is an archetype repressed for too long; it violently needs to come to light, dragged by an impetuous wind, or like lava from a volcano. After all, in those years, Freud was revealing to the world the existence of the unconscious. The shift in perspective is magnificently represented in *A Room with a View*, by E. M. Forster. Lucy's experience in Italy has a central significance: she gained a broader view – of Florence, of art, of life – capable of capturing the essence of an age of transition, not only on a historical scale but also in individual terms (Jones, XXVII).

The beginning of the novel is entirely dominated by frustration; the protagonist is disappointed by her sojourn in the Pensione Bertolini, which provided an annoying, typical English atmosphere. British guests, a hostess with a Cockney accent, and no Arno view, result in Lucy Honeychurch's entrapment in a little tourist bubble. She is disappointed by a familiar reality, maybe similar and comfortable, but surely not attractive. We may say that northerners are slowly abandoning their fears; now they do want to explore the Other. *A*

Room with a View is a romantic comedy about two countries, representing two perspectives and two generations: constrained, old-fashioned, respectable England and a spontaneous, carefree, brightly lit Italy (Bradbury XVI). Among the characters, three figures of intersection mediate between the two worlds, helping Lucy's transformation.

First of all, Miss Eleanor Lavish: novelist and self-proclaimed seeker of true Italy's essence. She is self-confessedly a free spirit untrammelled by conventions; her intention is to break with the traditions, refusing every guideline. For this reason, she will emancipate Lucy from what Forster defined "the orthodox of Baedeker-bestarred Italy" (Furbank 85). These handy guidebooks plotted the itineraries, determined the sights, explained the frescoes and emphasised the right cultural values; peculiar entries were included, like "begging" – described as "a national nuisance" – and "hygiene." To reject a traditional "rule book," which gives instructions and tells the readers how to behave, means embracing improvisation, the spontaneous, unexpected elements of a real life.

These volumes depict a world of mores and social conventions that are shaped by the weight of Victorian principles; the reformist characters are clearly chasing a freer life, a more open experience, a new passionate intensity (Bradbury XVI). And, in fact, when Lucy loses her way to Santa Croce, "the pernicious charm of Italy began to work on her, and, instead of acquiring information, she began to be happy" (Forster 19). Open to physical sensations, she is transfigured by the South. Miss Lavish likes defining her a "student of human nature", rather than a simple tourist. The novelist and Mr. Eager criticise British tourism harshly. Travellers just transfer "like a parcel of goods," "quite unconscious of anything that is outside Baedeker", living with the "anxiety to get done or through and go somewhere else" (56). However, even if Miss Lavish declares to abandon this perspective, she still brings her western views on the "exotic Otherness"; for instance, she shouts: "A smell! A true Florentine smell! . . . One doesn't come to Italy for niceness; one comes for life." Therefore, she is curious to explore and discover, but still remaining in her comfortable, predictable mind-set, which see alterity as a "freak show."

Another decisive guest of the Pensione is Reverend Beebe. He will be a mediator in every sense, by bridging the communication gap with the Emersons and between the Italians and the English. Miss Bartlett, Lucy's restrained chaperon, sees as outrageous the offer to exchange rooms proposed by Emerson; on the contrary, for him, it was just simple and spontaneous. Mr. Beebe wisely admits: "It is so difficult to understand people who speak the truth" (8). Later, he will recognise that Lucy expresses her true self most effectively in

music, observing that “if Miss Honeychurch ever takes to live as she plays, it will be very exciting – both for us and for her” (34). And again: “Does it seem reasonable that she should play so wonderfully, and live so quietly? I suspect that one day she will be wonderful in both” (86). Mr. Beebe, then, encourages Lucy to be free to pursue her passions, and, finally, “mingle life with music.” Finally, George Emerson, the younger of the two strange visitors, is himself a sort of Otherness. Audacious, bold, impertinent, indiscreet, impulsive, the boy represents a serious challenge to “over-civilisation”; with this term, I refer to the restraint and censorship of intimate desires because of the progress of civilisation. It is the northerners’ superimposition of “culture” over “nature,” paradigms over life: the “Victorian victory” of Super-Ego over id.

George gives up his room because he does not want to observe from a distance: he wishes to be immersed, experience life and identify with others. He is the voice of nature, primordial freedom. On the contrary, Cecil, the other suitor, represents the voice of civility, always portrayed in rooms. The scene in Piazza della Signoria is a crucial one. Lucy witnesses a violent murder and faints, then George picks her up. This is the climax of the change: the process must be painful. Lucy crumples because of her overwhelming feelings, impossible to rationalise; paradoxically, awaking the senses requires losing them. The blood of the victim that pervades the postcards – rejected by George – is then the imposition of carnal life over a fake copy of reality, the interfusion of the real with the unreal. In this sense, George is very similar to those southerners, who are here reevaluated; they are holders of an atavistic connection to nature, showing a free behaviour and unbound expression of feelings. In short, they can afford to be authentic.

Forster’s trademark words perfectly describe this situation; the ‘wondrous muddle’ is the union of contrasts, knowing that a meaningful life involves complexity and contradiction between duty and pleasure. After an existence of lies (see the numerous chapters named ‘Lying to George, Cecil, Beebe, Emerson’, and so on), in the end Lucy finally embraces her own truth. The South, then, helped her reveal her Self, which she could find only by losing her way, diverting on a different path. And this trail cannot be defined by any Baedeker. Southerners, then, are now even envied, because of their free, real authenticity.

A Room with a View may have a double interpretation. It can be seen as a Bildungsroman, because Lucy unfetters from her family’s castrating expectations, finding her own independence and sexual freedom: ultimately, she becomes an adult. Nevertheless,

the novel promotes the returning to a primordial stage, reevaluating the spontaneity typical of infancy, a pure age, free from hypocritical social conventions.

Conclusion

The two works of literature analysed show, in part, how the British impressions of the South changed over the centuries. Ultimately, this is the history of Europe dealing with the hostility/hospitality toward its internal and external “others.”

Initially, we had a clear distinction between the North and the South, built on incompatible characteristics. Northerners had conceptualised two conflicting worlds, so that the Otherness could only be either demonised or Occidentalised. Southerners were wild barbarians, who deserve to be slaves. Some fears started to be overcome with the first Grand Tours towards Mediterranean locations. In the mid-eighteenth century, a new pan-European consciousness arose with the observation that religion, arts, and philosophy have come from the shores of the Mediterranean. This represents a crack in the traditional dichotomy, as well as a change in perspective.

A distinct recognition of merits and virtues of the South emerges; after all, there is the cradle of civilisation, the place where everything originated. Travelling to the Mediterranean, then, means exploring the past: it is a journey backwards in time, digging up the unconscious, towards the deepest atavistic passions repressed by the progress of civility and rational adulthood.

In the course of history, we notice that literature has invented many different immortal characters. Othello could embody the prototype of the first mind-set; he is a Southerner, but with all the convenient characteristics of the northerners – being a faithful Christian and courageous warrior. His Otherness is “civilised.” Three centuries later, George Emerson is the exact antipode. He is a Northerner with desirable southern characteristics – spontaneity, carefreeness, sensibility. Figures of overlay and hybridity are now celebrated: individuals, just like the Mediterranean Sea, are a muddle of voices and conflicting impulses. The Spirit of the South deserves a reevaluation, because of its central meaning to human experience.

Franco Cassano, an Italian sociologist, responded to the traditional literature by restoring the “Southern Thought” integrity.² Firstly, he gives a value to the ill-famed

² See *Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean* by Franco Cassano.

“slowness”; some dimensions of experience (namely, love and knowledge) are only possible through time and patience. Northern societies are obsessed with obtaining a profit and an immediate gratification. The South does not need to catch up with the North. On the contrary, it teaches that a real maturation of the most durable, true feelings is only possible through slowness. More significantly, Cassano reveals the most important metaphorical lesson of the Spirit of the South. He asserted that the Mediterranean is not extraneous to modernity, since moderation triumphs in it. European identity is built on contrasts, contraposition, polarisation, and the South more than anything is a polyphony of different melodies, which all contributes to the harmony of its soul. As he noticed, the idea of mediation is contained in the very name: uniting and dividing, the communal sea that lies between lands holds a cultural and political programme (142).

The Mediterranean is a border and an interface for many peoples; it has always interweaved languages, faiths, cultures. Therefore, not only is the South used to Otherness, but it is indeed made up of Otherness, since time immemorial. And this fruitful diversity is our fortune, since it allowed the rise of scientific, intellectual, religious, political, and artistic activities around these shores. Thus, Southern thought is not the expression of a sole voice, but rather the re-conciliation between alterities, refusing fundamentalisms. This does not imply denying uniqueness, burning roots; rather, renewing them through the encounter with the Other. After all, as Cassano stated, “today more than ever, the world requires that future chapters be written together, drawn from different form of knowledge and wisdom” (153).

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