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## Predrag Matvejević's Mediterranean Breviary: Nostalgia for an "Ex-World" or Breviary for a New Community?

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## **Predrag Matvejević's *Mediterranean Breviary*: Nostalgia for an "Ex-World" or Breviary for a New Community?**

**Anna Botta**

La tua legge rischiosa: essere vasto e diverso  
e insieme fisso:  
e svuotarmi così di ogni lordura  
come tu fai che sbatti sulle sponde  
tra sugheri alghe asterie  
le inutili macerie del tuo abisso.

(Eugenio Montale)<sup>1</sup>

### *I. Rethinking Mediterranean Studies*

It has been widely trumpeted that we live in the era of the postnational or the transnational. In particular, in academic circles, a sophisticated sense of the problems that arise when studying history through the prism of the nation-state has encouraged scholars to move towards new objects of study (or, to be more correct, to revisit and redefine old ones). The aim is to cut across the political divisions and national borders that characterize previous histories and take instead as research objects areas wide enough to encompass economical, cultural, and political interests on a global basis. The two British historians Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell (2006, 722) notice a return to area studies in their discipline and comment: "The new interest in regional histories derives, fundamentally, from the task of finding a different approach to world history – not through formulating generalizations about everything, but through the analysis of the whole by way of its components and, consequently, of how those components fit together." Besides challenging the concept of national integrity, such new regional histories tend also to move beyond established disciplinary delimitations (anthropology, sociology, geography, economy, political science) and foster a hybridized and multileveled approach.

A similar shift can be witnessed in current debates in International Relations. Whereas during the Cold War period, the focus was on the confrontation of two rival political blocs and their ideologies, the end of that period has widened the debate and brought back the study of civilizations in world history. In an article published in 2002, Paul Rich writes that theories of civilization cycles were "out of tune with the general mood of state-centric realism in academic International Relations during the period of super-power rivalry in the Cold War." Yet after the demise of the USSR, it has become imperative "to think in wider regional or continental terms" (2002, 331). The conclusions of Rich's article are quite daring given that he historicizes and calls into question the name of his discipline itself, International Relations:

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<sup>1</sup> Eugenio Montale, "Antico" *Ossi di seppia* in *L'opera in versi* (52).

It was the latter conception of “international society” which largely defined the domain of post-war IR centered as it was on the rival power and interests of sovereign nation states. It is evident that the end of the Cold War has opened up this domain to a growing number of non-state actors who pursue issues such as global environmental control in the interests of a wider “global society” that is as yet bound together by only rather weak normative links. (2002, 340-41)

Rich argues in favor of a return to the study of civilizations, especially in view of the success encountered by the article “Clash of Civilizations” by the American political scientist Samuel Huntington, an article that was first published in *Foreign Affairs* in 1993 and later issued as a book. Yet, like Horden and Purcell, Rich argues for a revised approach, one that is less Eurocentric than civilization studies in the first part of the twentieth century (as reflected in the work of Arnold Toynbee, Fernand Braudel, and Marshall Hodgson) and more open to exploring a common “world civilization.”

In light of this common goal of decentering and enlarging their historical objects, it is therefore only to be expected that scholars have been attracted towards the borderless world of seas and oceans, giving particular attention to the diasporic movements of people, ideas, and goods. Shifting scholarly attention from the *terra firma* to the waters that surround it represents a subversive operation, one that “inexorably alters and widens the way history is considered” [“inesorabilmente altera e amplia il modo in cui la storia viene considerata” (Colley 2007, 37, my trans.)]. It allows for an asymmetric approach that focuses on the peripheral and the marginal instead of concentrating on traditional centers of power and political supremacies; it debunks the myth of continents, giving more importance to the connecting properties of waters. Anonymous merchants and immigrants, slaves and pirates, goods and ideas, climates and topographies, glut and dearth play the main role, rather than kings and politicians.<sup>2</sup> Seas are enticing because they tend to appear to be “politically neutral” (Horden and Purcell 2006, 723). In this vein, an unprecedented flourish of scholarship has been devoted to the Atlantic – first the Northern Atlantic, with its commerce between Africa, England, the Caribbean, and North America, and most recently including also South America. In his *Atlantic History*, Bernard Bailyn claims that the Atlantic is not an aggregate of national histories, rather something in common that comprehends all of them.

So it was to be expected that, after the “white” (Bernard Bailyn), the “black” (Paul Gilroy), the “green” (Kevin Whelan), and, most recently, the “Indian Atlantic” (Kate

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<sup>2</sup> It must be specified that, in the case of the Mediterranean, such a shift in focus is not completely new. It represents, instead, a return to the first wave of Mediterranean studies, a movement that flourished thanks to scholars such as Fernand Braudel and Shlomo Goitein. In his 1949 book, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, Braudel abandoned his intended political history of Philip II’s reign in favor of an analysis of Mediterranean geography. In his five-volume work *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, published between 1967 and 1988, Goitein evoked the world of Jewish merchants through the study of their letters. Both were monumental works that, for quite some time, had the effect of discouraging younger scholars from following a similar path, rather than challenging them to do so. Although current Mediterranean studies represent a return to anonymous historical subjects, they also take their distance from such earlier scholarship, most specifically in their unprecedented questioning of the Mediterranean as a preconceived unity.

Flint), the “new thalassology” would eventually turn its attention to the oldest sea of all, at least as an object of historiographical inquiry, and thus we would witness a renewed outburst of Mediterranean studies.<sup>3</sup> If, in a 2002 article, the historian David Armitage provocatively claimed: “Today we are all Atlanticists,” it seems that now we witness a similar call for an all-inclusiveness of Mediterranean studies. Besides the monumental study *The Corrupting Sea* by Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell (a 750-page volume which they promise will soon be followed by a second), there is a wealth of studies written by all sorts of scholars: collection of essays, Websites, centers, specialized reviews, and, last but not least, special issues of journals like this one.<sup>4</sup> By stretching the Mediterranean well beyond its geographic limits, a few comparative studies have used it as a template to be applied to “Middle Seas” in other parts of the world, waters which are characterized by ease of contacts between very diverse cultures (see the article “Mediterraneans” by David Abulafia). With his usual ironic wit, the critic Roberto Dainotto (2003, 5) remarks:

Africano ed europeo, orientale ed occidentale, mussulmano, cristiano ed ebreo allo stesso tempo, il Mediterraneo, novella Afrodite rinata dalle schiume della sua stessa storia, riemerge quindi come simbolo dell’abbandono degli arcani nazionalisti, come encomio dell’identità ibrida e multiculturale, e come rinovellata etica della convivialità tra i popoli. Per citare [ancora] Guccini: Dio e’ risorto.

At the same time African and European, Oriental and Occidental, Muslim, Christian and Jewish, the Mediterranean re-emerges as a new Aphrodite reborn from the foam of her own history; it re-emerges thus as a symbol of the forsaking of old nationalisms, as praise for hybrid and multicultural identity and as a renewed ethics of *convivencia* between peoples. To quote [yet again] Guccini: God is resurrected. (my trans.)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Edward Peters, “*Qui nobis cum pelago?* The New Thalassology and the Economic History of Europe,” and Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, “The Mediterranean and the ‘New Thalassology.’” In the latter article, the authors are also aware of the possible imperialist resonances of a neologism that derives from the Greek word “thalassa” (sea) and thus risks perpetuating the feeling of superiority European elites place in their classical education that is traditionally based on Roman-Greek antiquity (726).

<sup>4</sup> For a review of the academic journals published in the last two decades which deal with the historical Mediterranean, see Susan E. Alcock, “Alphabet Soup in the Mediterranean Basin: The Emergence of the Mediterranean Serial.” See also Dainotto, “Asimmetrie mediterranee: etica e mare nostrum,” (5) and Abulafia, “What is the Mediterranean?” (16-19).

<sup>5</sup> For clarity’s sake, I have translated Dainotto’s Italian word ‘convivialità’ with the Spanish word ‘convivencia’ (the term used in medieval and early modern Spanish literature to refer to exchange and interaction among people living together), given that the current meaning of its English cognate, ‘conviviality,’ is “enjoyment of festive society,” with particular emphasis on eating, drinking and good company. Yet I’d also like to point out that the original meaning of the Latin word ‘convivium’ referred to a banquet table where people came together both to eat and to discuss lofty matters. Dante’s *Convivium* was intended as a metaphoric invitation to lay people to sit at the table where learned men and religious scholars dined. The Latin meaning of ‘conviviality’ was reappropriated more recently by Ivan Illich in his work *Tools for Conviviality* (1973). In his introduction, Illich writes: “I am aware that in English ‘convivial’ now seeks the company of tipsy jolliness, which is distinct from that indicated by the OED and opposite to the austere meaning of the word ‘eutrapelia,’ which I intend” (XIII).

The resurgence of the Mediterranean in the postmodern anti-nationalistic arena – a weak and unbound identity, one which may be opposed to the sovereign and limited nation – must be critically assessed, precisely because such a resurgence appears alluring “in a historical moment like ours, one which removes stability and rigidity from borders and traditional reference points” [“in una fase storica come la nostra, che toglie stabilità e rigidità ai confini e ai punti di riferimento tradizionali” (Ciaramelli in Barcellona and Ciaramelli 10, my trans.)]. Why are we so attracted to maritime flows and, in particular, to revisiting the Mediterranean? If this new Mediterranean is meant to emancipate scholars from insidious political bias, does it retain nothing at all of its old identity of *mare nostrum*, when it stood as a manifestation of imperialist ideology? Did the Mediterranean as an oppressive concept at the service of Western hegemonies simply disappear?

In his 2005 essay, “Practical Mediterraneism: Excuses for Everything, from Epistemology to Eating,” the anthropologist Michael Herzfeld criticizes what he calls “Practical Mediterraneism.” For Herzfeld, the Mediterranean exists as a “research object,” “local category” (46), but not as an *a priori* analytical tool. He laments the fact that the concept of the Mediterranean is most often uncritically assumed as the methodological frame of scholarly studies that end up reinforcing, consciously or unconsciously, stereotypical views that imply its subaltern status (as was the case in the “Orientalism” denounced by Edward Said). On the model of Edward Said’s successful neologism, Herzfeld has coined the term “Mediterraneism,” specifying that it is “practical” because, like Said’s Orientalism, “it too can be treated as much more than an ideology – as, in fact, a program of active political engagement with patterns of political hierarchy” (2005, 51).<sup>6</sup> From this perspective, it is clear that the appearance of seas as a “politically neutral” area of study (Horden and Purcell 2006, 723) is only deceptive.

Against the insidious dangers of Mediterraneism, Herzfeld requires that those who use the Mediterranean category must subject themselves to ethnographic investigation. They should put the Mediterranean inside the frame of analysis rather than assume it as the frame itself. Such a move clearly requires a high degree of self-reflexivity. It is necessary to ask questions such as: what excuse is there for scholars to study the Mediterranean at all? Who still promotes its traditional stereotypes and why? Who stands to gain from them? Both researcher and researched are enclosed in a common frame of analysis, one that reflects their subjection to a situated disciplinary discourse.

The Mediterranean is a representation that has impinged on many forms of consciousness, and there is no doubt that people in the area have interacted believing in the existence of that common identity, even if their belief has been based more on stereotypes and desires than facts. In his study of nations as imagined communities,

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<sup>6</sup> It should be added that Herzfeld’s friend and colleague, W. V. Harris has a much less polemical definition of the term “Mediterraneism.” In the introduction to his essay (in the same volume as Herzfeld), W. V. Harris writes that Mediterraneism is “the doctrine that there are distinctive characteristics, which the cultures of the Mediterranean have, or have had, in common—from which it has been thought to follow that one can extrapolate the social practices and their meanings, from one Mediterranean society to another” (38). Yet he too is aware that “the Mediterranean seems somehow peculiarly vulnerable to misuse” (38) and asks: “Is Mediterraneism of much use to ancient historians, or is it alternatively something of a danger (and in effect, a cousin of Orientalism)?” (2).

Benedict Anderson reminds us that “communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined” (15). The popular proverb “Stessa faccia stessa razza” [“Same face same race”], used by the Greeks to invoke the idea of a shared identity with the Italians, is a good example of how that identity can be perceived differently. In fact, Italians, who, for the most part, hear that *cliché* only when they meet a Greek person, have a different way of understanding and negotiating their Mediterranean culture and their intimacy with Greeks. Instead of discussing the truth-value of particular statements, we should ask, “why does it matter to people to ‘be’ Mediterranean, or to lump others together under that title?” (51).

If the uncritical stereotyping of Mediterraneanism can be viewed as the Scylla of Mediterranean studies, its Charybdis is represented by a nostalgia for a lost grandeur, for a “thalassocracy” in which the Mediterranean represented the very center of power (this thalassocracy dates back to Herodotus and Thucydites in the fifth century B.C. and Thucydites is credited with having invented the term). Through the lens of nostalgia, the Mediterranean becomes a political utopia, one which is capable of challenging the secondary place it has had since the recent formation of the European Union, a political and territorial entity which clearly gravitates around the north of Europe.<sup>7</sup> Roberto Dainotto comments, in his 2003 article on “Asimmetrie mediterranee,” that the contemporary resurgence of Mediterranean scholarly discourse – as well as the proliferation of metaphors of exchange and liquidity which characterize it – is testimony to the Mediterranean peoples’ loss of security, a compensatory attempt to take refuge from the bleak present within a utopian vision of the Mediterranean as the cradle of Western civilization (or, at the very least, within a liquid space which promotes hybridity and the cohabitation of religions and cultures). It is important, in other words, to realize that by overemphasizing liquidity, permeable contacts, crossing and exchange, one risks occluding the asymmetric relationships that are constitutive of political hegemonies. The danger is “to pass this Mediterranean off as the best of all possible worlds” [“spacciare questo Mediterraneo come il migliore di mondi possibili” (Dainotto 2003, 7, my trans.)], whereas, in reality, metaphors of liquidity end up reasserting the capitalistic logic of free markets and globalization, a logic based on flows and unhindered circulation. Instead of cutting across political divisions, this Mediterranean as “a lake of cultures” becomes the comforting and illusory symbol of a conviviality that is a willful projection of European Mediterranean countries in a historical moment of political weakness. Such utopianism doesn’t take into consideration that exchanges “are always unequal,” (Arkoun 121 in Dainotto 2003, 7) as Dainotto reminds us of a remark made by the Turkish Nobel-prize writer, Orhan Pamuk. There is an asymmetry, the latter argues, between the claim “we are Mediterraneans” made by an Italian and the same claim made by a Turk or Algerian. While for an Italian, it is an uncontested assertion, in the case of a Turk or Algerian, it is a matter of the appropriation of an identity from bottom to top, an identity that can be used as a way of entry into the privileged Western world, although it is also synonymous with forced Europeanization and modernization (7).

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<sup>7</sup> It must be said that in recent years, there have been attempts to correct that imbalance and give the Mediterranean a more important role within EU’s economy and politics. One important example is the Union pour la Méditerranée (UPM) launched in the Summer of 2008 by the then president of the E.U., Nicholas Sarkozy. UPM includes about forty countries from the EU and the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean.

Iain Chambers (2008, 5) writes: “The borders are porous, particularly so in the liquid materiality of the Mediterranean. The outcome of historical and cultural clash and compromise is that borders are both transitory and zones of transit.” Yet Chambers also points out that today’s Mediterranean is “a disquieting place,” a locus where our global economy’s mobility and the much-celebrated fluidity of the postmodern nomadic subject turn out to be predicated on the policing of the flux of legal and illegal immigrants from the Southern Mediterranean or Eastern Mediterranean shorelines to the Northern or Western Mediterranean capitalist societies. “Suspended in the intersections of economic, political, and cultural dispossession, [the modern immigrant] carries modern borders within herself” (7). The borderless freedom of today’s EU citizens presupposes the abundant, necessary production and consumption of the immigrant as the “other” who inhabits the space of the abject (3). Instead of a soft area of hybridization and fluidity, Chambers’ Mediterranean is a solid, hard space where the borders of race and class get reinscribed within new dichotomies (such as tourist/immigrant, legal/illegal, inside or outside the EU fortress). Crisscrossed by the invisible routes and shipwrecks of illegal immigrants, his Mediterranean denounces the fragility of the abstract distinctions that made it possible for Western modern hegemonies to justify their thalassocracies.

## II. Predrag Matvejević’s Mediterranean Breviary

As we have seen, Dainotto points at asymmetries and Chambers highlights the space of the abject inhabited by immigrants as two privileged standpoints for launching a serious interrogation of Mediterraneism and Mediterranean utopias. In tune with these two critics, I’d like to turn my critical attention to a literary work that offers an open interrogation of Mediterranean identity and a passionate call “a ripensare le nozioni superate di periferia e di centro, gli antichi rapporti di distanza e di prossimità, i significati dei tagli e degli inglobamenti, le relazioni delle simmetrie a fronte delle asimmetrie” [“to reconsider the superseded notions of periphery and center, the traditional relations of distance and proximity, the meanings of exclusions and inclusions, the relations of symmetries as opposed to asymmetries” (Matvejević 2004, 133 and 1996, 91, my trans.)]. Although Predrag Matvejević’s *Mediterranean Breviary* inscribes itself in a longstanding tradition of books celebrating the interconnectedness of that basin, it also stands out insofar as it questions the limits and potentialities of the Mediterranean as a discourse.<sup>8</sup>

Matvejević is not one of those immigrants described by Chambers, whose invisible presence haunts the space of modern Mediterranean and undermines the stability of political powers and globalized economies. Yet, like those castaways (the Latin past participle ‘ab-iectum’ literally means “cast away”), Matvejević is familiar with the condition of forced exile, of being excluded by the newly traced borders of a collective community that he imagined as his own community. As a Bosnian Croat writer born in Mostar (a town that was part of ex-Yugoslavia and is now part of Bosnia-Herzegovina), he was forced by the recent Balkans wars to abandon his country in 1991 and live, first in Paris and then, since 1994, in Rome, where he teaches in the Department of Slavic

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<sup>8</sup> I use here the literal translation of the original title of Matvejević’s book, *Mediterranean Breviary*, which was kept both in the Italian and French translations, whereas the English translation of that book carries a different title (*Mediterranean: A Cultural Landscape*). See footnote 12.



Languages and Literatures at the La Sapienza University.<sup>9</sup> The title of Matvejević's epistolary novel, *Izmedju azila i egzila* [*Between Asylum and Exile*], best depicts his present ambiguous condition; he is someone who lives in a foreign country, Italy, which has offered him asylum in name of that same Mediterranean intimacy that came apart in his own country.<sup>10</sup>

The central questions asked by Matvejević's book *Mediterranean Breviary* – Could we conceive of a viable intramediterranean culture beyond stereotypes? Is the Mediterranean doomed to become “an *ex*-world”? – are understandably intimate for Matvejević himself, given that he has been living in first person the status of “*ex*.” I borrow this expression “*ex*” from another of his titles, *Le monde ex. Confessions (The Ex-World. Confessions)*, first written in French and published in 1996. In this autobiographical work, the status of *ex* becomes for Matvejević symptomatic of a kind of “*ex*-instance,” at once retroactive and superimposed, a state that is both individual and collective. In the following passage, the author illustrates the individual meaning of *ex* and also justifies his linguistic choice of the French language for this book in particular:

These confessions of mine are bound up with my origins: from one side, the old Russia from which my father comes, from the other the disaggregated ex- Yugoslavia where I was born, in an almost extinct ex-Bosnia-Herzegovina, in the ex-town of Mostar, half-destroyed. My father had learned, during his childhood, the French language of his ex-homeland. (So many “*ex*'s”!) He taught it to me, together with Russian. It is likely that there are only few of us who know this “other language,” which was the French used long ago in Russia. Sometimes I see myself as a dinosaur. (Matvejević 1996, 12, my trans.)

As for the collective meaning of *ex*:

The post Cold War will have witnessed a part of the world, in the East, living a somewhat posthumous existence . . . It is legitimate to wonder what either being or proclaiming oneself “*ex*” means in reality . . . Not being anymore – or not wanting to be anymore – what one was or thought to be? (7, my trans.)

The world “*ex*” is full of heirs without inheritance, of different ideologies which exclude each other: re-editions of past and present, disparate images, which are reassembled with nonchalance, hastily used schemata, improperly applied interpretive grids. (10, my trans.)

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<sup>9</sup> Although Matvejević has a Croat passport and considers himself Croatian (see his 2000 interview in *Il Manifesto*, “Viaggio nel cuore dell'Europa,”), he also rejects the labeling of ex-Yugoslavs along ethnic lines (see Bréchon 175).

<sup>10</sup> *Izmedju azila i egzila* was written in Croatian and Russian and published in 1995. I consulted the French edition (*Entre asyle et exil*, Paris: Stock, 1995) and the Italian edition (*Tra asilo e esilio*, Roma: Meltemi, 1998). A shorter, earlier version was published in French as *Epistolaire de l'autre Europe* (Paris: Stock, 1993) and in Italian as *Epistolario dell'altra Europa* (Milano: Garzanti, 1992).

It seems reasonable to speculate that Matvejević's historic pessimism, his critical realism, which has its origins in autobiography, also shapes and reshapes the author's Mediterranean vision. At times in his *Breviary*, the Mediterranean itself seems to partake of ex-istence of Eastern Europe and the Soviet block. Yet, like the political scientist Paul Rich cited earlier, Matvejević is acutely aware that the end of the Cold War and ideological bipolarism urges us, and particularly people from Mitteleuropa, "to think in wider regional or continental terms" (Rich 2002, 331). If the Mediterranean is an imaginatively constructed identity, certainly, in his case, it is in need of being rethought and reinvented (or "ri-guardata," to borrow Franco Cassano's linguistic pun).<sup>11</sup> How can the author appropriate his heritage vis-à-vis that culture? Can the Mediterranean offer an alternative identity of *convivencia* between multi-ethnic and multi-national territories to make up for a lost national identification?

Finally, the choice here to focus on a book which is ex-centric to Italian literature (its author is not Italian nor was the book originally written in Italian), yet a book which has ended its long diaspora through different editions and translations with its latest, 2004 edition in Italian, offers a certain critical distance from the way the Mediterranean is represented in more canonical Italian texts. Instead of attempting to answer the question: How might Italian studies contribute to Mediterranean studies?, my article will pose a more indirect question: Which sort of critical perspectives in Mediterranean literature contribute to the development of new approaches in Italian studies, perspectives which are transnational and may challenge the very notion that Mediterranean literature can or should be modified by a national adjective? After all, the very impetus for studying the borderless world of seas and oceans, for giving particular attention to the diasporic movements of people, ideas, and goods, was motivated by dissatisfaction with more traditional approaches which study cultures and histories from the national point of view.

If any book can rightly claim the status of diasporic text, surely it is *Mediterranean Breviary* – trespassing restlessly, as it does, across languages, countries, genres, media, and even across Matvejević's oeuvre itself. As Matvejević explains in its final pages, *Mediterranean Breviary* was originally inspired by the symposium "Mediterranean Cultural Traditions," which was held in Zagreb in 1973 and moderated by the author (Matvejević 2004, 207-11). The book's first edition came out only fourteen years later, in 1987, in Zagreb, in the language known at that time as Serbo-Croatian or Croato-Serbian. In the nearly twenty years that followed, it has been repeatedly reworked, the author has extensively revised and expanded the original version, especially in the most recent, Italian edition, published in 2004.<sup>12</sup> In a 1991 interview, Matvejević was already able to

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<sup>11</sup> "La chiave sta nel *ri-guardare* i luoghi, nel duplice senso di aver riguardo per loro e tornare a guardarli" ("The key is "to re-look" at places, in the double meaning of taking care of them and go back and re-consider them.") (Cassano 9, my trans.)

<sup>12</sup> The book was first translated in Italian by Hefti, a small Italian publishing house, in 1988 and then reedited in 1991 by Garzanti, a press with a much larger circulation and included a few revisions and additions. A more substantially revised French edition came out in 1992 by Fayard, followed by the American edition by University of California in 1999. In 2004, Garzanti published yet another revised, and extensively expanded, Italian edition, which the author considers to be the definitive edition (it was reprinted in 2006). The book has been translated in twenty or so languages and received various prizes (among others, the 1992 European Prize for the Best Essay, the 1993 French Prize for the Best Foreign Book, the 1991 Malaparte Prize in Capri, Italy). As already noted, although the American edition carries a different title (*Mediterranean. A Cultural Landscape*), I refer to the book using the literal translation of its

confess that the book represented for him a never-ending project, challenged as he felt, on one hand, by his encyclopedic ambition to be exhaustive on such a vast subject and, on the other, by the quest for its “pure language,” a style he wanted to oppose to a “langue de bois” (literally, “wooden language”). The expression refers to “a worn-out language, which has been distorted by its banal and especially its bureaucratic use” (Matvejević 1996, 45, n.1). Typical of so many ideological discourses in Communist Eastern Europe, this form of inauthentic language, in Matvejević’s view, ended up infiltrating even literary prose.<sup>13</sup>

As for his compulsion to revise the text, the writer reveals, for instance, that in between the 1991 Italian edition and the 1992 French edition, he realized that his book was lacking a chapter on vinegar, an element that he considers to be of the utmost importance in the history of the Mediterranean. “So it took me two months to read everything I could find on vinegar, which I then summed up in twenty pages, and ultimately, in the final draft of the French edition, I wrote twenty lines. I completely rewrote the book seven times, a few chapters even twenty times” (Matvejević and Spirito 1991, my trans.). In the 2004 Italian edition, the remarks on vinegar are again expanded, occupying one page. We read of different types of vinegar, its preserving processes, its medicinal and ritualistic uses, its Christian meaning, its metaphors in Latin literature, and we learn that ancient etchers and mapmakers used a vinegar-based compost to etch their bronze plates: “It is likely that the first geographical maps were traced in this manner: those *pinaks* which Erodotos had seen in the East (v, 49), plates where the whole Mediterranean was etched” (2004, 261). In his synthetic style, the author covers a vast range of erudition, from the everyday use of vinegar to its symbolic connotations, finally directly connecting that humble ingredient to the earliest representations of the Mediterranean.

Such minute attention devoted to aesthetic concerns and to everyday Mediterranean culture in the midst of war is symptomatic of how Matvejević drafted his *opus magnum*.<sup>14</sup> Yet Matvejević is no modern Bouvard or Pécuchet. Unlike Flaubert’s two characters, who resorted to their encyclopedic inquiries in the seclusion of their country estate, throughout the twenty or so years of the composition of his *Mediterranean Breviary*, Matvejević has been one of Europe’s most vocal voices to call international attention, first to the fate of dissident intellectuals under the Soviet regime, later to the wars in the Balkans, and today to the difficult “*ex-status*” of Eastern Europe.<sup>15</sup> In addition, he has also been actively engaged in promoting the political dimension of the Mediterranean in

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original title, *Mediterranean Breviary*. Because of the discrepancy between the 2004 Italian text and the 1999 English text, I’ll be quoting from both the English and the Italian editions (in the latter case, the translation is mine).

<sup>13</sup> The expression “langue de bois” is used by Matvejević in his essay “Sotto le macerie” (“Under the Debris”) in *Mondo ex* (45-47).

<sup>14</sup> 1991 marks the outbreak of the conflict in ex-Yugoslavia.

<sup>15</sup> Although he now lives in Italy and has acquired double nationality, Croatian and Italian, in November 2005 Matvejević was condemned to five months in prison by a Zagreb court on charges of defamation against a Croatian writer. In an article published in 2001 in a Croatian newspaper, Matvejević had accused a few Serb, Croatian, and Bosnian writers of having incited “national hatred” during the war in ex-Yugoslavia and called them “Christian Talebans.” Matvejević decided not to appeal the Zagreb court’s sentence, and in 2006, he defiantly returned to Croatia for a conference but was not arrested. See Predrag Matvejević Official Homepage and PEN American Center Web Site.

today's Europe (he was nominated "Counselor for the Mediterranean" in the scholarly European Commission, "Group of the Sages," lead by Romano Prodi).<sup>16</sup> Relentlessly publishing in books, academic reviews, journalistic articles, and Internet texts circulated in Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, French, Italian, Russian, and English, Matvejević has reached very wide and multifarious audiences.

In spite of such a diversity of contexts, the more one advances in the reading of the author's many texts, the more one is struck by a pervasive echo effect. Entire paragraphs transmigrate from one essay into another, from observations on the concrete aspects of the Mediterranean landscape to political reflections on Europe, from open letters to dissident writers to comments on Mediterranean photography, from reports on Kosovo refugees and Bosnian *mukhadjirs* to travelogues throughout the Adriatic region.<sup>17</sup> The *Breviary* lays as an island in the midst of a textual sea, which, like its subject, the Mediterranean, is an "intimate sea," a sea of close contacts and metonymic semiosis.<sup>18</sup> On its beaches, the waves of that common sea leave time and again some of the detritus of the other texts/islands and conversely the breviary washes up on the latter. Additions, deletions, and rearrangements continually modify this ceaseless work-in-progress; at the same time, many of paragraphs of the *Breviary* transmigrate into other contexts (journalistic articles or academic essays). Within the Croatian author's oeuvre, there are no definite borders or exclusive belonging to genres, subjects, and audiences. One could say, paraphrasing Matvejević, that the *Breviary's* textual boundaries, like the Mediterranean ones, are similar to "a chalk circle that is constantly traced and erased, that the winds and waves, that obligations and inspirations expand or reduce" (Matvejević 1999, 10).

The 1973 symposium on the Mediterranean Culture awakened in Matvejević the poetic curiosity of a child who grew up in Mostar, a city situated in the Pannonian plains of Herzegovina, fifty kilometers or so from the Adriatic Sea.<sup>19</sup> As any inlander who longs for the nearby sea, Matvejević continues to undertake his task of retrieving Mediterranean identity with both fascination and the inner conviction of a common belonging. Not being a native Mediterranean in the strict geographical sense, he thinks of finding himself in a privileged position for exploring the reasons why such an identity stretches far beyond the coastline:

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

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<sup>16</sup> See Matvejević and De Marco 1.

<sup>17</sup> According to Matvejević, "*Mukhadjir*" is the Arabic term that Bosnians used during the war to refer to refugees ("*Mukhadjirs* de Bosnie," 4) For Matvejević's comments on photography see 1995a; for his comments on Kosovo refugees see the essay "*Mukhadjirs* de Bosnie."

<sup>18</sup> "The Mediterranean is, as I have had occasion to state with enthusiasm, a sea of close neighbors." (Matvejević 1999, 202)

<sup>19</sup> The child's fascination with the sea is thematized in the last pages of the *Breviary* when the author wonders "why we so relish picking up pebbles from the beach and playing with them" and gives examples of the literary *topos* of a child playing with pebbles in different authors through the ages (Matvejević 1999, 215).

Mediterranean traits disperse and the mainland takes over. (Matvejević 1999, 66)

To those of us who grew up on the banks of a river, every genuinely southern river represents a kind of sea. We have no trouble following its Mediterranean element upstream. (69)

For such an inlander affected by “sea tropism” (Bréchon 1996, 183) and “*islomania*” (Durrell in Matvejević 1999, 167-68), it is particularly compelling to address questions of borders (where does the Mediterranean begin and end?) as well as that of the center (where does one encounter the most markedly Mediterranean characteristics?). Is it possible, as Joseph Roth says of Central Europe, that “The center is located at the periphery”?<sup>20</sup> The critic Robert Bréchon comments: “This feeling of being in Mostar, his native town, simultaneously at the center of an ensemble and on a frontier, is no doubt ‘the personal reason’ which has moved [Matvejević] to pursue his geopoetic Mediterranean exploration” (Bréchon 1996, 183, my trans.). Moreover, as an ex-Yugoslav who also has firm roots eastward, in his father’s Russia (his father was born in Odessa), he feels himself traversed by those fault lines that have recently reopened in the Mediterranean region between the south and the east, between Latin Catholicism and Byzantium Orthodox Christianity. Much like the Odessa-born Ukrainian man whom the author meets during his travels, Matvejević considers himself a Mediterranean: “Ex-Ponto,” “from the sea,” and he would thus extend the Mediterranean to include the Black Sea itself (1999, 70).<sup>21</sup> In this respect, the book offers a further exploration into the meaning of “*ex*,” by viewing it both as the privileged investigatory distance and as the moral attitude of a people deprived of certitudes (*The Ex-World*). Like the “modern borders” carried within Chambers’ immigrant, Matvejević’s intimate fractures “expose the instability of abstract distinctions and confines” (Chambers 2008, 7). The *Breviary*, through its constant reworking, thus gives its author an opportunity to develop a “semiotics of border spaces” [“une sémiotique des zones frontalières”], an ongoing reflection on the meaning of those fault lines where “geography and history seem to challenge each other” (Matvejević in Faye 1995, 141-42, my trans.). Paraphrasing the question asked by Jean-Pierre Faye in the opening pages of his book, we could say that for Matvejević the time has come to address the philosophical question: “what, as far as Mediterranean and Europe are concerned, is the border?” (Faye 1995, 12, my trans.).

Stylistically too, the book resists borders and straight narrative lines, refusing to be labeled as an essay or, for that matter, as belonging to any single genre. Instead of engaging in clear-cut distinctions or logical arguments, Matvejević’s book advances as a sea wave, by swirling (“*par volutes*”), by highs (descriptive accumulation of details) and lows (lapidary statements, often in a negative mode) as does the tide. His is a way of reasoning through narration (“*raisonner par récit*”), as Matvejević himself comments in

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<sup>20</sup> Matvejević 1996, 9.

<sup>21</sup> *Ex Ponto* is also the title of a 1918 collection of poetic prose by Ivo Andrić. In that book, the Bosnian writer represents the human condition as one of permanent exile, where we are constantly exposed to the arbitrariness of historic events. See Matvejević’s “Introduction” to the Italian edition of Andrić’s collected works, *Romanzi e Racconti*. As for the Black Sea, in *Breviary*, Matvejević frequently refers to the fact that it rightfully belongs to the Mediterranean both geographically and culturally (1999, 38, 70, 87; 2004, 250).

his contribution to Jean-Pierre Faye's book *La Frontière* [*The Frontier*] (139). Whereas Matvejević indulges in the pleasure of describing, as well as in retelling local stories of natural elements and human artifacts ("petits récits" à la Lyotard), it is, on the other hand, suspicious of generalizations, the kind of metanarratives ["metarécits"] traditionally offered by scholarly discourses that intend "to explain" the Mediterranean.<sup>22</sup>

*Mediterranean Breviary* could be called a "poetic essay" or a "prose poem"; in this sense, it reminds readers of Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, a book which Matvejević admits having had as his "imaginary guide close at hand while writing" (Matvejević 1999, 205). Both are books of memory and imagination, sensually evoking the present and the past, yet also casting anxious interrogatives into the future. As in *Invisible Cities*, the sections of *Mediterranean* are brief tableaux, juxtaposed without a linear plot linking one to the other. In spite of their predominantly descriptive and digressive style, the two books are motivated by a strong ethical purpose, in the best tradition of Montaigne's essays. Moreover, rather than focusing directly on people, the sketches abound in descriptions of objects, products, landscapes, and architectures that bear the traces of human stories. We read in Zaira, one of Calvino's invisible cities, that one cannot adequately describe the city by using a scientific approach (distances, degrees of inclination, raw data); rather the city consists of "the relationships between the measurement of its space and the events of its past" (Calvino 1974, 10). Calvino goes on:

As this wave from memories flows in, the city soaks it up like a sponge and expands. A description of Zaira as it is today should contain all Zaira's past. The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the grating of the windows, the banisters of the steps . . . every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls. (10-11)

Similarly, Matvejević writes that maps "can reveal only the wrinkles of the Mediterranean, not its face" (1999, 98) since, in spite of their pretense toward scientific knowledge, they can offer only a partial representation. Geographical lines and locations can tell us very little about a place; one must learn to interrogate the local at its point of intersection with the temporal (the axis of human history) in order to detect the Mediterranean past, its complex, heterogeneous "face."

Methodically cataloguing all different aspects of its subject, the *Breviary* could also be considered to be a philology of the sea, a gay science, a sort of poetic portulan (especially its second section dedicated to cartography). If we stress its nostalgic overtones, the book can be read as an epic of compassion, a dramaturgy and archive of lost civilizations, of languages, ships, and impressions of intimacy. The Mediterranean basin is both "a passionate collector" (25) and "a vast archive, an immense grave" (23), Matvejević tells us. In spite of his fascination with the relics of the past, the author nonetheless refuses to play the role of the pious "undertaker."<sup>23</sup> His "epics of meticulous description" (La Capria in Matvejević 2003, 8) bear witness to an intoxication with both vocabulary and maritime lore, two passions that seem to feed on each other, the result

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<sup>22</sup> See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*.

<sup>23</sup> "As far as I am concerned, I loathe the undertaker's role." (Matvejević 1996, 12)

being a very lively synesthetic and diachronic image of Mediterranean smells, colors, sounds and flavors. Such qualities lead a critic such as Bréchon to underline the joyous aspects of the book:

The impression of happiness which this book communicates . . . derives from the almost miraculous encounter between its love for marine things and its love for the words used to describe them. . . . To its encyclopedic bulimia, à la Borges (which transforms the book into an infinite inventory) corresponds an equal lexicographic joy, which transforms the verbal accumulation into baroque poetry and reminds one of Rabelais. (Bréchon 1996, 184, my trans.)

Poised between nostalgia and joy, the past to be resurrected and the present to be reinvented, the book yields itself to different readings according to what the reader prefers to underline. As Marco Polo tells Kublai Khan in *Invisible Cities*: “It is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear” (Calvino 1974, 135).

From the beginning, the *Mediterranean Breviary* presents itself as an ongoing voyage with no particular point of departure; there isn’t any specific destination either, rather the book is constructed on the repeated crisscrossing of three types of navigation (by sea, on old maps, and in books and libraries) which correspond to its three sections: “Breviary,” “Maps” and “Glossary.”

Three different courses intersect in the three parts of this cruise. Sailing from one coast to another, I dropped anchor in gulfs and harbors – I described and evoked, as if I were the first, seas and islands, buildings and customs, images and events. Then I followed the same periplus on the courses drawn on old maritime maps, those maps that preserve the names of old coasts and cities, places and rivers. Finally, I covered once more the same itineraries following the writings composed by sailors or pilgrims, wise or eccentric men. Thus the same stories continue and repeat themselves in a way which is every time different, in the three chapters connected to each other and yet each story preserving the approach, the register, the discourse of its chapter: breviary, maps, glossary. (Matvejević 2004, 210-11, my trans.)

The book’s substratum is an intimate mingling of practical and scholarly knowledge, direct nautical experience and sea literature. We read: “All sea voyages have several beginnings and several ends; they are never complete (especially when a book or ship’s log prolongs them)” (1999, 61). Ships, maps, and portulans each narrate their own stories as variations on the same theme, indulging in repetitions that nevertheless manage to show different aspects of the heterogeneity and the heteroglossia of the Mediterranean.

The first section, “Breviary,” is, as the title suggests, a short [*brevis*] compendium of the characteristics of Mediterranean landscapes, flora, fauna, crafts, and populations. The incommensurability of such an epistemological enterprise – writing a “breviary” on such a vast subject – doesn’t escape its author, who admits having been inspired by an even more paradoxical title, *Orbis Breviarium* [*The World Breviary*] by Zacharius Lillius

(published in Florence in 1493) (Matvejević 1999, 136-37). Moreover, since its origins in the eleventh-century Mediterranean monastic tradition, the term “breviary” has closely been associated to religion and traveling. With the rise of mendicant friars who preached by traveling around, there was the need of a shortened daily office contained in a single, portable volume.

In spite of the lay character of his author’s peregrinations, Matvejević’s *Breviary* preserves the ritualistic and sacred connotations of the term. Readers easily fall prey to the enchanted evocations of this book, which rescues ancient intimacies from oblivion, while paying homage to forgotten crafts and resurrecting tools that are no longer in use. For instance, when talking about viticulture and wine, the author makes a point of remembering the Roman soldiers pining for their local wine when they were sent to foreign lands (“I wanted to record this desire,” he writes, “to subtract it from oblivion” [2004, 78, my trans.]), but he also casts a pious glance on humble crafts making: “There are many reasons to spend time in the workshops of the Mediterranean shipbuilders, caulkers, ropemakers, netmakers, or spongemakers; without knowing their works and days, their rites and customs, we can never come to know the Mediterranean, what it was and what it is” (1999, 55).<sup>24</sup>

The section “Breviary” can be read as a ritualistic text also in its formal aspect. Especially in its first pages, many of its short chapters are structured as stanzas of liturgic hymns to be recited; they are invocations that urge one to go beyond the appearances and stereotypes of Mediterranean discourse. The latter is so pervasive and cumbersome that it risks turning each new encomiastic attempt into “*déjà vu*”:

Mediterranean discourse has suffered from Mediterranean discursiveness: sun and sea, scent and color, sandy beaches and islands of fortune, girls maturing young and widows shrouded in black, ports and ships and invitations au voyage, journeys and wrecks and tales thereof, oranges and olives and myrtle, . . . such are the commonplaces plaguing the literature, all description and repetition . . . The Mediterranean is inseparable from its discourse. (Matvejević 1999, 12)

Matvejević’s doesn’t deny the intimate relation of the Mediterranean with its own literature. In this respect, he keeps in mind Calvino’s remark: “One must not confuse the city with the discourse describing it, yet there is a connection between the two” (“The City and the Signs,” 6) (Calvino in Matvejević 1999, 205). Rather, he shows how the sea exceeds those common places and how the first step towards a new poetics is to wonder at that incommensurability. Stylistically, he proceeds by first briefly rehearsing stereotypical views and generalizations, only to immediately undermine them at the end of each paragraph (or stanza) by a short final sentence in the negative mode, which is used in guise of an anaphora (“The Mediterranean is not merely geography” [7]. “The

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<sup>24</sup> Matvejević’s attempt to record evanescent desires is another of the features that accomanates his book to Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*. “Cities and Desire” are one of the categories of Calvino’s book, and for both authors, desire is often understood as a way of looking that is indicative more of what is in the eyes of the beholder than the object itself (cities or the Mediterranean). See, for instance, Despina, the city quoted by Matvejević: “Despina can be reached in two ways: by ship or by camel. The city looks different when approached by land and when approached by sea” (Calvino 1974, 25; Matvejević 1999, 205).



Mediterranean is not merely history” [1]. “Mediterranean cultures are not merely national cultures” [11]. “The Mediterranean is not merely belonging” [12].) In other cases, the final anaphoric sentence enhance contradictions: “The Mediterranean has never been merely Europe – for a long time, it has been more, for an equally long time, it has perhaps become less – yet they cannot be one without the other” (2004, 19). Elsewhere, whenever the author fears that the swelling of his lyrical description could prevail, he deflates it by introducing distance and irony. For instance, when his topic is a trite poetic subject such as the smell of the sea, he chooses to do it indirectly by listing how people talk about the many smells of the sea and punctuates his prose with parenthetical comments: “(This is repeated everywhere) . . . (This too is repeated) . . . (People talk often about this in sentimental descriptions of encounters and departures)” (2004, 61).

The result is that the Mediterranean is as much disnarrated as it is narrated by such rhetorical techniques. Traditional discourses on the sea are thus constituted as the antimodel in terms of which Matvejević’s narrative text defines itself. Matvejević’s critique of Mediterranean discursiveness from within, his rehearsing of Mediterranean stereotypes while at the same time denouncing them, has exposed his *Breviary* to harsh critiques from historians who read it as an example of a “failed” historical account. This is the case of the noted British historians Horden and Purcell, who recently wrote:

The book is unclassifiable: part historical *mélange*, part contemporary evocation. . . . Above all, there is the romance of ports, the ships, and the seafarers: “I have listened to people living on both north and south coasts of the Mediterranean speak of sea smells. I have taken careful notes.” This is Braudel as rewritten by Walt Whitman. Everything is on the surface, and a frictionless one at that. Generalizations meet no resistance. The book is – for the most part – a study really “of” the Mediterranean. Yet it is scarcely history. (Horden and Purcell 2006, 731)

As noted above, the rhetorical strategy adopted by Matvejević is precisely to rehearse such generalizations, to acknowledge their pervasive presence, yet to show us also how their “frictionless surface,” which encrusts all writing on the Mediterranean, is only one voice of his heteroglossic book. The *Breviary* takes its distance from such *lieux communs* just as it distances itself from traditional historical discourse, which desires to enclose the Mediterranean within analytical categories without questioning them. It purposefully interrogates the fault lines that have opened within recent Mediterranean history in search of new ways of investigating worn-out paradigms. Horden and Purcell fail to realize that the book is in fact a complex and subtle critique of Mediterraneism and that Matvejević’s braided histories are an indictment of the inadequacy of any single discipline in narrating the Mediterranean. The *Breviary* celebrates the interconnectivity of stories and histories in order to search for a collective communal identity.<sup>25</sup>

While acknowledging that all the principal forms of Western discourse, and not only the poetical one, were born in that basin, Matvejević also admits that they are in need of renewal in order to avoid trite repetitions: “The forms of rhetoric and narration, of

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<sup>25</sup> “Connectivity” is also the fourth stage in the fourfold model (of risk regime, logic of production, topographical fragmentation, and internal connectivity) that Horden and Purcell propose as a way of “embracing the characteristic variability of Mediterranean human ecology.” (Horden and Purcell 733)

politics and even dialectic, invention of the Mediterranean spirit, have served for too long and seem more and more worn out” (1995a, 106; 2004, 133). Matvejević’s critique of Mediterranean culture thus extends to a more general critique of European thought, the conceptual grids that have fabricated the supremacy of Western intellectual tradition. In this aspect, his position is similar to the one taken by the postcolonial critic Dipesh Chakrabarty in *Provincializing Europe*. While recognizing his debt to that heritage, Chakrabarty also denounces European thought as “both indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the various practices of life that constitute the political and the historical in India” (Chakrabarty 2000, 6). Similarly, for the Bosnian Croat author, the Mediterranean is to be understood by revolutionizing from within the way we narrate and conceptualize its spaces and practices of life. We should view it as both a palimpsest, in which layers of ancient lore have accumulated over the centuries, and a palingenesis that exhorts us to renew its institutions and ways of thinking. The *Breviary*’s epistemological enterprise is thus constructed as a voyage which both ceaselessly returns to its familiar shores and takes off in new uncharted directions: “Eternal rituals of departure and farewell, dramas of separation and return, emphasis and parody, circular movements and attempts at getting out, palingenesis and palimpsest” (Matvejević 2004, 133). The alternative, if we don’t brave exploring conceptual networks and narrative structures that are unfamiliar, is to run the risk of reverting to the Mediterranean’s own mythology: “The rest is mythology. Let’s not forget that it too was born on the Mediterranean coasts” (134).

In “Maps,” the second section of Matvejević *Breviary*, the author shows us how maps, particularly ancient maps, are still an integral part of both our understanding of the Mediterranean and its mythology. Here too, as in the previous section, Matvejević underlines the redundant character of any new representation and the impossibility of casting an entirely fresh glance. Contrarily to what Heraclitus asserted, we end up by always bathing in the same waters, or, to be more precise, in waters our mental habits construct as similar to the ones we have already bathed in. Matvejević writes at the beginning of this section: “We see [the Mediterranean] as others have seen it – in the pictures they draw, the histories they tell. We cognize it and recognize it simultaneously. We are familiar with seas we have never laid eyes on or bathed in. No view of the Mediterranean is completely autonomous, nor are the descriptions in my breviary all mine” (95). He then concludes the section by commenting: “which brings us back to the starting point of our periplus. The more we know of our sea, the less we view it alone. The Mediterranean is not a sea of solitude” (137). By transmitting both “knowledge and experience: space and the conception of space, world, and worldview” (95), ancient maps inform our mental geography even when we don’t think of them as anymore geographically accurate. For Matvejević, for instance, it is important to know which towns used to be seaports because they often still display markedly maritime characteristics although they are now quite far from the sea (205).

Similarly, on the autobiographical level, old postcards, family albums, black-and-white or sepia photographs also “play a role in familiarizing us with the sea and the coast” (131). By reminding us of our first encounters with that landscape, they contribute

to shape our new encounters.<sup>26</sup> It is clear that for the Bosnian Croat author, the plural identity of the Mediterranean is funded on this constant osmosis between past and present, geography and history, cartography and autobiography. The poetics of the Mediterranean is one of ceaseless *metissage* – there is no personal destiny, only destinies reunited together – which also requires a hybridization of genres, of fiction and human sciences. “There is a boundary, the sages claimed, between the probable and the improbable or, as we put it today, between tropes of history and of narrative; the periplus overstepped the boundary and belonged more to the realm of fantastic exploits” (102). Yet, even if imaginary accounts of fortunate islands appeared as early as the first maps, it is important for Matvejević to think that science and fiction supplement each other yet they should not be conflated into an indistinct ensemble of equivalent stories (a bad version of postmodern *pastiche*); his poetics of *metissage* respect their differences and contrast the play of mutual influences. He reminds us that since the beginning, ancient Greece cartographers were keen on making a distinction between their science and writers’ tales about uncharted territories; they believed in the specificity of the two discourses (102-03). If specificity is respected, what is missing in Matvejević’s *Mediterranean Breviary* is a hierarchical and purist view of how the Mediterranean should be narrated; old maps can tell us about that sea as much as the most accurate contemporary maps, even the most scientific representations are indebted to fantastic accounts of the past, imagination and exactitude enhance each other in this sea of close contacts.

Whereas in the second section of his book, “Maps,” Matvejević shows his love for ancient maps, the third section, “Glossary,” betrays his passion for philology and languages. Very much like the first section, “Breviary,” “Glossary” starts in the negative mode, taking its distance from authoritative discourse. The latter is characterized by “common places,” which, under the pretense of neutral knowledge, end up by perpetrating a geography founded on power relations and asymmetries. Only in this section, unlike in the two preceding ones, the narrative voice adopts the more intimate tone of the first person pronoun:

I will not go into the fine points of the climate, the ebb and flow of the tides, the natural harbors, the modest distances . . . the fact that the ancient world was plowing our sea while others were still peering timorously out at the ocean. Such points can be found in any maritime encyclopedia. The history of the Mediterranean has been written many times over. (Matvejević 1999, 139)

To such knowledgeable history the author prefers the humble attitude of Borges when the latter writes: “The sea is a primordial language we cannot decipher.” Matvejević comments: “I have kept his words in mind while looking into the various names for the sea, leafing through lexicons of seagoing peoples, putting together this cultural landscape of the Mediterranean and especially this glossary” (147). His way of approaching the Mediterranean chronotope in its long *durée* is a personal glossary, one that delves into

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<sup>26</sup> Matvejević also reminds us that postcards played an important role in Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*. He quotes from “Cities and Memory,”: “In Maurilia the traveler is invited to tour the city and at the same time to look through old picture postcards showing it as it used to be” (Calvino in Matvejević 1999, 205).

“the *koiné* of words and things, attitudes and ideas” (139), a *koiné* shared by various Mediterranean dialects in spite of the rampant “*campanilismo*” dividing them.<sup>27</sup> The glossary is personal because it doesn’t claim to be exhaustive. (The author acknowledges his limitations and preferences: “The result is less a glossary of the Mediterranean than a glossary to my breviary” [142].) Yet, it also allows the reader to indulge in a more personal way of reading than allowed by any linear historical narrative.

Glossaries offer more freedom than do dictionaries: the user can skip around on the basis of need or caprice; they are also more philological or literary by nature. They might best be compared to a Mediterranean satire, *satura* being originally a dish of mixed Mediterranean fruits, a *lanx satura* or medley. (139)

Mixing philology and literature, history and sailors’ tales, dead and living languages, the glossary is the form best fit to narrate the hybridity of Mediterranean culture across the ages. In writing this section, Matvejević was particularly inspired by the *Glossaire nautique* written in 1848 by Augustin Jal, “an amateur and a seafarer,” who “occasionally used the pseudonym Fictor, which gives him a special place in [Matvejević’s] narrative” (214). Matvejević shares Augustin Jal’s belief that “the sea is absolute, but his designations are relative” (146); conversely, names used for winds, colors, borders, peoples, insults and curses, ships, nautical items, tools, measures vary widely from dialect to dialect, yet they also mysteriously travel from one culture to another mutually affecting each other and denoting a commonality of life practices. For Matvejević, the Mediterranean is a theatre where semantic variety and constant semantic slippage feed on each other: its close space and forced contiguity are responsible, on one hand, for enhancing linguistic differences and *campanilismo* and, on the other hand, for facilitating borrowings and permeability, which both derive from and reinforce a common cultural substratum. At the end of the section, on the last page of his book, Matvejević once more quotes Jal:

Though the words may differ, the language used by people of the sea has the same figures, the same energy, the same concision . . . The practice of handling the same equipment, braving the same risks, and witnessing the same impressive spectacles has given sailors of all countries the same tropes. Their poetry is one; its means of expression cannot vary greatly” (*Glossaire nautique* 12-13) (Matvejević 1999, 218)

Matvejević’s glossary underlines the centripetal forces of languages beyond appearances, its joyous lexicography contrasts with the pessimistic remarks about unresolvable historical contradictions that constitute a relevant part of the *Breviary* as a whole. The author’s love for words and for the Mediterranean phenomenology, as well as his meticulous linguistic archeology reminds us of the Catalan watchmaker, one of the few individual characters introduced in the *Breviary*:

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<sup>27</sup> “*Campanilismo*,” which comes from the Italian word “*campanile*” (church belfry), denotes an attitude of excessive and exclusive attachment to one’s own town or country.

In Alexandria I met a Catalonian, watchmaker by trade, whose goal in life was to gather the scant data available and compile a catalogue of the devastated library, the largest in antiquity. He considered his native language doomed to extinction and hoped his efforts in another domain would help to make up for the loss. (Matvejević 1999, 143)

Whenever history seems to have come to an end, cataloguing of any kind takes on an existential and redemptive meaning, as if by dedicating oneself to such projects one could contrast the extinction process. Confronted with an experience of loss, both the Catalonian watchmaker and the Bosnian Croat writer cling to words shored up against the destiny of an ex-language or an ex-country and, in turn, “things seem to cling to words” (Bréchon 1996, 184) in order to prove their existence, or, more precisely, their “ex-istance.” Although Matvejević’s gay philology reflects a lifetime of passion for words, the methodical compilation of the Mediterranean glossary has recently become particularly urgent for him, forming, as it does, an indirect response to the many fault lines opened by recent history in the Balkans, fault lines that have caused the author to experience his identity as a matter of malaise.<sup>28</sup>

### *III. Does the Mediterranean exist beyond our imaginary*

Although the division of the *Mediterranean Breviary* into three parts is justified by a certain insistence, in each section, on a particular perspective (phenomenology, cartography, and philology), the three parts complete each other, and their boundaries are ceaselessly trespassed by their author, who returns time and again to descriptions of their shared elements. Like the nine categories used by Calvino to introduce his *Invisible Cities*, Matvejević’s are arbitrary divisions, which the narrative undoes, ultimately demonstrating that no narrative mode excludes the others and that the interconnectedness of the Mediterranean space can be studied only by a hybrid approach. The picture one gets from Matvejević’s *satura* is of “a complex, heterogeneous and sometimes centrifugal mosaic” (Magris in Matvejević 1999, 3), a discrete ensemble made up of eccentricities that cannot be subsumed under a dominant discourse.<sup>29</sup> Matvejević’s repeated emphasis on the duality of perspectives – how different waves, foam, clouds, soil, colors, rivers appear from the coast and from the sea – reminds us of the intrinsically double nature of the Mediterranean, a sea which takes its name from the land circumscribing it. Yet such a dichotomy, or for that matter any other dichotomy, doesn’t offer an adequate methodological approach: “Mediterranean features do not dovetail completely with other entities; they do not enter into all aspects of the relationship between coast and mainland, North and South, and East or West and South” (Matvejević 1999, 10).

If dichotomies don’t represent an appropriate hermeneutical strategy for understanding the Mediterranean, even worse distortions have occurred whenever the

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<sup>28</sup> The author acknowledges that his identity malaise is similar to the one Muslim intellectuals living in Bosnia have been experiencing for a long time, although he was unaware of it until the recent war: “I had no idea of the ‘existential malaise’ they evoked nor I realized that they could experienced such an ‘identity pain.’ Perhaps we were unaware of many aspects of our country” (Matvejević in Palumbo 21, my trans.).

<sup>29</sup> “The Mediterranean as a whole is composed of many subsets that challenge or refuse the unifying concepts” (Matvejević 2004, 302; Matvejević and De Mauro 1).

differences or similarities among its nations and races have been accentuated or minimized from the standpoint of a monologic perspective. Matvejević remarks:

The Mediterranean will not abide a scale incommensurate with itself. We do it an injustice by approaching it from a Eurocentric point of view, that is, as an exclusively Latin, Roman, or Romance creation, or from a pure pan-Hellenic, pan-Arab, or Zionist point of view, that is, on the basis of a particularist criterion, be it ethnic, religious, or political. (Matvejević 1999, 11)

The strategy adopted by Matvejević in his *Mediterranean Breviary* is not so much to question “the repeated impulse to piece the Mediterranean mosaic together” (10) but instead to critique the manner in which this is usually done, according to a traditional poetics of space that privileges its center over the margins and translates distance into cultural inferiority. If we want to break away from such conceptual molds, geography as well as geometry must be reconceptualized. He invites us to view the notions of periphery and center, symmetries and asymmetries, proximity and distance – no longer as abstract geometrical concepts, but as terms charged with value judgments (Matvejević 2004, 133; 1996, 91). The Mediterranean has long ceased to be “the First Sea,” yet its representations, for the most part, still subscribe to a hegemonic ideology, a historicism that views its tradition as a ceaseless unfolding of unitary historic time and considers that sea to be “the cradle of civilization.” Peoples and places are often represented according to a logics of value based on this unifying historical development. Matvejević writes: “To grasp the Mediterranean only by taking its history remains a tenacious habit. . . . This ‘homeland of the myths’ endures the mythology that it generated or others fed. This space, so rich of history was victim of historicisms” (Matvejević and De Marco 2000, 2). As the critic Dipesh Chakrabarty has pointed out in his provocative study, *Provincializing Europe*, historicism is the bedrock of Europe’s narration of modernity. The Mediterranean Matvejević is seeking to provincialize is, like Europe for Chakrabarty, “an imaginary figure that remains deeply embedded in *clichéd* and shorthand forms in some everyday ways of thought” (Chakrabarty 2000, 4); decentering such figures “becomes the task of exploring how this thought – which is now everybody’s heritage and which affects us all – may be renewed from the margins” (16).

The condition of being on the margins is familiar to an author who, as we have seen, is a mainlander who pines for the sea and a man who lives in exile from his ex-worlds (the “Other Europe” that collapsed after 1989). He opens his essay on Central Europe in *Mondo “ex” (The Ex-World)* by quoting Borges’ remarks on the disappearance of the center: “A wise man from another continent evokes ‘the center which doesn’t exist any longer’ or which exists only ‘because it is considered as such.’ This seems to concern also Europe and, even more rightly, apply to Central Europe” (Matvejević 1998a, 115).<sup>30</sup> As an intellectual who comes from an ex-ideology (the dissident *intelligentsia* within the former Communist Block), the writer has personally experienced the difficulty that comes from losing the center: “Our discourses seem almost inevitably out of phase, their center of gravity seems displaced” (9). The question of cultural borders is intimately

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<sup>30</sup> An earlier version of that essay can be found in *Il Mediterraneo e l’Europa* and the title is “The Ghost of Central Europe” (Matvejević 1998, 52-64)

connected to that of the center: in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the recent Balkan wars, identities and feelings of belonging within the space of Europe and the Mediterranean have been shattered; they have become a matter of malaise. Matvejević's situation "between exile and asylum" – between a bygone reality which has worn out, yet still weights heavily on his consciousness – represents the standpoint par excellence of the postmodern intellectual or, more generally, of any critical writer. Matvejević quotes the Jewish writer from Mitteleurope Gregor von Rezzori:

Feeling "ex" is the frame of mind of modern man in general. . . . I believe that the awareness of being "ex" constitutes a considerable advantage for the writer . . .

It seems to me that a writer is always an "ex" vis-à-vis reality as it presents itself and in relation to how things are. . . . It isn't only Marxism's case, all ideologies must be rethought over, they are already now "ex." . . . (von Rezzori in Matvejević 1996, 11-12)

The pitfall for a writer who speaks from the decentered position of an "ex" is nostalgia, remaining anchored in the past and "living a somewhat posthumous existence" (7). Matvejević is well aware of the danger of letting retrospective views prevail over perspectives when writing about a Mediterranean, which has lost its central axis. Although *Mediterranean Breviary* was first published in 1987, he has continued working on it from his newly acquired perspective of "ex" (both during and after the Yugoslavian wars). How else can one, for instance, read the addenda to his 2004 edition, such as the following grieved remark?

Many races and tribes came together, mingled and fused, every attempt at "ethnic cleansing" on the Mediterranean is absurd and inhuman. . . . Nationality has always been shaky in the Mediterranean" Matvejević 2004, 290)

Matvejević's Mediterranean chronotope registers divisions and alliances as part of a complex hybridity which is impossible to disentangle and which has historically been the cause of creative as well as destructive effects. Throughout the book, contiguity and proximity are praised as the spatial condition that has fostered the development of Mediterranean cultures, its similarities and differences, its tolerance and ignorance. In his detailed description of Mediterranean phenomenology, the ex-Yugoslavian author spins metonymic networks between nature, dwellers, and crafts or man-made architecture. For instance, when he describes natural ports, piers, ships, and sailors, he comments on their mutual transformation:

Piers on which long years of service have left their mark cannot be distinguished from the surrounding rocks. When a pier develops cracks or begins to sag, further consequences are in the offing. Some piers are like elongated ships: they await their ships so patiently that in the end they come to resemble them. Piers encourage old salts to recount their youths

with no regrets. On the Mediterranean the flesh ages faster than the spirit.  
(Matvejević 1999, 14)

Fishing nets are another telling example of how one can deduce the intimate intermingling of fish, ships, and human desire from an ancient tool. By meticulously describing their many varieties and listing the different modalities of their use, the writer shows how nets can be considered “parables” of the Mediterranean in the etymological meaning of the word, that is to say, how they allow us to place side by side entities in order to reveal their affinities (Matvejević 1999, 59-60).<sup>31</sup>

As the Italian writer Claudio Magris comments, in his preface to *Mediterranean Breviary*: “Borders that once seemed clear-cut and concentric suddenly lose their contours and start meandering, looking more like isobars or wave crests” (Magris in Matvejević 1999, 4). It is as if the silent poetry of landscapes, things, and crafts, as well as the philological excavation of everyday words, succeeds in asserting a humble communal identity against the clamor of inhuman wars and the retracing of borders on our maps. What is, then, the moral behind Matvejević’s parables of the Mediterranean? What are the social and political implications of the poetics of intimate space traced by this book? What relations are there between metonymic networks that involve humans, nature, and *techné* and the historical divisions of nationalisms, of religious schisms, of ethnic conflicts, of “*campanilismi*”? Is the concept of a Mediterranean culture merely rhetorical?

In an essay written in 1995 and later partially integrated into the latest edition of his *Breviary*, Matvejević reflects once more on the subject of Mediterranean identities and interrogates himself about the viability of Mediterranean alternatives to globalization, Eurocentrism, and interethnic conflicts.<sup>32</sup> After asking: “Does the Mediterranean exist beyond our imaginary?” (Matvejević and De Mauro, 2), he once more rejects the temptation to let historical pessimism carry the day. The author believes that, at present, the alternative of an intramediterranean culture cannot be formulated yet as an imminent project; he nevertheless invites us to share “a differential vision,” a more modest goal, yet no less difficult to realize (2). To the traditional way of construing the Mediterranean as “a state of being,” a constant, he opposes “an identity of doing” projected into the future, a collective praxis geared to build a new civil society. Differential civility here must be understood as a form of cohabitation that presupposes the recognition of conflicts within a common space and the inclusion of the whole kit and caboodle into the plural identity of “*mare nostrum*.”<sup>33</sup> In order to envision this new identity “in the making,” he then

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<sup>31</sup> “Parabolic” derives from the Greek “para” (beside) and “ballein” (to throw). Accordingly, a parable is “a comparison, a similitude; any saying or narration in which something is expressed in terms of something else” (Taylor 103). As for the religious connotations associated with the term ‘parable,’ while Matvejević relies on things and crafts to tell us “parables” of the Mediterranean, he also fears the danger of turning his *Breviary* into a “Gospel,” that is to say, a principle or ideology to which all other representations of the sea should be reduced (Matvejević 1999, 137; 2004, 211).

<sup>32</sup> Matvejević in Jodice 1995; Matvejević and De Marco; “Euro-Mediterranean Cultural Dialogue”; “Il Mediterraneo di ieri e oggi”; 1995c; 1998a, 23-32; 2004, 133-34 and 302-03.

<sup>33</sup> I borrow such an understanding of civility from Balibar’s essay “Three Concepts of Politics: Emancipation, Transformation, Civility.” (Balibar 1-39). It is meant also as a qualifier of the concept of “convivialità” (or, *convivencia*) which I discuss earlier on (see footnote 5).



makes an appeal to the potential for renewal that has always characterized the Mediterranean spirit.

For a long time, this vast amphitheatre has witnessed the same play on its stage, the point is that the gestures of its actors are now well known and foreseeable. However, its genius has succeeded in reaffirming its creativeness every time, by renewing its typical way of telling stories without comparison. (Matvejević and De Marco 2006, 2)

Such is the fabulation of Matvejević's *Breviary*, one which can project a new history of the Mediterranean without Greece at its center (1999, 79) or succeed in tying back "the many old sunken ropes which have been broken or torn by intolerance and ignorance" (2004, 302).

Although Matvejević no longer sees any possibility for such reconstruction during either his or the following generation, he does share the tenuous hope of an exiled Croatian friend, a man who says to him, in Italian: "Forse tuttavia un giorno" ["Maybe, perhaps, one day"] ("Sull'Adriatico, il Kosovo," 14). It is interesting to note that, while most of Matvejević's essays end on an interrogative note which seems to find no answer, his *Mediterranean Breviary* ends instead with a long description of one of the oldest inhabitants of that region, the donkey.<sup>34</sup> In addition to an ironic and indirect homage to his predecessor Fernand Braudel (the first historian to underline the importance of the "long durée" chronotope and geography rather than sensational events and human history in the study of the Mediterranean), Matvejević also offers here a way of celebrating those common manners and ways of life that exist in spite of separations and conflicts. He seems to tell us that the description of a donkey, or of the many uses of vinegar, or of the recipe for that stone soup that can be found on all islands (Matvejević 1999, 178-79), all are humble, yet persuasive ways of piecing together a collective identity which human history has repeatedly shattered, a heteroglossia that separatist ideologies have dismissed. The critic Bréchon writes: "Matvejević woefully professes his disenchanting, yet not desperate, humanistic faith" (Bréchon in Matvejević 1996, 180); we might add that he does so by relegating the humans to a secondary role.

If we are to think of new rhetorical and narrative forms as a means to counter old historicisms, the worn-out modes of "Mediterraneism" and the political asymmetries fabricated by the West, a book like *Mediterranean Breviary*, although tragically marked by the "ex's" (or perhaps, precisely because of it), may yet serve as our breviary for representing the Mediterranean community – this sea "vasto e diverso / e insieme fisso" ["vast and diverse / and still constant"] (Montale 52).

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<sup>34</sup> It should be noted that the donkey description is missing in the English edition.

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