

Excerpts from the "Mediterranean breviary"
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BETWEEN LAND AND SEA...

Some day someone may classify coasts according to the ways in which they come together with the sea, that is, the places where their relations are stable and complete and where they are fragmentary and haphazard, the stretches where sea and land are at one with each other and where they bristle and always shall, the points where entry and access are possible and where no approach is tolerated. But how can anyone take so many forms and structures, so many groupings of land and vegetation, stone and light, so much resistance and concession and compress it into a system? The rocky headlands and reefy strands, pebbles and sand, straits more or less dangerous, inlets, creeks, and coves, caves and grottoes, fords and capes, cliffs, bluffs, and crags, precipices and promontories—we cannot dismiss them with concrete appellations; they need conceptual amplification, clarification. We need to explain, for example, why in one place masses of stone have remained whole and intact, while in another, though compositionally all but identical, they have fallen to pieces or been turned into detritus; how in one place they are smooth, flat slabs, while in another they have become boulders and crags, rough or blade-sharp. Epochs of prehistory, shifts and fissures in the earth, major rifts, rapprochements, and related phenomena, tectonic and architectonic, have left their imprints in the layers of rock. Certain sites—where the rock has completely crumbled or is decaying, where it has been stripped of all vegetation and crust, where its nerves and veins burst out on the surface—are literally dramatic...

Many people have written in memoirs of picking up pebbles, weighing them in their hand, and using them to draw pictures in the sand. Some see this as mere child's play, but adults do it as often as children. There must be more to it. Ancient sages and poets have celebrated the role of the Mediterranean in grinding pebbles smooth and sand fine...

SPREADING WAVES...

Of the sea and all that goes with it—its various states; the reflections of sky, sun, and clouds in it; the colors its bed takes on and the stones, sand, and algae along that bed; the dark and translucent patches on the coast; then farther out, the transitions between morning sea and evening sea, day sea and night sea, today's sea and the sea eternal (to which any number of terms might be added)—all Mediterraneans have something to say, something they deem of the utmost importance...

A KEY CHARACTER...

Waves play an important role in the dramaturgy of the sea, its scenes and peripeteias. They have many names, varying not only from one gulf to the next but also according to whether we view them from ship or shore and what we expect of them. They combine with adjectives (or, less commonly, other nouns), which are for the most part descriptive: regular or irregular, longitudinal or transversal; they are connected with high tide or low tide, with the surface or the depths; they are solitary, frequent, fortuitous, rolling, choppy, cyclical (experts claim that the cycles of some waves can be measured in terms of geologic periods). What matters most from the deck is their size; their strength; whether they hit flank, bow, or stern; and whether masting, sails, and, especially, sailors can handle them. The distinctions that interest us here are of a different sort: how they break on the shore, how long they last after they have broken in the eyes of their beholders, whether they are the same when they return, how the sound they make differs when they hit sand and when they hit rock, how they sleep when they are tired and barely perceptible. All that remains of the huge waves tapering and dying on the shore is a gurgle or a lap, a splash on the pier or the hull of the boat, buoy, or reef, though this sound can last a long time and is most likely to be audible at night. Even though everyone recognizes it—this gurgle or lap or whatever one calls it—there is disagreement over whether it is a noise or a voice...

SPECIAL PLACES...

Islands are special places. They may be classified according to such criteria as where they lie in relation to the coast, what type of channel separates them from the mainland, and whether or not one can row or swim across the channel (a measure of the extent to which thesea unites or divides). Islands also differ in the images they project: some seem to be floating or floundering, others look anchored, stonelike, and, though torn-off and incomplete remains of the land mass, quite satisfied with themselves, having escaped in the nick of time and declared their independence; some are in disarray and dissolution, others neat and trim, on the point of establishing an ideal order. Islands take on human characteristics and moods : they too can be solitary, quiet, parched, naked, barren, inscrutable, cursed, and even happy or blissful. They are defined not only by their similarities and differences but also by the company they keep...

THE LAND...

The land too differs from one region to another. Nor does it look the same when we view it from the sea and when we view it on the shore: the reddish soil among the rocks, the gray or ashlike soil that appears to be made of rock (while at points it is more or less sand, whence the name "white earth" on some Adriatic islands), the black soil, rare and highly valued in these parts, and finally plain, ordinary brown dirt, the kind that exists all over Europe, Asia Minor, and a part of Africa. The vegetation veils or unveils, dresses or denudes the land and its character, changing backdrops from one occasion to the next, depending on how much the rock has disintegrated under the burning sun and how much the water and moisture coming from the sea have furthered the process. Thus even the land is the creation of the sea, the Mediterranean...

MYSTERIOUS INFLUENCES...

No one writes about the Mediterranean or sails it without personal involvement. The city where I was born is located fifty kilometers from the Adriatic. Thanks to its location and the river that runs through it, it has taken on certain Mediterranean traits. Slightly farther upstream, the Mediterranean traits disperse and the mainland takes over.

I am particularly interested in Mediterranean rivers and borders and the connections between them. I cannot explain why at some points the coastal area is so narrow and ends so abruptly and major transformations occur at so short a stretch from the sea. Cross a mountain and the bond with the sea is broken: land turns into hinterland and grows coarser, harder of access; people practice different customs, singing different songs, playing different games...

RIVERS...

Mediterranean rivers flow down to the sea in their own ways: some are quite ceremonious, even smug about doing their duty, others seem caught off guard and flow along abashed, confused; there are those that are haughty and resolute and those that are timid or resigned; there are those that do not care to mix their waters with the waters of others and those that are only too eager to take part in affairs of the sea, set up an alliance with it. Nor does the sea accept them all uniformly or the coast suffer them to leave it in one and the same way. Some rivers tend to linger by the sea, forcing it to yield some of its territory; others plunge deep into the karst to emerge either at the coast itself or in the cold springs at rock bottom. Estuaries are of a dual nature: they let the river flow into the sea, and they let the sea make its way inland. The riddle of their reciprocity makes itself felt here and there in their deltas. When swimmers from nearby rivers swim in the Mediterranean, they claim they can recognize the water of their rivers in it...

A HISTORY ABOUT MAN AND THE SEA...

Everywhere the eye can see—from vista to vista, event to event— there are stories about the sea and the coast, the islands and isolation, the body and incarceration, about winds, rivers, and estuaries, about ourselves: the eternal rituals of rise and fall, departure and return, grandiloquence and parody, palingenesis and palimpsest, circlemaking and circlebreaking. The moment we try to penetrate these oppositions, they become eschatology or prosody, yet I do not see how we can avoid them. Putting them into words may represent the Mediterranean's greatest achievement. Setting sail for distant seas and distant continents, the great seafarers have imitated their Mediterranean forebears by keeping minute records of their travels. The ship's log and travelogue are among the earliest genres of literature, the earliest branches of science.

Denizens of the north often identify our sea with the South. Something attracts them to it even when they remain perfectly loyal to their homelands. It is more than a need for warm sun and strong light. It may be what has been called "faith in the South." Anyone, regardless of place of birth or residence, can become a Mediterranean. Mediter-raneanity is acquired, not inherited; it is a decision, not a privilege. Some even say there are fewer and fewer true Mediterraneans on the Mediterranean. Being Mediterranean entails more than history or geography, tradition or memory, birthright or belief. The Mediterranean is destiny.