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Atlantics or Mediterraneans?

A Stormy Sea

What seas are our fast boats cutting through? What winds swell their unfurled sails? In which sea are we sailing? Between long-standing endemic conflicts, new revolts, and the usual crossing of migrants driven by despair, the waters of the Mediterranean are tinged with red—an ancient color, like the purple of the Phoenicians. The Mediterranean: it is a sea that has always been on fire but has also always been able to extinguish its fires and transform clashes into encounters, to change the warfront into a fruitful confrontation, *pólemos* (war) into *diálogos* (dialogue). When things have been most tense, this sea has been able to glimpse the invisible and the most powerful harmony that lies at the bottom of every dispute and restrains adversaries.¹ Sooner or later, will this sea become aware of its own size? Will it find the equilibrium between land and sea that is inscribed in its name? But Mediterranean winds of war blow ever farther, passing through and over the Balkans, until they reach remote lands that are almost forgotten by history. It is impossible not to see that one war births another; after the fall of the Twin Towers, one war means the outbreak of another, even the revelation of its very truth. As Mediterraneans, we had perhaps deluded ourselves into thinking that we could treat the Arab-Israeli conflict as a “modern” war—that is to say, as a land

war that stemmed from issues regarding borders, frontiers, and lands to be conquered. Even though the frequent terrorist attacks suggested that it was increasingly difficult to contain this war, it nevertheless appeared to us as limited, curable, and governable, and peace seemed close at hand. But the radicalization of the conflict revealed to us the fragility of our illusions and of any attempts to “reshape” a war in the era of globalization. Since this new form of “global war” emerged,² we have no longer been under any illusions about our ability to contain conflicts or restrict wars within clearly delineated spatial boundaries. Behind the mask of humanitarian intervention, all recent conflicts, including the wars in Iraq, the Balkans conflict, and the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan, have revealed the radicalization of postmodern war, which has buried forever every idea of *jus publicum europaeum*, of a European public law, as well as the possibility of containing conflicts. Carl Schmitt, with extraordinary clarity and foresight, had foreseen all this. His sharp gaze retraced the stations of the *via crucis*, the way of the cross that gradually shifted the focus of world history from Europe and “its” sea (the Mediterranean) to America and the boundless oceanic expanse that surrounds it and constitutes its very being.³ Hegel already noted that “the European state is truly European only in so far as it has links with the sea.”⁴ According to a recurrent literary motif,⁵ Europe appeared as a small promontory, a cape, a peninsula of the great Asian continent, and the Mediterranean as an internal sea that is everywhere surrounded by land. On the other side, America, when compared with old Europe, is a New World. Hegel saw it as “the country of the future, whose world-historical importance has yet to be revealed in the ages which lie ahead—perhaps in a conflict between North and South.”⁶ As a large island in comparison to the small island of England that gave birth to it, America does not understand the limits of the *mesógeos* (midlands) sea nor those of the *póntos*, a sea that is a road and bridge over which to cross and join lands.⁷ America is surrounded by an ocean, an endless stretch of water as far as the eye can see, a boundless space of Limitlessness and disproportion. America itself has been the response to the ocean’s irresistible call.

On which routes did we set sail? Which cruises or crusades are we part of? Winds of war and stormy skies have often clouded the blue depth of that *mare nostrum*, our sea (as the Romans called it). Within its shining clearness, different peoples, languages, and civilizations have been mirrored from coast to coast and from one shore to the next. They certainly came into conflict with one another, but, more often, they engaged each other in dialogue and mutual understanding. Over time, they have developed shared words, such as the word *hospitality*, which crosses the entire Mediterranean, from the Greek *philoxenía*,⁸ to the hospitality of Abraham⁹ and of his God, who loves the foreigner,¹⁰ to the idea inherited from Latin culture that guests must be respected.

Despite everything, Europe still faces this sea that is in continuous dialogue with the land that borders it, that holds it in check and contains it, inserting its promontories into it, indenting it with its inlets and gulfs, dotting it with islands and peninsulas. Predrag Matvejević defines it as “a sea surrounded by land or land touched by a sea.”¹¹ Or have we perhaps embarked, without even knowing it, on a far riskier journey, beyond all limits and measures, toward the infinite, unlimited, homogeneous, and empty space of the oceanic expanse, where no land is on the horizon, neither in front of nor behind us? To which sea does Europe think it belongs? to the Mediterranean, which we still pompously refer to as the cradle of the entire Western civilization? or to that ocean that dragged Columbus past all known limits, to “discover” a New World?¹²

That “discovery” revealed, once and for all, the two souls that tear Europe apart, its constant being in *krisis* between them, and the urgent need for a decision between two shores, two worlds, two seas. Are we Atlantics? Are we Mediterraneans?

Following Ulysses’s Trails

More than anyone else, Ulysses, this tireless traveler, in his double Homeric and Dantean versions, embodies this dilemma at the heart of Europe. Odysseus is a man of the Mediterranean not

only because he has the features of a *polýmetis*, a crafty-minded person—his intellect is so multifaceted that it borders on deceit, to such an extent that Virgil could define him as a *scelerum inventor*, a deviser of crimes. His very journey is Mediterranean because, in it, *nóstos* and *éxodos*, homecoming and departure, continually contradict each other, like the land he must finally return to and the sea that continually seduces and tears him away. He is not a simple homeward-bound figure, as Levinas would claim, in contrast to Abraham (who is a man of departure with no return and of a land that is only a promise).¹³ Rather, he is a *homo viator*, a wandering figure in continuous delay, even though he is always *oriented* toward the route home. The *Odyssey* is not only a poem about homesickness and domestic peace, nor, on the other hand, does Odysseus resemble Captain Ahab of *Moby-Dick*. His actions do not occur in the immeasurable vastness of the ocean but in the measured space of an inland sea, which is nevertheless fraught with perils.¹⁴ Without a doubt, the prow of his ship is always directed toward home, but its keel slides lightly on the water surface, incapable of permanently docking itself. Odysseus is neither hurried nor vexed on his slow journey back from beach to beach, and each port is not only an entrance door but also an exit door, a stopover, with new departures ahead. The stopovers may be long or short; some may be more sweet and entertaining than others. Some more than others may remind him of his native land and the domestic affections that force him to return. The call that comes from the sea is just as seductive as the siren song. It makes him desire to leave, just for the sake of going. Odysseus's travel would be incomprehensible were it not for this letting himself drift away, this losing the way, the oblivion of the final destination, the continuous digressions that time and again force him to postpone the end of the journey. Between land and sea, the journey of Ulysses is truly a Mediterranean one; it is a grandiose epic of its broken coasts, peninsulas, inlets, and straits as well as its extraordinarily varied islands, from Ogygia, the island of Calypso; to Scheria, the land of the Phaeacians; to Sicily; and to Ithaca itself, to name the most famous.

The journey of Dante's Ulysses, described in canto 26 of *Inferno*, is quite different.¹⁵ Dante's poetry, which, however ignorant Dante may have been of the Homeric *Odyssey*, nevertheless derives from Latin sources,¹⁶ shows us a very different figure of Ulysses, one we might consider to be "Atlantic" rather than Mediterranean. Echoing Cicero and Seneca, Dante's Ulysses appears as *sapientiae cupidus*, a lover of wisdom, who is animated by *innatus cognitionis amor*, an inborn love of knowledge. He is no longer the hero who returns to his homeland, albeit delayed by countless stops; instead, he is the hero of knowledge, who pursues his companions not to stagnate but "to follow virtue and knowledge." And, in order to attain knowledge, Ulysses and his companions cannot *stay*; they must *go*. They must set sail, raise their anchors, and go beyond any limits still considered insurmountable, turning their "stern toward the morning" and leaving at the first light of day—according to some scholars—for this journey at the end of the night. Other interpreters say that they had to reverse the usual direction of their travels and point the bow to the West, "following the sun" on its declining path, traveling toward the sunset, until shipwrecked in a "mad flight."

Dante's Ulysses does not know any return journeys; he remains deaf to the call of the *oikos*, the home where family affections, which might hold him back, await him in vain; only the passion for knowledge and a desire to *experience* the world ("the ardor that I had to / gain experience of the world") continually push him farther to "open sea." Aged amid the shores of the Mediterranean, with few companions left, he now feels its borders are too narrow and limited, as are its views. *Beyond* the Pillars of Hercules, beyond the final End that they represent for the ancient world, an end-less oceanic space opens up—the infinite sea of unconstrained knowledge. Beyond that extreme limit, he is devoured by the already-modern anxiety to try, to attempt, to test, and to finally experience the unknown. He is among the first moderns to be unable to resist the siren song of the ocean and to undergo the destructive seduction of the Limitless. The mountain of the earthly paradise will remain a "New land" that is only glimpsed, a utopian

island floating on a space that is by now absolutely delocalized. It emerges and appears only for a moment, after a “nocturnal” journey into the heart of darkness, in the instant preceding the shipwreck, before the battered boat sinks into the sea with its human cargo. Dante’s Atlantic Ulysses is no longer able to feel the size of the Mediterranean that continually restrains the sea with the earth. He is a man who has lost all sense of the dwelling. Wandering without *horizons* has become his way of life. He is even devoid of any memory of a home to which he might return to enjoy a break. The brother of Captain Ahab, Dante’s Ulysses, who is the precursor of pirates, of whalers, and of the great ocean navigator Columbus, is a tragic figure of the will to power of a form of knowledge without limits or restraint.

Nietzsche: The New Columbus

Nietzsche dedicated a poem to Columbus in the summer of 1882, after spending the winter in Genoa. It was not by chance that the work was titled *Columbus Novus*:

That’s the way I want to go, and I trust
 Myself from now on and my grip!
 Open is the sea: into the blue
 Sails my Genoese ship.
 Everything becomes new and newer to me
 Behind me lies Genoa.
 Courage! You yourself stand at the helm,
 Dearest Victoria!¹⁷

Even though, like many Germans, he felt the charm of the South, the sun, and the Mediterranean Sea, on whose shores he loved to winter, there is no doubt that Nietzsche was the philosopher who best understood the challenge of the open sea and heard the call of the ocean. For him, philosophers become “aeronauts of the spirit,”¹⁸ or “brave birds which fly out into the distance, into the farthest

distance,” pushing further and further into the sea of knowledge, in that direction “where everything is sea, sea, sea!”¹⁹ As they “cross the sea,” they are animated by a mighty longing, which “is worth more to us than any pleasure”²⁰—the inexhaustible thirst for knowledge that is finally free and no longer under any constraint. The same passion drives Dante’s Ulysses and these aeronauts, who trust only in themselves and in their own rudders. It is the same desire to attain knowledge that establishes their route, and it is the same courage that they all have in common. In a similar vein to Ulysses and Columbus, they, too, orientate themselves “thither where all the suns of humanity have hitherto *gone down* [. . .] *steering westward*.”²¹ They, too, chase the setting sun; they are ready for sunset, as long as the dawn of a new morning rises. They are aware of running the risk of being “wrecked against infinity.”²² And never did it seem so “sweet” to be shipwrecked in this sea!

But who are these reckless adventurers of thought, for whom the call of the ocean is irresistible? They are the new philosophers, those who have freed themselves from God, accepting his death without regret but rather with the boldness of one who foresees a new dawn. Nietzsche’s aphorism 343, which opens the fifth book of *The Gay Science*, is revealingly titled “We Fearless Ones”: “Finally the horizon seems clear again, even if not bright; finally our ships may set out again, set out to face any danger; every daring of the lover of knowledge is allowed again; the sea, our sea, lies open again; maybe there has never been such an ‘open’ sea.”²³

It is not an inland sea, a *mesógeos*. Rather, this *mare nostrum* is now a boundless, free, *open* sea; it is no longer contained by any shore; there is no land that delineates its edges. The wide marine expanse that opens up before these intrepid sailors does not unfold its space between any known lands. Nor does it touch any coast, nor can any port offer rest and shelter. The ship that plows through this smooth surface resolutely leaves behind every mooring, as well as every pier; no anchor can now hold it back or even reach the bottom: “Never before has a deeper world of insight opened up to bold travellers and adventurers.”²⁴ We must therefore always go *forward* and always go *further*; we must “hold on tight to the

helm,”²⁵ since there are no longer fixed stars to orient us along our path. There is only the obsessive fixation of a gaze that knows one direction—that of continuous *overcoming*. As Ulysses’s progeny, the new philosophers—that is, the philosophers of the future—share with the Greek hero a certain capacity for dissimulation, although it is now completely put to the service of that passionate desire for knowledge, that *curiositas* that characterizes Dante’s Ulysses: “Our adventurer’s courage, our sly and pampered curiosity, our finest, stealthiest, most spiritual will to power and world-overcoming that greedily roams and revels throughout all the realms of the future.”²⁶ The *innatus cognitionis amor*, the inborn love of knowledge that makes him *sapientiae cupidus*, a lover of wisdom, brings Nietzsche’s new philosopher close to the Ulysses of Cicero, who was probably one of Dante’s sources. But this yearning for knowledge has now become the *will* to know, *Wille zur Macht* as knowledge,²⁷ which can be stopped by no obstacle in its unrestrained course. No “mad flight” frightens it, as it has entirely forgotten any sense of limitation. The *Columbus Novus*—that is, the philosopher of the future—pays no more attention to the End point that is imposed on his journey. The columns of Hercules, faithful guardians of an obsolete measurement of the Mediterranean, are now completely emptied of any symbolic value. “On to the ships, you philosophers!”²⁸—this is the mandatory invitation to get out to sea that Nietzsche launches to the thinkers of the future. He incites them to discover more than a new world in the “ocean of becoming.”²⁹ He urges them to transform themselves into “adventurers and birds of passage,” to look alert and be attentive and ready to steal everything that falls under their gaze “as sharply and as inquisitively as possible.”³⁰ He longs to venture alongside them “out over the ocean, no less proud than the ocean itself.”³¹ These oceanic, Atlantic men, these daredevil heroes of knowledge are those “aeronauts of the spirit” who swarm from Old Europe, like migratory birds taking off for new and more hospitable shores, knowing that no land can be a safe home from now on but only a small foothold from which to fly even farther. Perhaps no Nietzschean passage is able to grasp the meaning of this dangerous crossing more effectively than the

famous aphorism 124 of *The Gay Science*, titled “In the Horizon of the Infinite”:

We have forsaken the land and gone to sea! We have destroyed the bridge behind us—more so, we have demolished the land behind us! Now, little ship, look out! Beside you is the ocean; it is true, it does not always roar, and at times it lies there like silk and gold and dreams of goodness. But there will be hours when you realize that it is infinite and that there is nothing more awesome than infinity. Oh, the poor bird that has felt free and now strikes against the walls of this cage! Woe, when homesickness for the land overcomes you, as if there had been more freedom there—and there is no more “land”!³²

Far from being a *nóstos*, a homecoming, the journey Nietzsche conceives is genuinely an *éxodos*, a sailing with no return. No longer a *póntos*, this sea forces us to cut all bridges, to erase even the land that we leave behind forever. Now the ship becomes the one and only precarious abode for those who feel they have embarked, leaving behind only a trail drawn on the water, which quickly disappears. Everywhere there is the ocean, an immense expanse of water with no more land on the horizon. The gaze is always trained forward, persistently following the bow that makes its way along unknown routes. The ocean is *infinite*, *unlimited*, and without recognizable boundaries, an immense space devoid of measure, but, precisely for this reason, precisely because it is homogeneous and empty, it is extraordinarily willing to accept the measures that humans seek to impose on it. A horror vacui, a fear of emptiness and dismay in front of the Nothing, might then surprise these daring sailors, as there is nothing more frightening than feeling oneself slipping into this smooth expanse devoid of any *nomos*, of any law. Here, in the open, wide space of the sea, the pain of returning might assail sailors. They may well yearn for the land from which they turned away after finally making a decision to leave. But it would

be futile to give in to this extreme, regressive temptation, as if the earth with its *nomoi* could still guarantee more freedom than the infinitely free space that the sea can now offer. It is impossible to go back to that land, which has been submerged by an ocean wave that now permeates everything. Like the ocean, it is now subject to a nihilistic *Ent-ortung*—a delocalization and a deterritorialization that no longer permits us to make roots or dwellings. How might one return to that land, how to return to that Mediterranean Sea that washed over it, if everything now appears as a *tabula rasa* of infinite oceanic expanse?

Remembering the Mediterranean

Nietzsche, who defined himself as a posthumous and untimely thinker, knew that his writings were not for his contemporaries but for posterity, for those who would live at least two centuries after him. He was writing for us, who have just entered the twenty-first century. No one has been able to describe our present circumstances with greater clarity or to foresee the inescapable decision that awaits us. Are we still, can we still call ourselves Mediterranean, or has this sea on which stormy winds blow definitively lost its historical centrality? Are we perhaps about to become, if we are not already, Atlantics—that is, fearless ocean navigators? Ever since the “discovery” of America and the first circumnavigations of the globe, have we entered the age that Schmitt called the “*globale Zeit*,” the global epoch? In fact, where does the process of globalization come from, if not from that powerful yet provoking call caused by the first opening of the ocean in the era of great geographical discoveries? It was the era of Columbus and of pirates and whalers. Like great cetaceans, they were all free to undertake routes that had never before been attempted in an open sea without borders, resistant to any *nomos*. It is this same appeal that caused England, an island of rustic sheep farmers, to go to the sea: “Then the island turned its gaze away from the continent and raised it to the great seas of the world. It undocked and became the vehicle of an oceanic world

empire.”³³ Like a ship setting sail, this unanchoring (*Entankerung*) led the island to journey along the ocean routes until it founded, on this unsteady expanse, its mobile empire. But only America, the New World, was able to truly embody that oceanic spirit that England had inaugurated. The great continent did on a grand scale what the small island had only just begun. Ever since its inception, it became an extraordinary experiment in the practice of the Limitless. From the very beginning, it was unable to draw boundaries, to mark borders, other than as an ever-moving line of progress that is always on the point of being moved farther. The pioneer, this new pirate figure, was the undisputed hero of the conquest, not so much, and not only, of the immense prairies that opened like the ocean as far as the eye could see but rather of the West—that is, of a direction, a *route* westward, the same as for Dante’s Ulysses. The pioneer succeeded, however, in accomplishing and carrying out that “mad” task that had ended in the shipwreck for Ulysses.

Now this ocean has become a *universe*, it has become a world under the sign of a flat and uniform universalism that is like the smooth expanse of a sea that knows no land, which has erased borders and, thereby, all possibilities of confrontation and dialogue that are respectful of differences. This world, now unified and rendered uniform by the global era, this oceanic world empire, far from guaranteeing perpetual peace, is like a shock wave that produces increasingly ungovernable wars and conflicts. Equally shapeless and immeasurable are the attempts at reterritorialization, including the all-out defense of identity and belonging. The world, therefore, ends up becoming ever more regressive and archaic.

The Mediterranean, however, is a *memory* of another story. It is an experience that is unique in the world, of the encounter between sea and land; it is a space for sharing that both separates and divides but also connects and unites. It favors exchanges between identities that, in their incessant confrontation, desire to remain different. In its plurality of borders and frontiers, it has been a space of clashes but also of extraordinary encounter, of inexhaustible confrontation with the other, preventing or moderating any drastic *reductio ad unum*, reduction to one. From this sea of differences, Europe was

born. It is an irreducible *pluriverse* of peoples and languages that are forced to dialogue with one another, forced into an eternal translation and distancing. Will this ancient sea surrounded by lands know how to be a model now for a world not *universal* but *pluriversal*? Will we all—and not just we Europeans—be able to become Mediterranean once again and finally find a new *nomos*, a new measure, between heaven, earth, and sea?