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6. THALASSIC LESSONS

Pedagogical aesthetics and the Mediterranean

At night by the sea, the desolate sea,
Doth a young man stand,
His head full of doubt, his heart full of anguish,
And with livid lips he questions the billows:

— Heinrich Heine (1948, *The North Sea*. Second Cycle. §VII Questions)

You could at least oblige
in my struggling rhythm
some of your ramble;
given that you could match
your voices, with my stammering talk:

— Eugenio Montale (1990, *Mediterraneo*. §VIII)

With some trepidation the poets plead to their sea. Their only hope is that the sea—the *thalassa*—offers a lesson. This expectation exudes a sense of liturgy and sacrifice. Not unlike a presbyter, the poet's ritual seeks to mediate the world with the myriad singular experiences that make it.

Heinrich Heine demands an answer from the North Sea by recalling the gods of Hellas in an effort to resurrect its ability to conjoin death with life. He is the presbyter who demands most. In contrast, in the presence of *his* sea, Montale sees himself as a mere mortal. He could only engage in a strange rhythm as he carefully traces back his upbringing along the Mediterranean coast. In the cycle of poems *Mediterraneo* Montale-the-poet encounters the limits of Montale-the-man. His liturgy happens every day, as it struggles with his poetic craft, looking for appropriate words that would somehow represent his bewildered sense of loss, fear and desolation as an individual. Overwhelmed by a presence that far exceeds what the brain thinks or his voice could utter, Montale-the-man is reconciled with Montale-the-poet by surrendering in a “struggling rhythm” to the limits of what the rest of his senses could feel, taste and hear in a sea that portends the weight of universality.

While Heine enthusiastically hails the North Sea with: “Thalatta! Thalatta! | I hail thee, O Sea, thou Ancient of Days! (...) Homestead-desiring, calamity-

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mastering, | World-renowned bold Grecian hearts” (Heine 1948, §I), Montale feels deeply restrained. He calls upon the Mediterranean, looking up to the sea as an exiled prodigal son who, upon returning to his father, would state: “Thus, father, from your restraint | one avows, upon seeing you, to a severe law” (Montale 1990, *Mediterraneo*, §IV). In Heine’s and Montale’s respective odes to their seas one senses a contrast of liturgies that speak to different communities, ambitions and world-views.

VANTAGE POINTS

The recourse to a poetic construct—as an assumption of *representation*, or *mythos*—confirms how the only way to communicate with the sea must take several steps back. Art hesitates to presume any form of direct communication. It casts doubt on the efficacy of the *word* as some sort of universal *logos* on which everything is founded. The poets’ questions are real, but on one condition. They remain mediated by a number of mimetic forms that gain us all a reasonably practical aesthetic vantage point. This is how art, as a sacrificial (mediating) process projects our singular experiences into a universal semblance that we all read, but which we assume, interpret and enact differently.

Pedagogically speaking, an *aesthetic* vantage point is both pragmatic and critical. It is pragmatic because we know that knowledge is never assumed or given even when it appears to be grasped before any experience (hence our need to pose it *a priori* as if to say that we have an ability to assume what we do not yet know). It is critical, because the experience that we invoke (and from which we claim to *learn*) is never a matter of mechanistic acquisition or incremental wisdom. Knowledge is anticipated by the myriad mistakes, delusions and desires that continuously prompt us to seek it, and ultimately the arts continue to confirm that we can only learn through unlearning (See Baldacchino 2013a; 2013b).

Such a vantage point is aesthetic because the artistic-pedagogical forms by which we deem it as *reasonably practical* often have no choice but to assume an artistic structure. They cannot be otherwise because then they would be something else and would demand different procedures that may or may not fall within what Lukács calls art’s “special ‘world’” (Lukács 1971, p. 180). Yet without expecting to feel or express more than we can afford to be or understand, we must also bear in mind that all that these artistic forms could afford us are those ways by which we express and feel what we encounter in our everyday life as a *necessarily contingent* reality.

In the context of an essay that builds its argument around Mediterranean narratives, one cannot avoid the question: Is this aesthetic vantage point exclusive to the sea of the Mediterranean peoples? Although, like everyone else, the Mediterraneans (i.e. the peoples of the Mediterranean) tend to express divergent notions of “identity” that are expressly linked to their common sea, these expressions and convictions remain strictly geo-politically positioned. Furthermore, like any narrative of identity this divergent span of imaginaries ranges from inclusive to exclusive statements of nationality, culture, ethnicity, faith, politics, etc. In view of such boundaries, any pedagogical argument that is

linked to forms of aesthetic identity must also carry the responsibility of transcending the parochial traps to which any discourse on identity remains prone.

“THIS ‘INLAND SEA’ OF IDEALS”

This might begin to explain the urge to create a realm of autonomous forms that are identified with the Mediterranean region and its fluctuating populations. Such an urge would only signify a means of projecting what we cannot understand, rather than what Mediterraneans think is *theirs* by dint of the gods of the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Hellenes, Romans, Christians, Jews or Muslims. In other words, the assumption of a Mediterranean identity reflects a constructivist need that is somehow posed as a form of redemption (hence the poetics of sacrifice and the liturgy as forms of artistic mediation), when in effect such a hope is doomed from the start—which is where the stories that we tell about the Mediterranean find both their origin and assert their need to keep returning in various guises. As Nietzsche famously declares in full poetic jest in *The Gay Science*:

Anyone whose soul thirsts to experience the whole range of previous values and aspirations, to sail around all the coasts of this ‘inland sea’ (*Mittelmeer* [Mediterranean]) of ideals, anyone who wants to know from the adventures of his own experience how it feels to be the discoverer or conqueror of an ideal, or to be an artist, a saint, a lawmaker, a sage, a pious man, a soothsayer, an old-style divine loner — any such person needs one thing above all — *the great health*, a health that one doesn’t only have, but also acquires continually and must acquire because one gives it up again and again, and must give it up! (Nietzsche 2001, p. 246)

The claimants to the Mediterranean narrative often miss what in actual fact continues to terrify them. Nietzsche’s is a call for sacrifice, as he recognises the imaginary that lies behind the image of an inner sea and how “the great health” of such an ideal image comes from giving it up, “again and again”. The ominous nature of the Mediterranean is found in the ruse of its histories; histories that are continuously spun by those who consider themselves as citizens of an *epic* space where heroes, saints, crusaders and corsairs, have ruthlessly indulged in the delusional *tragedy* of the Whole. This “‘inland sea’ of ideals” could only presume a degree of universality insofar as it reflects a stage where our epistemological horizon remains limited to what is possibly known at the time.

This is not because the Mediterranean is a unique geographical experience of pluralities that somehow offer a synthesis to a forced or willed dialectic of *otherness*. On the contrary, it is because the Mediterranean offers a conveniently closed but a vast enough space that remains relational in the minds of those who inhabit it, and whose construction of time is often rendered irrelevant. There is nothing unique about a geographical space that has and continues to accumulate so much representational capital by which too much power has been wrenched and millions of individuals have been slaughtered in the name of one myth or another.

As we reverse the language of myth by understanding its pragmatic truths, we must also bear in mind that in their forms of representation, artists seek to *construct*

(by way of *mimicking*) the deception of a *total* reality. The craving for the whole may be explained by the need to surpass the limits found in the sheer physicality of a geographic space like the Mediterranean. However, as we have seen in the poet's question, the whole comes to represent a deadly presence. Thus on our behalf, the poet has no choice but to conceal our fear of mortality and surrenders to this presence by listening to the Mediterranean's thalassic lessons.

In the sea caves
for whole days I gazed into your eyes
and I didn't know you nor did you know me (Seferis 1995, p. 100).

The sea may seem benign to those who celebrate its blue skies and clear waters. But this is an Odyssean ruse that leads to the deep scars of war, the dark pits of genocide, and the tragedy of the refugee who dares its deadly currents in pursuit of a better life elsewhere. There is nothing benign in the Mediterranean, just as there is nothing quaintly true or ideally good in the poetic beauty bestowed on the epic battles by which Homer and Virgil depict the rise and fall of the "great" narratives on which we sustain our political dystopias and by which we adorn the façades of power in our cities. In such narratives we quickly assume a "birthright", claiming to be the descendants of the Greek *polis*, the recipients of Roman Law and the diligent students of *paedeia* as an uninterrupted lineage where, in our legal-democratic fantasies, we dream of an education of women and men that somehow satiates humanity's thirsty questions.

In these claims one finds a pedagogical aesthetic that constructs a series of historical myths by way of an opportunity to re-write what was shaped in our own self-serving political image. For better or worse, the Mediterranean becomes a vast canvas on which we paint and impose our bodies as images of a world that serve as an excuse for our excess. Likewise, within the identifiable parameters of this ecological polity we try to lodge specific forms of representation (and therefore power) that makes us dependent on a socio-economic palliative by which we take comfort in the collective bourgeois ambition of our Greco-Roman law.

By the reaffirmation of such forms of representation, we assume that learning would somehow represent a way by which we seamlessly move from the legislative grounds on which we have tailored our myths, to a spatial reality that is inhabited at will in the image of a perennially extended agora. In this pedagogical spectacle we often presume that the history of education is schooled in the political spaces of *anamnesis*, *praxis* and *phronesis* where we freely recollect, critically act, and intelligently construe the habits of our minds. By this we pretend to remember a world of origins. We heed to the ancients, convincing ourselves that we have always inhabited a space of forms that would somehow absolve us from our sinful existence.

As we realise that myth is only another tier of signification that is far more ironic than irenic, and which affords no politics of heavenly bliss, we panic and resort to the State asking for its violent protection against the foreigner, the immigrant, the barbarian, or anyone who appears to be invading this sea of ours from distant lands and alien cultures.

Why did our emperor get up so early,
 and why is he sitting at the city's main gate
 on his throne, in state, wearing the crown?
 Because the barbarians are coming today
 (Cavafy 1992, p. 18)

DOING, UNDERGOING AND LIVING DELIBERATELY

The arts confirm that we cannot speak of the event of learning without recognizing the primacy of unlearning. I do not regard unlearning as a mechanistic reversal or rejection of what one learns, but as a relational act that comes to terms with what Dewey sees as our doing's relationship with what we undergo. "Experience is limited by all the causes which interfere with perception of the relations between undergoing and doing," says Dewey. "There may be interference because of excess on the side of doing or of excess on the side of receptivity, of undergoing. Unbalance on either side blurs the perception of relations and leaves the experience partial and distorted, with scant or false meaning" (Dewey 2005, p. 46).

Anamnesis, *praxis* and *phronesis* are only terms adorning a narrative we seek to construct for ourselves in order to make sense of the limits that historical contingency throws at us. But the value of contingency will be blurred unless we understand its relational quality in terms of how we experience doing and undergoing. Here we are not dealing with a dualism between acting and receiving as a sort of suspended notion of experience. To be conscious of contingency is to have a pragmatic understanding of experience as being relational (without, however, falling foul of simplistic relativism). Viewing this from an aesthetic vantage point, we begin to understand how unlearning is an articulation of the relational quality of our contingent experiences.

Unlearning also reveals that any pedagogical narrative that we might construct out of a geographical location for the sake of a presumed historical absolute (as we often do with the idea of a Mediterranean *oneness*) cannot suit our self-fulfilling prophecies.

In terms of what Alfred Schutz (1970) and later Maxine Greene (1977; 1978; ND) call a *wide-awakeness*, we are urged to reflect on the extents of what a pedagogical aesthetics could represent as a practice that reflects what it appears to say and as a ground on which we build what we presume to do and to be. Discussing wide-awakeness as an argument for the arts and humanities, and in reference to Thoreau's *Walden*, Greene argues that "The point of this kind of writing is not simply to describe one man's experiment with living in the woods; it is to move others to elevate their lives by a 'conscious endeavor,' to arouse others to discover—each in his or her own terms—what it would mean to 'live deliberately'" (Greene 1977, p. 120)

If, as we are proposing here, wide-awakeness is read in terms of pedagogical aesthetics (which is broadly what Greene has done in most of her work [see Baldacchino 2008]), and if we were to assume a plural identity such as the Mediterranean's as a possible horizon for this kind of approach, then we have a task that goes beyond the limits of a politics of identity. More specifically we

would need to explore and ultimately explain what, if any, are the thalassic lessons—the lessons of the sea—that the *Mediterranean* as an aesthetic and pedagogical narrative might represent.

This would invariably lead to a wide-awakeness by which we seek to live deliberately. Before citing Thoreau, Greene approaches Schutz's concept of wide-awakeness by offering a commentary on Kierkegaard's authorial decision to refuse to simply engage in simplistic benefaction or philanthropy, and instead make things harder for people. Greene explains how for Kierkegaard, "human reality—the lived reality—could only be understood as a difficult, indeed a dreadful freedom. To make things harder for people meant awakening them to their freedom" (Greene 1977, pp. 119-120). The concept of deliberate living emerging from Thoreau's partial exiting from an agreeably human world begins to make sense vis-à-vis an awakening towards freedom.

Discussing Schutz, Greene makes a bold statement: "My argument, as has been suggested, has to do with *wide-awakeness* not with the glowing abstractions—the True, the Beautiful, and the Good. Like Nick Henry in Ernest Hemingway's *Farewell to Arms*, I am embarrassed by 'Abstract words such as glory, honour, courage, or hallow ...' Wide-awakeness has a concreteness; it is related, as the philosopher Alfred Schutz suggests, to being in the world" (1977, p. 120-121).

Schutz's concept of wide-awakeness can be summed up as a heightened state of consciousness. He defines it as "a plane of consciousness of highest tension" (1970, p. 69). One might add that the interventions we make in the world by such a plane of consciousness are not simple acts of doing or receiving. Though I am not aware of any specific connection made by Schutz between his concept of wide-awakeness and Dewey's discussion of the relationship between doing and undergoing, one could argue that a heightened state of conscious experience cannot avoid bringing to the discussion a criticality that would have to contextualise this relationship.

CULTURE, REVOLT AND COLONISED ECONOMIES

The current political and socio-economic developments around the Mediterranean more than suggest a heightened state of consciousness. To start with we are still trying to make sense of what North Africa's inauguration of the so-called Arab Spring really means and what lies in store for these new republics. On the other hand, in almost all Southern European countries we keep witnessing massive acts of protest and resistance that are clearly rejecting what many would regard as the imposition of political economic homogeneity, which, some would argue, is not short of a new form of colonization. If we can call the Arab Spring and the Southern European protests moments of wide-awakeness, these events must be recognised in diversity and divergence. Some of these narratives of revolt may enjoy expressed forms of consensus and agreement within diverse groups. However, we are increasingly witnessing violent confrontations that erupt between factions and groups that a few months ago, fought side by side against a common enemy.

Tracing back what brings a diversity of groups and individuals together in the first place, one finds a common will, which could be perceived as a desire to live deliberately—although when one begins to qualify what this means, it appears to sustain opposite meanings that often belong to specific ideologies or faiths. Examples are found in the violent clashes between Christian and Muslim communities in post-Mubarak Egypt, and in tribal clashes in the new Libyan republic. (As I finalise this essay we are witnessing this kind of crisis in Egypt, which some commentators, rightly or wrongly, regard as the making of civil war). Be that as it may, when such signs of deliberate living begin to surface on the horizon of the politics of aesthetics, then the formative sensibilities by which we all learn how to survive the chaos of revolt gain an even higher priority in the order of commonplace necessities, wherever they come from and however we define them.

Yet, as the Mediterranean context is laden by so many divergent histories, any pedagogical assumption that we might take to explain or legitimise our diverse ambitions to ‘live deliberately’, is implicitly conditioned by external perceptions which interfere and blur the relational character of our cultural, formative and aesthetic experiences. As we do and undergo the political struggle by which we want to lay claim to our freedom, we increasingly become actors on a stage that has to confront increasing interference both from within as well as beyond its walls.

An immediate interference that comes to mind is the stereotypification of those Mediterranean economies that, as we speak, are constantly denounced as inefficient and often corrupt by their northern European partners. This manipulative form of blurring is not so different from the romanticised colonial discourses that depicted the Mediterranean as a ground of exotic divergence bursting with orientalist expressions of liminality. Those who spoke on behalf of Empire (and these included both the colonisers and many of those who were colonised) somehow presumed a culture whose “simple” expectations deliberately signalled a willingness to “receive” colonisation. There has always been a displaced assumption that the colonised somehow harboured a degree of admiration towards countries and cultures that appeared more powerful than theirs.

Sadly such constructs of cultural submission attracted more disdain than gratitude from the part of the colonisers. The racist typification of the “lazy Arab”, or the dubious “Greek bearing gifts”, the “dark faced” Turk kidnapping “our” virgins, the laid-back Italian, or the procrastinating Spaniard, not to forget the denigration of “the Jew” and the historic lineage of anti-Semitism ... all sound like echoes from a distant colonial past. However when one hears commentators accusing southern Europeans as being incapable of running their economies in the light of the most recent economic crisis, what often qualifies this argument resorts to these very same colonial concepts, albeit differently worded.

Any middle school pupil coming from countries with a colonial past would recognise this discourse in their own formative years. Those who were born before or immediately after the periods of independence in the 1950s and 1960s would in all probability have been schooled on textbooks that inculcated them in such cultural hierarchies. As Leila Ahmed recalls in *A Border Passage*:

When I began to look in my academic work at issues of colonialism and began to unmask the colonialist perspectives and racism embedded in texts on Arabs and on the colonized, steeping myself in writings on internalized colonialism, I began to realize that it was not only in texts that these hidden messages were inscribed but that they were there, too, in my childhood and in the very roots of my consciousness (Ahmed 1999, p. 25).

Some would say that even now, in what is often deemed to be a post-colonialist context, the same latent acceptance of Empire is being covertly constructed from under the ashes left behind the Arab Spring, while the economies in southern Europe become increasingly dependent on the might of the political homogeneity imposed by their northern counterparts.

It seems that one of the lessons that the Mediterranean proffers is that colonialism continues to revive itself under the guise of the same impersonal homogeneity which Kierkegaard wanted to reject in his retorting to “make life more difficult” for people. The ironic pedagogical suggestion made by Kierkegaard goes to reveal how any talk of pedagogical aesthetics must have a non-identitarian edge that bears the methods of indirect communication (See Poole 1993). Another thalassic lesson would begin to explain how the elites of yesteryear have continued to reinforce a language of homogeneity. This is a language that the Mediterranean publics must resist by preserving their right to autonomous thought and living. Tragically, however, within such publics there are those who are adopting the myth of homogeneity as a reactionary discourse against immigrants and refugees whom they see as “invaders” from the East and the South.

Somehow, what we are witnessing in the Mediterranean is an imposed struggle between (i) the accusation over a perceived chaos of non-structures by which the South has always been distorted and “celebrated” by colonialists and colonised alike as an easy territory to be taken and used; and (ii) an enforced myth of order and structure, presented by “other” polities as a redemptive narrative which willingly imposes itself as the final teacher and arbiter of an economy of deliverance. Yet this latently structuralist imposition fails to recall what Sartre once remarked; that “structures are created by activity which has no structure, but suffers its result as a structure” (Sartre 2008, p. 55).

To this effect, what appears to be the myth of a homogeneous structured discipline imposed on the so-called “undisciplined” Mediterranean cultures and markets, is only reinforcing the hegemonic chaos of a political economy that in the first place went out of hand while sustaining the fallacy of a presumed rational order. It gets worse when the same publics who have been colonised on such cultural and economic pretexts are now speaking like their past masters when it comes to those whom they see as foreign or even barbarian and on whom they look down with disdain.

AN AESTHETIC SENSE OF BELONGING

If we are to make some sense of the notion of a Mediterranean pedagogical aesthetics it must be distanced from the political convenience that comes with the

internalised histories of colonial narratives. Conversely, one could argue that *Mediterraneity* as a notion of deliberate living based on autonomous communities of doing and undergoing, could denote a form of resistance to the same histories by which Mediterraneans and non-Mediterraneans presume to have been educated, and of which they speak through what Barthes (1973) rightly defines as the language of myth, and therefore of empty signification.

Such communities of doing and undergoing are relational by dint of human experience and the ambitions that we all have towards living deliberately. In terms of the artistic and cultural histories of the Mediterranean, such communities take shape in the forms of identifiable concepts that are often shared across different cultures, creeds and philosophies. Narratives like those of nostalgia, journey and doubt tend to articulate forms of understanding that permeate several aesthetic experiences characterised by those who settled around North Africa, the Middle East, the Balkans and Southern Europe. Though such concepts are not exclusive to the Mediterranean region, they tend to shape its cultural and aesthetic imaginaries. This is what Abulafia identifies in how the inhabitants of opposing shores interact across the sea, and by which their plurality creates several constructs of the Mediterranean (see Abulafia 2005 p. 65ff).

The aesthetic imaginary which articulates this connectedness is evident in the myriad works of visual, performing, musical, literary and all forms of art that are identified with a Mediterranean “aesthetics” by will or attribution. Whether it has to do with Salvador Dalí’s work inspired by the shores of Port Lligat; Pablo Picasso’s 1937 sea paintings like *La Baignade* and *Femme assise sur la plage*; Ismail Shammout’s paintings of Palestinian women and children in a Suk adjoining a refugee camp; Umm Khalthum’s legendary performance of Ahmad Shafiq Kamel’s and Mohamed Abd El Wahab’s Arabic song *Enta Omri* and its newer renditions over so many decades, including that of contemporary popular Israeli singer Sarit Hadat; the performance of a Turkish *makam* that translates in Greek music through their shared Byzantine heritage ... in this wide aesthetic landscape one finds that way before any methodological concept of *rhizome* or *fold* were popularised, the horizon over which a Mediterranean aesthetic identity continues to perform itself, has retained continuity through the essentially *aporetic* nature of its artistic imaginaries.

Against this backdrop I see a Mediterranean pedagogical aesthetics as having a dual role. The first takes that of a critical gadfly—call it Socratic if you like—that continuously questions the historical constructs of *Mediterraneity* by way of recollection and forgetfulness, discovery and error. The second role awakens us to the pragmatic expression of a quasi-space of paradoxical possibilities, where as a third order that cannot be rendered into word or representation, this adopts the undefined nature of a *khôra* as a ‘space’ that moves away from the dyadic perimeters of word and representation. Both criticality and the third genre of the *khôra* (Derrida 1993; Plato 1989) provide a passage through the questionable notions of political and aesthetic identities by which the Mediterranean’s histories are told, written, painted and performed throughout the centuries.

The concept of *aesthetics*—and more specifically that of a *Mediterranean* aesthetic—represents a paradoxical terrain of ambiguities and challenges in terms

of how we could approach it. Fernand Braudel (1992; 2001) comprehensively discusses the Mediterranean in all its dimensions as a “vast presence”. Yet to be conscious of the paradox that this “vast presence” represents is to carry a heavy burden. Beyond the limits of ethnic pride or cultural-centrism the burden of being Mediterranean comes with the attempt to define what this “being” or “sense of belonging” really means.

“To belong” is an ambiguous statement. This ambiguity is, strangely enough, a source of inspiration to those who see themselves as being more than citizens of one closed Nation but indeed as part of a wider diversity of communities. However this sense of inspiration is more *desired* than *realised*. It is a projection. It comes from the assumption that ideals must exist in order to beat the contingency that in effect makes us what we are. So the notion of *belonging* must be handled with great care, because throughout history, *to belong* often meant to cast judgement on those who are perceived as *not belonging*.

While Mediterraneans continue to argue for a sense of *nóstos*—a homecoming, in the sense of returning to where one purportedly *belongs*—from where the idea of nostalgia becomes so poignant in the Mediterranean aesthetic imagination; this same nostalgic narrative is often qualified as an excuse for oppression. To journey through the notion of a Mediterranean aesthetic is to trek a path riddled with pitfalls, perils, contradictions, and unanswerable questions. It is like setting for oneself a never-ending research-question that could not be solved.

To use an old idealist distinction that came down to us from Eleatic philosophy one could say that the Mediterranean is *real* but it does not *exist*. In many cases the reality of the Mediterranean is found in one’s *being* Mediterranean rather than one’s being *in* the Mediterranean. Not unlike the estranged characters that one keeps encountering in Albert Camus’s novels, one’s sense of being is marked by peculiar absurdities that define what is meant by being one rather than another. The paradox of being Mediterranean could begin anywhere. This begins to make sense when one recognises his Mediterranean origins while living in New York, Melbourne, Toronto, London or Buenos Aires.

In effect, when we speak of a Mediterranean aesthetic we also speak of the domains within which a Mediterranean reality belongs to the human desire to *move* from one place to another with the intent of returning, one day, but not just yet. Rather than being located—rather than being *in* the Mediterranean—being Mediterranean implies the need to take a journey without having to arrive anywhere specific. Thus Naguib Mahfouz concludes his *Journey of Ibn Fattouma*:

The man agreed to undertake the task, so I made him a present of a hundred dinars and we recited together the opening chapter of the Quran to seal the agreement. After that, freeing myself of my misgivings, I made ready for the final adventure with unabated determination.

(...)

Will one day a further manuscript be found describing his last journey? Knowledge of all this lies with the Knower of what is unseen and of what is seen (Mahfouz 1992 p. 148).

The journey that we speak of in the Mediterranean desire to move is distinctly ambiguous. As the Alexandrian poet Konstantin Kavafis tells us, the destination is only an excuse that starts the journey (Cavafy 1992, p. 36). This implies that the journey is a way of living and being *in continuity* for which one does not desire to find an end, except of course, in that of journeying per se, which recalls what was cited earlier in Nietzsche's reference to "this 'inner sea' of ideals" in *The Gay Science* where, "health that one doesn't only have, but also acquires continually and must acquire because one gives it up again and again, and must give it up" (Nietzsche 2001, p. 246). This constructs an ever-changing sense of identity, where one might call oneself Maltese, Cypriot, Croatian, Turkish, Lebanese, Libyan, Sicilian, Corsican, Sardinian, Israeli, Palestinian, French, Egyptian, Syrian, or Spanish ... but where one can also consider herself as being Mediterranean, especially when the idea of the expanse of the journey becomes pressing.

FINDING "GAPS"

This pressing sense of definition is never sure of itself. Its desire is nowhere clear. Like other forms of desire it is full of anxiety and hope, guilt and pride, sorrow and euphoria. But in terms of the arts, this can never stop because it is entitled to the paradox that makes art what it is and which gives men and women a deep sense of autonomy.

In my book *Makings of the Sea, Journey Doubt and Nostalgia*, I begin to visit and revisit the several angles through which a possible notion of a Mediterranean aesthetics could make some sense, where—at least to me—this seems to come together through art's sense of autonomy. From George Seferis to Eugenio Montale, from Constantin Kavafis to Nikos Kazantzakis, from Federico Garcia Lorca to Luigi Pirandello and from Renato Guttuso to Salvador Dalí, I kept finding the same iteration of the ambiguous and the drift and tension between one's need to belong to reality and the sense of having to deal and engage with the contingencies of existence.

Admittedly this is common to all artists and the question that keeps nagging anyone who engages with Mediterranean artists is the lingering doubt that ultimately there is nothing distinctly different in what they do when compared to other 'non-Mediterranean' artists. Yet, the challenge remains because the assumption that one could term 'an aesthetic' that is bracketed within a region or a community tends to defy the transcendence by which the aesthetic imaginary itself allows us to defy the immediacy of existence.

Towards the end of *Makings of the Sea*, I have come to the conclusion that although an argument for a Mediterranean imaginary may well lead to *another* metanarrative, on a closer look the notion of a metanarrative always amounts to nonsense because of its inherently tautologous nature. In trying to elaborate a notion of Mediterranean aesthetics, the model of a metanarrative does not hold because any contradiction that sustains the critique of metanarratives relies on the performative character by which metanarratives remain self-referential. This basically neuters any notion of longevity or groundedness, and turns the very

notion of a metanarrative into a self-iterating statement (see Baldacchino 2010 p. 148ff).

This is why a Mediterranean aesthetic has no choice but to defy the idea of a metanarrative in principle. To say that there is a Mediterranean aesthetics is to assert that in effect there cannot be a specific Mediterranean aesthetic, or art, or sense of being. To argue that the latter is just another Hegelian ruse is to avoid the real question that lies at the root of the paradox that anyone engaging with the Mediterranean has to confront. When one looks at how the Mediterranean imaginary is characterised by the desire of constant journeying, one cannot accommodate the same concept within mere progressive systems without having to leave gaps or contracting oneself. If anything, this recalls Adorno (1991 p. 81), who in *Minima Moralia*, in a section he titles “Gaps”, he states that, “If a life fulfilled its vocation directly, it would miss it. Anyone who died old and in the consciousness of seemingly blameless success, would secretly be the model schoolboy who reels off all life’s stages without gaps or omissions, an invisible satchel on his back.”

The discourse of a Mediterranean *imaginary* implies the *gaps* that make the argument for it. While resisting the idea of constructing metanarratives (because, as we have seen, they lend themselves to nonsense) to talk about Mediterranean aesthetics is to talk about *being* Mediterranean while also *not being* Mediterranean—whether this implies living in a village in Cyprus, a city in Croatia, or on the shores of Gaza and Tel Aviv; or whether it is a claim that one makes from within a neighbourhood in Astoria in New York, St Albans in Melbourne, or where the journey has taken her.

As in the case of journeying, what matters here is not the actual destination of a distilled and elegant definition, but the journey, which in terms of aesthetics, is essentially a process in constant struggle with itself and others.

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