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IMAGINED GEOGRAPHIES

the walk liberating, I was released from forms,
from the perpendiculars,
straight lines, blocks, boxes, binds
of thought
into the hues, shadings, rises, flowing bends and blends
of sight:
I allow myself eddies of meaning:
yield to a direction of significance
running
like a stream through the geography of my work:
[. . .]
I see narrow orders, limited tightness, but will
not run to that easy victory:
still around the looser, wider forces at work:
I will try
to fasten into order enlarging grasps of disorder, widening
scope, but enjoying the freedom that
Scope eludes my grasp, that there is no finality of vision,
that I have perceived nothing completely,
that tomorrow's walk is a new walk.

—A. R. Ammons, “Corson’s Inlet”¹

As is evident in Mme de Staël’s 1816 essay, “The Spirit of Translation,” which opens this special issue (presented and translated by Joseph Luzzi), modern literary criticism from its inception thrives on the Italian oxymoron “traduttore, traditore”: there is at once renewal and betrayal in negotiating the tension between national literatures in their symbiosis with the spirit of a specific people, language, and geographical territory, on the one hand, and on the other, the literary or more broadly the aesthetic as a “kind of pleasure” that transcends cultural differences and aspires “toward the universal.” Focusing on particular moments of dialogue and disjunction between the Italian and French national traditions, the essays that follow

1. A. R. Ammons, *The Selected Poems (Expanded Edition)* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1986), 43, 46.

reflect on the tension adumbrated in Mme de Staël's essay: to what extent do writers who in various ways cross national boundaries shed new light on the purported homogeneity of these traditions as well as on the questionable autonomy of aesthetic experience? What is at stake in their often ambivalent espousal of a universalizing or a cosmopolitan ethos combined with a self-conscious search for specificity of language and place? Where does the balance lie between the assertion of difference and the attraction of contamination, and on a different level, between the desire for an absolute ground and the critique of the illusions of grounding?

It would be predictable for investigations into the intersections between national traditions to call into question the very notion of a national literature as a discrete geographically determined entity, opening a fruitful discussion of its institutional and intellectual underpinnings, be they nationalist politics or at the other extreme the compartmentalization and relative marginality of foreign language departments in the North American university system. Effectively this comes down to insisting that translation or cross-cultural crossing is an inevitable betrayal, which can expose but not transcend the constructed and highly relative coherence of different literary and cultural milieus. The task of the comparatist is to unveil and historicize the imagination that makes these geographies possible. Perhaps equally predictable would be the opposite extreme: if the geographies of national traditions are purely imaginary, unity lies in the aesthetic imagination, and, in turn, translation or bridging the gap between cultures means to distill their common essence. The comparatist's goal here is a broader vision whence a true geography of the mind might emerge. Another way of envisioning these options is to ask whether the study of foreign literatures and cultures in our universities aims to heighten self-conscious awareness of difference or in contrast to form minds open to deeper similarities, and thus to more global notions of aesthetic and human experience. Putting the question this way suggests that of course, we want both; and indeed the essays in this volume turn away from the predictable extremes and delve into the more difficult task of considering how apparent opposites do not collapse into synthesis but coexist in dynamic tension. Imagined geographies, in other words, are at once constructed and natural—and the latter is, inevitably, a slippery term for what is not relative.

De Staël's essay already points to this dynamism, for she argues that a national tradition, in this case Italy's, can only be revived through the interference of external forces that act, according to her imagery, via obstruction, preventing complacency, and this implies that creativity lies most radically in differentiation: the alienness of translated works is what would "rid [Italian] of certain commonplace forms" and so revive the "natural dignity" and the "originality" inherent in Italian itself. At the same time, Monti's *Iliad* is praised for "providing us with the sensations produced by the Homeric Greek," and by implication it is aesthetic sensation's ability to traverse

boundaries and unify experience which is natural and, paradoxically, underlies the very possibility and perception of difference: it is only when “Shakespeare and Friedrich Schiller have become fellow countrymen” that a “German national literature” is born, and similarly Monti’s *Iliad* is a promising beginning for an Italian national literature.

Oxymoron, dynamism, and paradox thus best describe the tension of nature and culture, universality and originality, order and disorder at work in imagined geographies. As figures of contradiction, these terms point to skeptical and pre-Socratic philosophies, in which the “polemical” or destabilizing effect of thought is not ultimately resolved into what we might now call hegemony, ideology, or systematic thinking. As Mortley writes of the famous paradoxical statement, “I always lie,” the philosophical impetus here is not to find a way out of a logical conundrum, but unexpectedly to experience a paradigm shift that according to the skeptics, “produce[s] peace.”² The shift has something to do with accepting the limits of human understanding as well as the artificiality of language and logic; yet it is important to notice that paradoxical statements are still *about* something (in this case truth) and that therefore they associate limits with a specific place or scene of tension (in this case, enunciation, and the tension between performative and descriptive uses of language). Moreover, the polemical power of such statements has a short life, caught between the emergence of contradictory terms (what the speaker is saying and what he is doing, in our example) and their flattening into binary opposition and superior synthesis (such as a theory of language that opposes performative and descriptive); to remain incisive, paradoxical thinking must continue to shift its terms, a new scene of tension must emerge to question synthesis (a new paradox, such as the statement, “I am dead,” shows that perhaps the whole problem is not about performance versus description, but about language and agency, about *who* in fact is speaking in both of these statements, is it a unitary or ‘real’ person?). In sum then, the peace obtained through the experience of contradiction lies in glimpsing though not grasping *where*, and for a moment only, our limits lie. And, finally, why peace?: it would seem that to give a name, however temporary and paradoxical, to our questions and fears, is literally to make a place for them, to ground them and assert that certain things are of ultimate concern.

I pause on this dynamic of paradox, for what is most remarkable, in reading together these essays that in a variety of ways depart from the initial tension of the natural and the national, is that they generate many new varieties of this tension, none of which overlap as would a series of parallel oppositions: natural/national can branch out toward ethical/political, transcendent/constructed, memory/history, utopia/dystopia, and many more, but in each case we learn in a slightly new way how reality eludes a single overarching

2. Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, vol. 1, *The Rise and Fall of Logos* (Bonn: Hanstein, 1986), 35.

order even as the questions raised by these terms are crucial. Geography names this dynamic insofar as it questions the natural as a marker of difference by exploring its shifting position: realist and constructivist positions vie over whether nature is a scientific fact to be protected pragmatically or a cultural understanding that requires renewed imaginary awareness. This in turn points back to the Romantic shift in thinking, in which both national literatures and literary criticism as we know them are born, for then too nature is caught in the paradox of the sublime: at once ineffable and transcendent and in some ultimate way real, it is also tied to the most intimate dwelling in specific places and to the awareness of their decay. What is at stake then in imagined geographies is the movement itself whereby difference or the natural emerges as real precisely via the multiplicity of its constructions: there is not so much a truth underlying shifting paradoxes as there is a persistent concern, in this case with what maintains the link between the aesthetic and the particular: time, place, scale, and embodiment are of ultimate concern even as they cannot be delimited once and for all. Borrowing from A. R. Ammons, aesthetic experience is “like a stream,” “a direction of significance,” which eludes any totalizing grasp yet yields “eddies of meaning” via “the hues, shadings, rises, flowing bends and blends” of a geography at once concrete and imaginary, and all the more precious for it lasting only until the next tide reconfigures it. Arguably, then, literature’s gnoseological wager rests between the discovery that “there is no finality of vision” and the movement “into order enlarging grasps of disorder.”

This movement is visible as the essays in this special issue unfold, and I propose one brief reading of it. The first three essays turn to how the tension of the natural and national plays out in reflections on language, translation, and literary criticism; they are followed by three essays in which the tension shifts to the search for stable social narratives in the face of aesthetic indeterminacy; then, four more essays address more explicitly the ambiguity of individual identity, which aesthetic and cultural mediation—the work of memory—cannot entirely redeem from precariousness; finally, the last two essays explore the metaphysical dimension of this precariousness, focusing on a moment of suspension or of forgetting which redeems or at least brings forgiveness to the experience that “Scope eludes [our] grasp.”

Paola Gambarota explores the context in which de Staël’s essay developed, tracing Bouhours’s association of “the spirit of the nation” with “the spirit of the language” and Vico’s ambivalent response. Focusing on the hyperbaton or inversion, she argues that Bouhours shifts the association of syntax and more generally linguistic “order” with universalizing values such as reason and clarity, to a link between word order and an “expressivity” which is depicted as “natural” to a particular people: hence in his argument, French women and peasants are not only included but the best example of how French speech “follow[s] exactly the natural order of things” whereas Latin, Spanish, and Italian fall into “servitude” to passions they cannot control as evidenced in

the “disorder” of the hyperbaton. Vico, in turn, reverses Bouhours’ argument in two ways: on the one hand he argues that “language shapes the *ingenium* of the people,” hence their passions, and not the reverse; yet on the other he resists “hardening [. . .] this argument into a theory of linguistic relativism” by insisting on “*universali fantastici*,” or a “pre-verbal imaginative logic,” whereby the passions, and inversion’s link to them, is at once a rhetorical and historically contingent construction, and an anthropological category.

Looking back to Italian *volgarizzamenti* in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Alison Cornish depicts a time and place when “the borders between literatures, as well as nations, are much more fluid,” arguing that such works are not incompatible with the rise of humanism since they are neither a “submission” nor a complete “conquest” of French culture on the part of Italians. This complexity is reflected in Dante’s shifting views of the vernacular tongues, as well as in the development of “franco-veneto,” a hybrid that could be seen as much as a failure to adapt to French models as a resistance to them; this same shifting complexity is seen in the Italian reception of *Li fait des romains* as well as the *Tresor*, both of which reflect for Cornish “the provisional nature of translation,” and its deliberate dwelling in a “never completely native, never completely natural” borderland, where “poverty of imitation” can paradoxically become a form of originality.

Luca Somigli’s essay on Marinetti’s early criticism harks back to these reflections on translation, for the late 1890s debate on the shape of a “renaissance latine” that would renew Italian letters once again hinges on the opposition between “autochthonous ‘Latin’ cultural values” defined against the “morbid somberness” of both Germanic letters and French symbolism, and a kind of “cosmopolitan” Latinity derived from the assimilation of the symbolist lesson. As Somigli argues, Marinetti’s position at this moment, before the birth of Futurism but when he is beginning to turn away from France and toward Italy, is decidedly ambivalent: in the divide between the “Ideal” and the real, literature is an illness yet also an injection of life, so that both Wagner (as symptom of decadence) and Nietzsche (as critic of decadence, albeit one Marinetti sought to surpass) are needed in order to produce a renewal which is itself still a question and not an answer about “where exactly contemporary culture is going.” Somigli’s essay leaves Marinetti at this “impasse,” which could also be summed up in the oxymoron “decadent renaissance,” itself a fruitful way of interpreting Futurism and its passion for creative destruction.

Enrico Cesaretti’s analysis of Marinetti’s *Le Roi Bombance* and its relation to Adam’s *Lettres de Malaisie* repropose this same author’s ambivalence in terms of utopia and dystopia: just as Adam’s apparent utopia contains upon careful reading an emergent “malaise” and finally sheds a subversive light on a harmony “achieved at the price of widespread and oppressive state control,” Marinetti’s play, conversely, begins as an apparent dystopia or “critique of those who ‘sell’ the dream of universal happiness,” but, in rejecting the “cult of history that afflicts modern man,”

“leaves the space empty and ready for the future possibility of an absolute beginning.” Bringing together Adam and Marinetti allows Cesaretti to show that the utopian structure of deriving presence from absence coexists with its shadow, the dystopic consumption or “dyspeptic” “digestion” whereby presence produces only absence: “comédystopie” and “tragédutopie” are the terms he coins to describe what is not a closed circle whereby utopia and dystopia cancel each other out, but an evolving cycle whereby Adam’s socio-political irony gives way to Marinetti’s more bio-political anxiety regarding the body’s organicity and the (still oxymoronic) “hygiene” of the machine.

In Nicoletta Pireddu’s reflection on the *fins de siècle* (the nineteenth, and the twentieth, the French, and the Italian), the contradictions of anthropology and decadent aesthetics shed light on our more current debates between a dialogical “identity via non-identity” and a weakening and “métissage” of the separation between self and other. Specifically, Pireddu elucidates decadence’s “internal critique of Europe’s project of self-redemption through non-Western models” via two paradoxical discourses: first, discussions of the tattoo, in the contexts of criminology, anthropology, and art, oscillate between “on the one hand, an official condemnation of primitive aesthetic expenditure haunting the productive European body [. . .] and, on the other, the mourning for a native display or ornamental sumptuousness”; second, in a wide range of texts from Mallarmé, Barrès, and d’Annunzio, to Marinetti and Bontempelli, “barbarism” is associated at once with radical alterity and transgression, and with the very materialism, vulgarity, and ideology of production they oppose. In both instances, Pireddu argues, paradox “turn[s] culture into a metanarrative [. . .] the locus of a tug of war between emergence and homogenization” according to a structure still evident today in our attempts to defend otherness and plurality without objectifying them: most crucial perhaps, Europe here not only “confronts the ambivalence of its own narrative authority,” but via Pireddu’s turn to our other *fin de siècle* discovers that this confrontation itself is never done, metanarrative does not undo the persistent power of narrative.

Laura Chiesa brings together Calvino and Perec observing how both play with the abstraction of maps in order on the one hand to describe cities that are potential insofar as they are known only through networks of relations that can be actualized in a potentially infinite number of ways, and on the other to fragment and multiply landscapes into constantly reemerging and unreliable details. In both cases, constant movement and the foregrounding of interpretive uncertainty conjugate metanarrative with an anxiety about or a longing for narrative—the actual outline of a city, the visible contours of a room—which is constantly frustrated. As Chiesa shows, rethinking the links between the small and the large, the inside and the outside, the familiar and the strange in these terms not only suggests that the crisis of modern urbanism has its other side in the experimentations of recent and more historical

avant-gardes, but that in both disorder reveals its paradoxical agglutinative power as it forces us constantly to re-situate ourselves.

The link between a fragmented city and a subjectivity whose closure is constantly deferred toward interpretive oxymorons is central to Andrea Malaguti's reflection on Frénaud's "The silence of Genova." For indeed, "the man" inhabits a "welcoming labyrinth," a dream of plenitude that "swerves" from final realization, which "opens [. . .] a transcendental dimension without defining it." As Malaguti shows, this indefinite character always seen "in profile," is at once "a failed mystic" who finds only "his own inertia" at the end of his journey, and at the same time the very vessel of a communication, an address to the reader which is at bottom an interpenetration with the reader's own emotional subjectivity: here the "renunciation to a metaphysics of the subject" coincides with "joy, pleasure [. . .] a state of grace." If there is no way out of the labyrinth, "no paradise," Frénaud's poetry nonetheless insists on the intersubjective value of the quest and the desire, which is not a "lyrical identification" between different subjects, or between author and reader, but rather an intersection of partial and inexplicable moments of grace.

In turn, Elizabeth Leake's essay on Rosselli proposes *Sleep* as a "metapoetics" that deploys the lapsus, as well as a number of other rhetorical strategies associated with Surrealism, in order to decenter authorial authority. Rosselli's voice, in criticism ranging from Pasolini to Agosti, has been detached from her text in order to "naturalize" her poetic production and ultimately to claim for it "potentially infinite, and perpetually indeterminate" meanings. In her attentiveness to how this "natural" chaos is associated with Rosselli's suicide and in particular with its interpretation as a pathological rather than a deliberate act, Leake shows that both her work and her death have been voided of agency in order to resolve the uncanny tension of her writing or "the vacillating origin of the gaze." Crucially, this origin that would be naturalized turns out to be an incessant movement between self, other, and world, in which the subject's "utter, potentially devastating precariousness" is revealed while at the same time affirming both self-awareness and agency, and ultimately a constantly shifting, neither authoritative nor absent, identity.

In Dana Renga's essay on Italian and French Holocaust film, identity is once again shifting, defined by traumatic events that are at once "beyond the imagination" yet also the subject of constant reinterpretation. Bringing together Resnais' *Night and Fog* and Benigni's *Life is Beautiful*, she argues that in both "antipathetic visual and verbal cues," as well as the "fog" in which individual responsibility becomes murky, structure the films in order to leave an "unanswerable why lurking in the background." Moreover, Benigni's references to Resnais show that, far from being disrespectful of trauma, his association of the holocaust with both a fable and a riddle shows that a "'sense of moral obligation' is not so easily obtained in the camps" for their reality is beyond narrative control, just as "in answering the Sphinx's riddle, Oedipus encounters the fate from which he was attempting to flee." Linking Lanzmann's

Shoah and Cavani's *The Night Porter*, Renga shows that in both, montage and the migration of objects from past to present is used to foreground how "present-day signs and symptoms" of past trauma are not fully absorbed into redemptive narratives but, by enacting "narrative fetishism" instead reveal an "inability to grieve" and therefore point to "continued racism and ignorance." Even as all these films are themselves a cultural gain in the sense of enacting mourning over the holocaust, they also foreground an "unwillingness to make good [. . .] instinctual loss through cultural gain" that ultimately testifies at once to the limits and the necessity of a cultural responsibility for violence.

Alessia Ricciardi's reflection on neorealism, and on Italian resistance to French critics' depiction of it as an epistemological and ontological turning point, also foregrounds the limits as well as the fruitfulness of a creative reconstruction of the past. Specifically, she shows that, not unlike critics of Rosselli's poetry, Bazin and Deleuze tend to present neorealism's delving into the time-image as a "thing in itself," and the "reality" it evokes as a "generalized biological or spiritual vitalism," in essence affirming the "naturalness" of neorealist cinema only in order to deprive it of agency: Bazin's "ontology of the medium," and Deleuze's "cinema of the seer and no longer of the agent," both elide the "nationalist ethos, born of the *Resistenza*" that is central to neorealism, and Italy's contingent, "bit-by-bit reconstitution as an imagined community." What is at stake emerges most clearly in Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma*, for in associating his "eminently political" admiration for neorealist film with "the sublime space of the time-image beyond historical boundaries," he fails to recognize the limits of an aesthetic redemption of historical traumas, which is central to neorealism's unresolved tension between ethical imperatives and formal innovation.

Thomas Harrison's investigation of French and Italian versions of laughter turns to the philosophical dimensions of a subjectivity torn between aesthetic distance and moral urgency. Noting that Baudelaire "inherited a romantic metaphysics which held that the ostensible superiority of the human spirit was also its inferiority," Harrison argues that nonetheless in the French tradition from Baudelaire to Bergson *ressentiment* dominates, and hence "nausea at the natural" is "not redeemed [but. . .] merely rationalized"; in contrast, from Leopardi to Pirandello, laughter becomes "laughter *at* despair" so that the sorrow of knowledge, ostensibly the original sin, becomes calling knowledge itself into question. Most important, this "laughability of laughing" does not lead to a further sense of order and superiority but instead to a compassion not unlike the peace brought about by skeptical paradoxes. Humor thus turns the Fall itself not into a foundation for distinctions, "high and low, true and false, face and mask," but rather into a "suspen[sion] [of] moral judgement" thus allowing both contradiction and the human desire for resolution to coexist, maintaining and reviving the dynamism that all of these essays point to.

Ernesto Livorni elucidates Ungaretti's meditation on time and its oscillation between Bergsonian and Platonic models, both of which provide the poet

with different elaborations of an oxymoron central to his at once modern and Christian metaphysics, “ephemeral-eternal.” Thus Bergson spawns in Ungaretti a poetics of “anamnesis,” understanding time’s flow as an unfolding into duration of the eternal, such that poetry, grasping the continuity of this duration, espousing the very movement of time, can join the “conscious act of memory” to a far different “awareness that one’s own life is a return trip that moves” back into an unconscious timelessness. The Platonic model is in contrast tied to Ungaretti’s experience of the Fall as, essentially, an inability to dwell in the Bergsonian oxymoron where time and timelessness, matter and immateriality, are joined: Plato is thus linked to a poetics of “amnesia,” which does not cancel out anamnesis but reveals in it a moment of original oblivion, whereby the return into timelessness can only be experienced as absence. Such forgetting, not unlike the “laughability of laughing,” is what allows concern or indeed reverence for the ultimate questions of existence to be woven into our acute awareness of the precarious constructions that are our only answers.

Weaving precariousness with concern, as these essays show and as the dynamic of paradox demands, rests each time on attention to a specific shift in location of the natural, by which it emerges as a figure for ‘what matters’ in the least mediated or constructed fashion, yet does so precisely by spawning new mediations and constructions. On the one hand this suggests that it is not possible to assert the reality of ultimate questions in abstract or universalizing terms: what makes such questions urgently real is their situatedness—their geography—and to remove it is to remove the impetus of human suffering and joy within them. In turn this implies that as we search for terms in which to understand what is of concern on a global scale—and once again nature, in the form of the environment and/or its population, is central figure—we cannot do without what Adriana Cavarero has called the “absolute local”: not necessarily a concrete location in our world of long-distance communication, and certainly not tied to the territoriality of nation-states, the absolute local nonetheless involves a specific locus whereby a given group of people are gathered around one particular experience and formulation of concern, as is the case, for example, in the anti-globalization movement.³

On the other hand, the very situatedness of the absolute local requires negotiation, as Bruno Latour’s work on *The Politics of Nature* suggests.⁴ If the terms in which concern develops are always precarious in their locus, as precarious as subjectivity and life itself in its broadest sense, they are subject

3. Adriana Cavarero, “Hannah Arendt: Locating Politics,” Lecture delivered at Stanford University, 17 November 2005.

4. Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Winter 2004): 225–48; also Latour, *Politiques de la Nature* (Paris: La Découverte, 1999).

to the constant shifts that emerge in these essays: and as Latour shows in the case of environmentalism's understanding of nature, these shifts should not be mapped out abstractly and as it were from above, but rather constantly reinterpreted in "gatherings[s]" that are open to dialogue by a plurality of "local" voices. Finally, what these essays point to, with their constant return to paradox, dynamism, and oxymoron, is that to gather in dialogue multiple formulations of situatedness and concern also implies making room for the unknown, the uncertain, and the unexpected: "narrow orders" are an "easy victory," as Ammons avers, in contrast with a more frightful yet more fully human freedom to rediscover what matters most deeply.

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