

Piero Bigongiari

Greece in Italy, or, A Great Silence
Sections X-XVII

Eugenio Montale

On the Sacred Way

Translated with Introduction and Notes by Theodore Ell

Introduction

in the catalogue of travel writing, fellow travellers are not always aware of one another. They may follow the same routes and arrive in the same places, and their impressions may resonate or dispute with each other as though in intimate talk. Yet in so many cases the travellers are held apart by vast stretches of time, or by the narrowest miss. That interval, great or small, focuses the uncanny harmony that patterns of travel can influence in separate intellects. Each mind arrives at a place with its own learning and expectations, but the legacy of the place itself, human or natural, loads the reaction. Its associations work their way into an individual's language and begin speaking for themselves. What each traveller expresses is both unique to the moment and a speck in the mosaic. After coming home to the printed page, a piece of travel writing may be surprised to find that it has company, as it emerges that one traveller has followed in another's footsteps, all but reliving the experience of a different person. One consciousness finds itself side by side with another, in the memory of the Heideggerian feeling of *Dasein*, 'there-being.' Identities may be insolubly remote, but in opening the eyes to foreign surroundings, the same sights may inspire similar vision, and closeness, generations apart. The physical condition of a place is a great equaliser. Even a site's most vehemently intellectually dissenting visitors are united by a sense of standing *there*, and not somewhere else.

Mediterranean lands must have seen more of these overlaps than most, having hosted countless intellectual pilgrims. The Mediterranean's

mental territory has a vast spread, but its physical territory leads thought into more compressed space. Land journeys are dictated by passable terrain and around the islands there is a net of regular shipping routes. Any harbour pilot knows there are only so many ways to approach a certain port, so that while a visitor might read the figuring of a shore for the first time, the inbound route means that the experience is also a recital of coastline, to a mature script. Even a gap of years between such readings cannot outlast topography. Barring catastrophe, a city, village, temple or theatre essentially stays put, as do the mountains, headlands and plains that are its contours, boundaries and signatures. The ancient Greeks in particular seem to have had a talent for building in ways that magnified a natural setting, a sense of harmony they took with them to their colonies. The amphitheatre at Taormina was built to frame Mt. Etna as a backdrop to the stage, and the volcano is as dramatic now as it was for ancient theatregoers. It is only more recent human activity which threatens to disrupt the pattern. Modern buildings and urban sprawl break up the long-enduring outline, so that a landscape takes on an involuntary camouflage, distracting the visiting eye and frustrating those who would prefer an unhindered gaze at the past. Yet underneath rising and falling streets, or the suddenly lifted and squared skyline of rooftops, there are still the folds and flatlands of the earth, implied as a rock's form is by a coat of barnacles. So in built-up areas the older condition of a place transmits even now, and a sensitive traveller can interpret a message. The difficulty is translating the power of *Dasein* into language.

Between this and the previous issue of *Modern Greek Studies*, I present a pair of travelogues which pinpoint this experience of looking on ancient Mediterranean sites for the first time, shadowed by other minds and other readings. The travelogues represent departures in a literary as well as literal sense, as both were written by poets making forays into their 'second' medium of prose. *Greece in Italy, or A Great Silence*, the first part of which appeared in the previous issue, is an account by Piero Bigongiari (1914-1997) of travels in southern Italy – Puglia, Calabria, Sicily and Campania – to visit the remains of the Greek colonies known as Magna Graecia, in March and April 1952. The shorter *On the Sacred Way* by Eugenio Montale (1896-1981) is a piece of reportage Montale produced during a literary tour of Greece proper in May 1962, as a guest of the Italian Institute of Culture.¹

The two pieces obviously differ materially, having been written ten years apart and on opposite shores of a sea, but Bigongiari and Montale show themselves to be true fellow travellers, and not only because they happened to know one another well and to have shared a great deal in their formation as poets in Florence.² The writing itself is united by sensibility. Both poets find their understanding of ancient Greek culture through readings of its grounding in landscape, and both accept landscape as they find it, seeing Magna Greece and Greece proper as essentially unchanged settings, which allow meaningful connections to ancient personalities. Indeed, in many important respects, it is as though the travelogues represent two stages in the same journey. As described in the previous issue, *Greece in Italy* was in fact the prelude to a larger-scale trip Bigongiari made to Greece proper in 1953, which produced *Testimone in Grecia* [*Witness in Greece*], a magnificent volume of essays and photography co-authored with his travelling companions. Their ‘witnessing’ of ancient cultures continued the following year in Egypt, which produced an equally absorbing volume. Altogether these travels contributed to one of Bigongiari’s central preoccupations, the nature of origins, cultural and personal, which preoccupied his writing in the 1950s and persisted subliminally throughout his life. Montale did not have the luxury to travel so extensively or on so broad a theme, but *On the Sacred Way* comes across as a long-awaited leap into similar territory. Its brevity intensifies Montale’s savouring of the experience.

The difference in the two pieces’ length is a matter of style rather than effort. Bigongiari’s prose is conversational and generously flowing, in tune with his first perception of the south as “long wave landscape,”³ while Montale’s manner is quite clipped, his phrases often depending on a single, intensely calculated word to refract the intensity of his impressions. The most inventive of these, and the hardest to translate, is *polipaio*, denoting the slimy, suckered, tentacled contents of an octopus salesman’s basket. In this context the suffix *-aio* denotes a gathering or some kind of forum or den, and modifies *polipo* (octopus or polyp) into a slippery heap of itself, a next to impossible feat in English. *Octopile* was one possible rendering, but in the end it took two words, *octopus nest*, to evoke the tangled overlapping of many octopus bodies and situate such an image, credibly and sonorously, in a basket. To a degree, Montale’s concision was dictated by the constraining column inches of the *Corriere della sera*, but the density of his turn of phrase

is in fact typical of his other work. He was known for his reserve, even in conversation rarely saying more than he had to; his poetry is renowned for pithy and unsettlingly deep insights arising from odd everyday trivialities. Indeed, in writing poetry, Montale reportedly followed the maxim that it was pointless to write a sequence where one poem would do – better to face the one, glaring truth than circle around or dilute it. It is ironic, then, that *On the Sacred Way* is actually the first piece in set of three. The other two are brief accounts of interviews with Greek journalists and intellectuals, which may well be of interest another time, but which all but write Montale's voice out of the scene. They also simply concentrate on matters concerning modern rather than ancient Greece, and are more concerned with discussion than with travels in time and timelessness. As Montale suggests at the end of *On the Sacred Way*, he had not experienced all that he had hoped to. What he did experience seems to have impressed him deeply, for all his restraint. *On the Sacred Way* stands as a radiant miniature, in which Montale found some space to touch on something metaphysical, outside his official roles as correspondent and honoured guest.

Bigongiari's more relaxed approach to his travelogue is also typical, in that he considered prose the natural dimension for exploring and experimenting, in which a poet was allowed, even obliged, to kick loose. He had set his own maxim in this respect as a student, declaring that in writing prose a poet "throws himself in and disciplines in some way the avalanche of thoughts,"⁴ prior to setting them down in poetry's distilled shapes. As described in the introduction to the first part of *Greece in Italy*, this was precisely what was happening as Bigongiari explored Magna Graecia. The long and difficult process of writing his second poetry collection, *Rogo* [*Pyre* or *Blaze*], was nearing its end, and with it Bigongiari's consuming preoccupation with Italy's Second World War traumas. *Greece in Italy* was the first of Bigongiari's writings to break free of it, at least materially: nowhere in the text is it obvious that Bigongiari was still dwelling on the emotional contortions and often crazed imagery that built up over eight years in *Rogo*. The *pyre* or *blaze* of the title refers to a central motif of consuming fire, which over the course of fifty-four poems achingly transforms from an agent of destruction into the heat of a crucible, in which the matter of life is reorganised and adapted to new conditions. By the time Bigongiari toured Magna Graecia, this fire had died down, and was all but out. Then

the journey and the working-through that *Greece in Italy* represents brought about two last bursts of poetic activity, which sealed off *Rogo* in a way that the earlier poems had barely anticipated (and much to the surprise of Bigongiari's publisher, who had already delayed the book twice because of other sudden additions).

The two closing poems of *Rogo*, "Ibis redibis" and "Un lume velenoso" ["A venomous light"], evoke the volcanic landscape of Campania and its associations of past destruction. Bigongiari reached this area at the end of his trip, writing about it in the last two sections presented here, "Elea" and "Paestum." In the poems that the visit inspired, the *rogo* of the war settles into the same menacing dormancy as Vesuvius, joining cataclysms already deeply buried in the Italian psyche. In conceiving of this, Bigongiari made himself a fellow traveller of Giacomo Leopardi (1799-1837), whose last great lyric, "La Ginestra, o il fiore del deserto" ["The Genista, or the flower of the desert," 1836] had also seen on the barren slopes of "Sterminator Vesevo"⁵ a vision of Italy's frail endurance and the mute catastrophe of its decline. Leopardi's shrub must bow its head beneath the lava flows, but it dies more nobly than modern man, who is a shallow and ignominious creature beside the ancients, the remains of whose elegant and uplifting civilisation litter that lonely region. Bigongiari looked on the same sights during his journey and was well alive to their desolation. During the writing of *Rogo*, however, he had come to believe in a basic vital impulse, which, despite working at the most remote and incremental level of consciousness, fundamentally resisted the destructive forces that Leopardi saw as inevitable – and there was nobility in this. Walking in Campania, Bigongiari's thoughts engaged in a quiet, understated dialogue with Leopardi's, consisting of nods and references rather than outright questioning. The effect of this subtle intermingling of impressions anchors both poets in the one place, as they talk across time. In 1836, Leopardi describes bats huddling in crevices, shielding their young; in 1952, in "Un lume velenoso," Bigongiari projects himself into Leopardi's frame as a "Florentine bat," "calmly flitting about."⁶ In 1836, the lava glows; in 1952, the volcanoes are spent.⁷ And where in 1836 the genista must resign, burn and perish, and the world go silent, in 1952 the vital impulse flickers and pushes life to go on making sense of itself:

*...in the fire what remains
of you of me, crackles, advances, adores*

*its funereal essence, which is to disappear
from here and in the blue find once again
among the stars its body, in the sleepless
drone that fatigues the universe
towards a voice.*⁸

So two divergent poetic inspirations spring from the one *Dasein*, and in *Greece in Italy* we can witness Bigongiari working his out. For Leopardi, the ancients were the youth of the world and the moderns its decrepit old age. Bigongiari, gazing around at the moody coast of Elea, mused on the depths of geological history surmised there by “the rhapsodist Xenophanes” and on Leopardi’s grand, despairing metaphors, and sensed the elements of the place and the presence of both former visitors transmitting to him – but he rephrased what they implied altogether about time: “The world is not yet completely born: we are its eternal youth.”

On the Sacred Way, too, preserves in its concise, laser-like descriptions the fleeting moments when Montale also sensed a oneness of things in Greece proper. His lack of space compelled him to favour generalities over detailed descriptions, for instance proclaiming “the long snaking road that leads from Athens [...] to Delphi,” the ‘sacred way’ itself, as a “miracle of harmony.” Hackneyed phrases such as those are rare, though. Most of Montale’s generalities are not intended to brush broadly over meanings, but sew them up tightly together, delineating quickly the conceptual lining of the experience and leaving emotional implications to the weighted effect of individual words. The travelogue is written in a saturated shorthand. After that unpromising beginning with the “miracle of harmony,” the actual journey along the ‘sacred way’ is made of intensely radiant elements. It is a collage of single images, each held in its own tightly-spun sentence, many of which sketch out a thought system or extended metaphor, adding together to evoke an ancient presence that endures as an undercurrent of undercurrents. The changing patterns of vegetation suggest the attention-holding drama of an epic; rugged landforms suggest “irregular strophes” that will not be fused together in the heat of writing poetry; the wind “sighs from distant throats”; the whole atmosphere is one of “subterranean convulsed exuberance” that has breached the surface and now glows everywhere. Even if his schedule did not allow him to look long at things, it is clear that Montale was able at least to *notice* them and think deeply on their potency.

The trouble with *On the Sacred Way* is that Montale's perception of transcendent forces is constantly interrupted by contemporary rubbish: obnoxious new hotels, coaches, ignorant crowds. At one point, at Delphi, Montale ponders the merits of a UNESCO residence for artists, writers and philosophers, under construction nearby. Although highly sceptical – he wonders what good it could do a Hölderlin or a Nietzsche, given that both of those writers produced ideal evocations of Greece without ever needing to go there – Montale does sense that “the air of Delphi is electric, exciting, probably mysteric,” and when he leaves off the subject of the residency, he leaves open the possibility that future writers may not necessarily find it pointless. But if mystery and literature could still be partnered at Delphi, Montale laments, “Mystery and tourism cannot be reconciled.” Montale's disdain for tourism, and the way its mob rule drowns out the individual connection to places, is evident throughout *On the Sacred Way* and may raise a reader's smile at several points. It is a serious matter, though, as it put Montale's attitude in danger of being jaundiced. Even the inspirational journey along the ‘sacred way’ itself became “tedious.” It might have been hindered a little by a sluggish travelling pace and a flat tyre, but under any other circumstances Montale would have welcomed such opportunities to slow down his time there. As it was, touristic vulgarity in the midst of spiritually charged landscapes tried his patience to the limit.

Bigongiari was just as aware as Montale of the less savoury aspects of some of the places he visited. In southern Sicily, he passed through the towns of Palma di Montechiaro and Gela. The latter he described as “an extremely poor city tak[ing] the place of the great Gela which welcomed Aeschylus,” and in exploring Palma di Montechiaro noted that instead of drains the streets had central ditches, the air smelled of urine, and “misery [had] transformed faces into impenetrable masks.” Yet he was far from believing that the modern age in Magna Graecia was a fallen one. The region's people might have been poor, even at this point in the twentieth century (or perhaps especially then, with war legacies still lingering), but they were people nonetheless. Bigongiari could not dismiss their psychology, especially as, in his view, it was inseparable from their *Dasein*. Beneath their emotional inscrutability he detected “a primitive happiness,” a positive and ineffaceable sense of belonging, derived from working the land, living off its fertility, being what it dictated: “A happiness without smiles, full of

restraint, all returns and departures, to be purchased like an object, by the power of sweat and solitary cogitations, like bread and what little else fills up those tables.” There was no looking down upon these country Sicilians. Bigongiari’s description of the nightly return of workers from the fields – “what seems a whole people migrating by cart” – is full of surprise at the spectacle, but also appreciation for its emotional meaning locally: “At the entries to these poor cities there is a festive atmosphere for these returns at dusk: children, goats, dogs, chickens come out to meet the people coming back, they overfill the street in quiet tumult.” The muted quality Bigongiari perceives cancels out any hint of the merely picturesque: the atmosphere at Palma di Montechiaro and Gela is one of mixed feelings, as subtle a *Dasein* as anything Bigongiari considers at an ancient site empty of people. As with Montale, in this case Bigongiari could not devote more attention to this subject, as he was travelling on the theme of the dead rather than the living, but again like Montale, he did at least notice that the living offered much else to think about.

In this respect Bigongiari disagrees profoundly with another fellow traveller, this time one taking exactly the same route through Magna Graecia, in the distant years of 1897 and 1898: the English novelist George Gissing (1857-1903).

Gissing had gone in search of myth and self-forgetfulness, which he imagined he would attain while standing on the same ground and looking on the same landscapes as his long-vanished literary icons. As he put it,

Every man has his intellectual desire; mine is to escape life as I know it and dream myself into that old world which was the imaginative delight of my boyhood. The names of Greece and Italy draw me as no others; they make me young again, and restore the keen impressions of that time when every new page of Greek or Latin was a new perception of things beautiful. The world of the Greeks and Romans is my land of romance; a quotation in either language thrills me strangely, and there are passages of Greek and Latin verse which I cannot read without a dimming of the eyes, which I cannot repeat aloud because my voice fails me. In Magna Graecia the waters of two fountains mingle and flow together; how exquisite will be the draught!⁹

Gissing recounted his progress, rarely without grandiloquence, in a long travelogue called *By the Ionian Sea: Notes of a Ramble in Southern Italy*. The moments of bliss he sought turned out to be rare, and the reasons why

can be found in one early description, written on the first stage of the journey southwards from Naples:

*The stillness of a dead world laid its spell on all that lived. To-day seemed an unreality, an idle impertinence; the real was that long-buried past which gave its meaning to all about me, touching the night with infinite pathos. Best of all, one's own being became lost to consciousness; the mind knew only the phantasmal forms it shaped, and was at peace in vision.*¹⁰

Gissing's notion of travel was fatally one-sided. He might on this occasion have dissolved in contemplation of the ancient setting around him, but he assumed that he could demand this of Magna Graecia whenever he wished, which was all the time. Furthermore, his desire to forget himself meant that he laid the trap of perpetual disappointment. Travelling alone, with little knowledge of Italian and meeting no locals he considered capable (or even worthy) of intellectual conversation, Gissing's attempted escape saw him further imprisoned. Small wonder, then, that his temper quickly rose – but unfortunately he vented his frustrations on the Italians around him, thus completing his alienation from the land he so dearly wished would embrace him.

In many other respects Gissing's rambling in 1897-1898 predicts much of Bigongiari's journey to an eerie degree. Both their narratives begin in Puglia (Gissing's after a Neapolitan prelude), trace the Greek sites around the Gulf of Taranto, stand at the southern tip of Calabria, then swing northwards again to the Strait of Messina. This Bigongiari crosses and their ways part, at least on the page, but the parallel is more than a question of routes. At many points Gissing and Bigongiari describe particular sights as though standing together, one a ghost in the other's presence. Looking on the remote Sila, the last range of the Apennines that reaches down to the tip of Calabria, "dark with climbing forests,"¹¹ both writers imagine the same emptiness. Gissing in 1897 "dream[s] of sunny glades, never touched, perhaps by the foot of man since the Greek herdsman wandered there,"¹² while in 1952 Bigongiari hears his 'great silence' for the first time: "deserted plains, dunes, grey marlstones, meadows, scrubland, olive groves run wild. [...] The silence has mysterious dimensions because, more than space, it occupies a limitless time."¹³ At the site of Sybaris, a city destroyed in war at the time of Pythagoras, what preoccupies both writers is the density of earth between them and the ruins. Between their accounts, we can

witness the ground uncovering itself. In 1897 Gissing laments that the remains of Sybaris lie out of reach “beneath some fifteen feet of alluvial mud [...] as on the day when [the river] Crathis first flowed over them,”¹⁴ while in 1952 those same remains are just emerging under Bigongiari’s feet: “Stone, worked stone, square cut, lies immediately beneath. There are glimpses of coins, bones, fragments of pottery funereally striped in black and red.”¹⁵ At Capo Colonna, a dramatic promontory on the Calabrian coast, stands a single Doric column, the last of the great Temple of Hera. In 1897 it appears to Gissing like a defiant lighthouse;¹⁶ in 1952 Bigongiari watches a real lighthouse there, “sweep[ing] through the night over the Ionian.”¹⁷ And there is the howling wind, disturbing sleep in 1897 at Capo Colonna (“The wind would not roar itself out. Throughout the night it kept awaking me”)¹⁸ and in 1952 at Syracuse (“At night, in the hotel, the wind comes into our rooms under the doors and almost lifts our sheets off” – see below). Isolated down the end of Italy, as though thrust out over the sea on a gangplank, Gissing and Bigongiari find themselves compelled to react as one to many powerful stimuli.

They are likewise united on the questions of Italian suffering and endurance. No foreign invasion had ravaged southern Italy in 1897 as it had a few years before 1952, but in 1897 Italy certainly had been invaded by Italy. The chaotic effort to unite the country socially and economically as well as politically had seen southern people taxed and seconded for military service in the name of causes they could hardly be expected to understand. Gissing, for all his faults, perceived the people’s hardiness in struggling on. “One remembers all they have suffered, all they have achieved in spite of wrong,” he wrote, “A wandering stranger has no right to nurse national superiorities, to indulge a contemptuous impatience. It is the touch of tourist vulgarity.”¹⁹ But such noble understanding came too late. Gissing felt himself besieged by vulgarity and had already decried his various lodgings as “ill-kept stable[s]”²⁰ “heavy with indescribable stench,”²¹ and if southern children looked “burdened before their time,”²² Gissing was less likely to put it down to injustice than to the fact that in the south “for the most part one walk[ed] on the accumulated filth of ages.”²³ The *Dasein* of Magna Graecia was transmitting powerfully, but Gissing lacked the openness to receive most of the message. He succumbed to the jaundicing that tinged Montale in 1962 in Greece proper.

Montale's journey, too, was shadowed by a fellow traveller. Only a matter of weeks after he left, there came in search of the ancient Greek *Dasein* Martin Heidegger himself. His brief travel book *Sojourns* describes many of the sites that Montale had just visited, particularly Delphi ("disfigured [...] by the unfinished new buildings [to become] hotels for the American tourists"),²⁴ as well as several of the islands, which Montale had not reached. Yet despite travelling further than Montale, Heidegger saw far less. He was so preoccupied with the conceptual nature of the Greek *Dasein*, so daunted by its intensity and so appalled by commercial tourism, that several times he simply refused to explore. At Rhodes, he would not even leave the ship, finding that the island's nearness to Turkey unsettled his very identity as a westerner – a conundrum he contemplated the whole radiant summer day:

*the confrontation [Auseinandersetzung] with the Asiatic element was for the Greek Dasein a fruitful necessity. This confrontation is for us today – in an entirely different way and to a greater extent – the decision about the destiny of Europe and what is called the Western world. [...] As the blue of the sky and the sea changed by the hour, the thought arose, whether the East could be for us another sun-rising of light and clarity, or rather whether these are illusionary lights that feign the revelation to come from there and thus are nothing more than historical fabrications artificially sustained.*²⁵

And Heidegger wondered why Greece "remain[ed] so hard to describe, if it [did] not reject any description."²⁶ He had suspected that there might be such difficulties before arriving. "The Greece of today could prevent the Greece of antiquity [...] from coming to light,"²⁷ he wrote early in the trip. By the end, he was sure he had the culprit. "[W]ith the unthoughtful assault of tourism an alien power enforces its own commands and regulations over ancient Greece,"²⁸ he proclaimed. But in attributing full blame where Montale had merely expressed irritation, Heidegger only distanced himself further from the *Dasein* that his journey was meant to reveal. He chided tourists who were endlessly taking photos for not truly contemplating their surroundings – "They abandon without [a] clue the feast of thinking that they ignore"²⁹ – but it was an undernourishing feast if its main ingredient was prejudice. Heidegger knew this at least in the abstract: "What is of necessity is to look back and reflect on that which an ancient memory has preserved for us and yet, through all the things that we think we know and we possess, remains distorted."³⁰ Yet he did not act on this knowledge

in any meaningful way during his Greek journey. It might have illuminated some subtleties in the pure concept of *Dasein*, but as a traveller, Heidegger had stayed mentally at home, ending up with the same disillusionment as Gissing, more than half a century earlier, and on the opposite shore of the sea. "So hard a thing to catch and to retain," Gissing brooded in 1898, "the mood corresponding perfectly to an intellectual bias."³¹

Bigongiari and Montale demonstrate that a successful foray into the ancient world depends on two-way traffic in time and space. These two modern Italians incline eastwards to look into ancient Greek places and culture, and are met half-way by the ancient Greeks themselves, speaking out of the land, towards a future that was theirs to invent, and looking westwards, to Italy. "Nothing so distinguishes ancient from modern man," wrote Walter Benjamin, "as the former's submission to a cosmic experience of which the latter is scarcely aware."³² Be that as it may, the other distinguishing factor is that moderns are fervently aware of the ancients. Their legacy is open to whichever modern mind can translate their former influence. The result may be only a glimpse of the earlier reality and not a panorama, but even to sense that for a moment can suggest the larger radiance. What we have, we hold.

Sydney, 2012

As explained previously, Bigongiari's text is divided into numbered sections, not all of which have been included. There are also some omissions within certain sections, marked: [...]. These omissions were made because Bigongiari often quotes at length from other works, ancient and modern, without much commentary, this being a diary rather than a formal discussion. My intention was to focus Bigongiari's own distinct voice and attitudes, which these long and unanalysed quotations rather diluted. Montale's text appears in its entirety.

Piero Bigongiari

Greece in Italy, or, A Great Silence (continued)

X – Between the Anapo and the Cíane

Having wandered around in search of ancient things in stone, we decide to go to the Anapo, in search of ancient nature; we head to the harbour to hire a boat, but the sea is impossible, rough everywhere, even in the

Porto Grande. A great wind is up. But we do not want to give up and so in the car we head along the arc of the shore towards ancient Syracusa, the now very fertile great bog-land, from which Syracuse may have taken its name. What a magnificent wind, at Syracuse. Under its force the wheat, already high, very dense, breathes vehemently between the Anapo and the Ciane. We move from one watercourse to the other, as they run very close together without touching, opening our way through the tussocks. The tall eucalypts shimmer in the wind. And the wind has a taste of ancient words. What if we listened? It seems we might understand something...

Nothing remains of Cyan, who melted into water, if not this slow brook rippling in green. "Nothing remained of her that could be held."³³ A country man guiding us, having put down amongst the wheat a great bundle of flowers he had in his arms, cuts the fringes of some papyrus flourishing in the water and hands them to us. Here it is. Reckless. We handle its intensely white pulp, the green filaments which hang down like a tuft of hair, but we cannot keep them, take them away with us. We are gripped by an almost sacred terror. Here they lead their seabound life, here they have a last murmur of rebellion. Let us leave them here.

What a wind at Syracuse! At night, in the hotel, the wind comes into our rooms under the doors and almost lifts our sheets off, bringing us the aroma of Capo Plemmirio and the whistles of the tugboats. We remember then, or perhaps we are already dreaming, that even the white and bony rock in which the Greek theatre is cut, under this wind seems to change colour, becoming agitated with a life which cannot tear itself away in the sighing over its stonebound spell. This is a land of ghosts; fate has been invoked here too many times.

XI – The oranges of Gela

The southern coast of Sicily senses Africa close by: we are level with Carthage: the African sea blows on these lands with its hot breath. In the most desolate places where the dunes cover and uncover, unstably, ruins and vegetation, it would not surprise us to see a great lion leap out, its roar breaking the muteness of this air, its bewitching spell. In leaving Syracuse we have turned south-west, heading for the region of almond trees and carob-trees, towards those places where the remains of Athenians who had been under Alcibiades and then Nicias and Demosthenes, driven back by Syra-

cuse, found their final resting place, on the banks of the Cassibile and the Assímaros.³⁴ We go through places where race became indissolubly confused, descending towards Capo Passero and Pachino and then turning properly west. So: Avola, Noto, Rosolini, Ispica, Modica, Ragusa, Comiso, Vittoria, and then an area where the bandit Vincenzo Rindone is making a name for himself locally, seeking in vain to follow in the footsteps of his great fore-runner.³⁵ In fact our drivers have asked to be allowed to get along this road much faster, before night falls... Siculi, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Swabians, the Aragonese – together they are a graft on this land, so thick as to give a mysterious depth to its inhabitants and, in the townships, a taste for history, or disgust with it, so pronounced that now history has dissolved into a compact humus, a sort of geographical aura, indifferent by nature. We are approaching Gela, we are approaching the sea. It is evening. And we are present for what seems a whole people migrating by cart: it is the farm workers going back to town from the distant fields, the workers who, having left at dawn, with the setting of the sun take the road back to their houses, with their horses, their donkeys, their little mongrel dogs padding along beneath the carts, tied to the axels of the wheels. The workers appear like Arabs crossing the desert, with their cloaks or cloth caps draped over their heads like *burnous*. Inscrutable old women watch us, with the gazes of lizards. At the entries to these poor cities there is a festive atmosphere for these returns at dusk: children, goats, dogs, chickens come out to meet the people coming back, they overfill the street in quiet tumult. Two large sheaves of grass waggle prettily here and there, tied to the backs of horses who sense, like landlords, that their stalls are near. Gela, Licata, Palma di Montechiaro...

It is already evening when we pass through Palma di Montechiaro, dark blue on the saplings on a mountainside smelling of nocturnal sea: here we enjoy a childlike happiness in the dark, broken by lanterns at the doors which face on to the street: doors which set you imagining a dinner table waiting, on which a lamp is flickering weakly, and which flashes through the blue darkness outside enclosing the last homecomers. The street has no drains: instead of a hump, in the middle runs a ditch; so that rivulets run constantly along it, as it leads only downwards. Poverty, rust-red candles, the smell of urine and of a primitive happiness mixed into the misery which has transformed faces into impenetrable masks. A happiness without

smiles, full of restraint, all returns and departures, to be purchased like an object, by the power of sweat and solitary cogitations, like bread and what little else fills up those tables. Even for us the oranges bought at Gela had the flavour of an ancient, happy mirage. Today an extremely poor city takes the place of the great Gela which welcomed Aeschylus, who died here in 456 B.C. After Syracuse and Agrigentum it was the most important Greek city of Sicily: from Gela in 582 B.C. the founders of Acragas departed. And Gelo, later tyrant of Syracuse, of the race of Dinomenides, also came from Gela, of which he had already proclaimed himself tyrant and which he ceded to his brother Heiron. Gelo pursued the programme of his predecessor Hippocrates, whose cavalry commander he had been; this can be defined as an attempt to give pre-eminence to the Doric element in Sicily, over the Ionic-Chalcidean element.

In 424 B.C. Gela held the great Siciliot congress, which proclaimed the unity of interests of the Greeks in Sicily against Athenian intentions. Until in 405 B.C.³⁶ Gela, too, after Agrigentum, ceded to the Carthaginian inundation. Today at Gela, with new fervour, excavations have started again: they are trying to lift away the immense blanket of sand which has buried it over the centuries. Some fortunate excavation campaigns at Capo Soprano, at the western extreme of the long hill of Gela, uncovered a series of extremely interesting ruins which established that the limit of the fortified area of the city lay far beyond what was believed, even by Paolo Orsi,³⁷ to have been inhabited. Whoever gazed at the city from the sea would have seen it sprawling for more than four kilometres. And so truth returns through the story – anachronistic though it is – that Aeneas told Dido of the voyage along the southern coasts of the island and the appearance of “wild” Gela.

*Apparet Camerina procul campique Geloi
immanisque Gela fluvii cognomina dicta.
Arduus inde Acragans ostentat maxima longe
moenia, magnanimum quondam generator equorum.
Teque datis linquo ventis, palmosa Selinys...*³⁸

Thus this Greek coast unfolds, evoked again to Dido's gaze “the dark fire blazing in her veins.”³⁹ And the Geloan fields, the great valley which turns downwards in a plain to touch the sea, protected far away by high mountains, all green and uninhabited, with its sweet ripples and folds and the dunes which shelter it from the sea, this country without trees,

where cotton and wheat grow, and which heads towards the night like a sky overturned, even colouring itself with darkness as though, like the earth, it were made of air and infinite transparency – it brings on us a shiver of the ancient Mediterranean happiness. We are making for lands of ash, of sulphur and of asphalt; we are heading towards the brown tuff of Agrigento, a mirage which yet maintains its signs within reality, between Saracen olive trees and a black sea which comes to meet you in a breaker of sunlight; if you look down from the height of Agrigento, through the enflamed skeletons of columns, on the African sea. We are in the lion's throat, there is no escape. Not for nothing does Agrigento find its origins with the tyrant Phalaris, with his bull of red-hot bronze to which he threw his enemies so as to hear their lamentation of death, mixed with a monstrous bellowing: it was the god Moloch who from nearby Carthage had set foot in Sicily.

XII – Agrigento

In 490 B.C. Pindar saw in Agrigentum, home of the flautist Midas who was victorious at Delphi, “the fairest among all cities of mortals”.⁴⁰ And yet Agrigentum had not yet crowned itself with the series of temples, which between 480 and 420 B.C., in less than six decades, in a sort of building fury, arose all together within its walls. Whoever has seen Agrigentum, even without having been to Greece can say that they know the full intellectual and affecting enchantment that this ancient civilisation has handed down, intact, as far as ourselves. The whiteness of the marble of the Parthenon has the purity of an idea; but this shelly tuff of Agrigentum through which that idea returns, out of abstraction, to become, let us say, pathetic and dolorous, to become anxiously light and flame, consuming itself – this cannot be forgotten: it is the other, human face of a perfect cycle. We are facing the temples. The wind, with its eddies that surprise us low around the columns, has consumed the base. The shelly, crumbly tuff does not withstand the vocal biting of the wind that seems to wish to carry these giants away with them, tearing them out of the soil.

[...]

[...] Until 480 B.C., for a century, Agrigentum was a warlike city. After the victory of Imera, the city was transformed: it was taken by a fever to build: slaves, who had been obtained in great numbers, cultivated its famous vineyards and olive groves, tended to its racehorses, raised the tem-

ples. The wheat rippled all around. At the pan-Hellenic feasts its athletes drew honour. Simonides and Pindar lived here for long period, as hosts of Theron. And Gellias of Agrigentum was famous for his richness and liberality throughout Greece.⁴¹ Until in 405 B.C., after Himera and Selinus, Agrigentum's time came: after eight months under siege, the city was sacked and set ablaze by Carthaginians craving to get their own back after their undoing 75 years before.

Now we head towards the western part of the hill of the temples, towards the one known as the temple of the Dioskouroi, and which would be better called the temple of chthonic divinities. In this archaic sanctuary we see in the *bothroi*, that is, in the central cavities of the ancient altars, round or rectangular, the mysterious artesian wells of a primitive faith. Here where the Greeks and the indigenous people lived together before the official founding of Agrigentum, the *bothroi* seem as though they were dug into the earth in search of the subterranean world, a mysterious richness which would spring out, once found, to reassure the inhabitants of the consonance of that world with all in the darkness of the soul which they could neither dig out nor define. Man dug into the earth to give it this sense of chthonic liberation: man, too, that is the human need to believe, together with the compressed forces of nature, riddled the earth with these supernatural volcanoes. And here at Agrigentum, these Flegrean Fields of faith, these mysterious eruptions open to the sun are particularly affecting: the worn-out tuff of which they consist seems to be the solidification of an eruptive matter, and you do not know if it came from the depths of the earth or the ambiguous folding of the soul. The sun blazing overhead does not break that halo of reserve and suspension which surrounds them. Neither can it discount the possibility of a scream or blood emerging from them, regurgitated from the earth. So that in the end it seems natural to us that Agrigentum's greatest son, Empedocles, as the legend tells, ended his days by leaping into a smouldering volcano, Etna, to rediscover in the primal fire a heat for a new fusion of his being. Empedocles, the last rhapsodist of Hellenic philosophy, saw chimerical monsters on earth, exploding chance into fantasy: "On the ground there sprouted heads without necks, and bare arms wandered without shoulders, and lone eyes drifted lacking brows." There could be seen "many creatures born with doubled faces and breasts, oxen with the faces of men, human bodies with ox heads and shapes mingling the male and the female."

[...]

With Empedocles the Orphic intuition of the four Elements of the world – air, water, earth and fire, considered “the limbs of Pan” – transforms into scientific theory.

[...]

But Empedocles was not a pure thinker: for him experience is fantasy, and vice versa: with him we move away from a purely abstract Greek thought: he leads us towards Galileo and Leonardo, that is, we might say, towards that other aspect of the Mediterranean intelligence which is more Italian than Greek. It was Empedocles, it was said, who worked in strictest contact with nature, as far as modifying its structure in a way that was almost thaumaturgic. Not for nothing was a Hellenistic temple at Selinus, the little Temple B, supposedly dedicated to Empedocles, who would have cleansed the Selinuntian marshes; not for nothing is the cutting which divides the Rupe Atenea⁴² from the hill where the city rises called “Empedocles’ ravine”, because he envisaged it allowing a purifying North wind to enter and spread over the city, stirring the still air, drawing out its African malaise.

XIII – Selinus

We move away from the crumbling tuffs of Agrigento, which did not permit the development of a great plastic art – and indeed the temples are devoid of any sculpture – and we turn towards the great sculpture of Selinus and its rocky ruins. Between Agrigento and Selinus the variety of stones blazing in the sun is infinite, now white as white, now golden, now silvery, alternating with burnt ground, great meadows, barley fields, oat fields, agaves. High above the road hangs the falcon, over the expanses where spring frolics and the eucalypts breeze lightly. The African air of tragedy which assails the green oases gives these places a sense of transparent apparitions forgotten in the hard air.

Selinus: columns strewn like small change over the gigantic rock bases, cog wheels at a standstill in the grass: on the high plain the wind and the solitude rage before the grasses, the harvests, the wildflowers are engulfed into the sea, around the catastrophe in stone which the earth seems only barely to support. It still seems possible to hear the sound of ancient disasters, the terrestrial scream of earthquakes, in this tense air

which even the mildest breeze can make alert, ringing; between Africa and what is most remote in Sicily, this air cloistered in time more than in infinite space. Here man can find himself, by gigantic catastrophe, as by the defeat of giants, restored to his own nature. The human voice is filled with meaning among these rocks, which were given form by man: a note on a violin would be enough to articulate this wildness. Indeed the human stature is a sanctuary, here where Orpheus is a household name, and where everything verges on the desert, except that the wind that runs across it is a wind in flower. Such high folly makes us more masters of ourselves, it brings a physical happiness, a jolt to our deepest self: at ease among the ruins, free of tiredness, merry (perhaps what drives us is a desert ecstasy), we talk as though standing in a colonnade in the time of Plato. Who would not feel like a Raphael-esque Plato or Aristotle? In effect the ruin raises up imaginary columns, temples of light, the fantastic speaking limbs of a city opposed to the tangible space surrounding it, to the winds from the interior and from the sea which penetrate it, linger there and suddenly fly for the open like migrating birds, shrieking. But with a shiver we remember, as we turn away from the ruin to look for an inhabited place (the closest, Castelvetro, is fifteen kilometres away), that this could also be the place where Leopardi's Icelander encountered Nature,⁴³ and that all that broken ground could also be the giant body of a Nature torn to pieces by a god gone mad.

And now thinking back: there, in that desert, we had spoken low, as though in a place that had witnessed a god erupt: it was, even with its signs of rage, a certainty, which left us no longer feeling orphans, although we were alone.

XIV – Misery and manna

As we leave Segesta as though from some dark and stony full stop, already the liquefied blue of the little houses of Partinico introduces us to the Tyrrhenian. And from here on, all that we see is colour turning into stone, water, vegetation, words. Things yield to the hour that transforms them, time is space, the mountains are light which stays behind, suffocated in the sky even after the sun has set. Here the moon can do nothing: its reflected light, not made of matter, has no power over the glow of the land, over which it falls with a mysterious incredulity. So it is with the sunlit bastions which defend Palermo, for whoever follows them along the

seashore. So it is too with the immense riverbeds (as short as their courses might be), which open wide on the shoreline their debris of stony, blinding light, dropping straight from the Madoníe or from Val Dèmon: from the ash trees on their banks pours manna. Himera is a memory on the stony mouth of the Himera river: the remains of a Doric temple are debris among debris: they give off a calcified light. You would know Himera: here Hamilcar was undone in 480 B.C., here his nephew Hannibal inflicted the bloody rematch that made Greek Sicily overflow with mourning. And so here Greece is a noonday demon, or an *ignis fatuus*: anything but a consistent reality; and so it is that history yields to geography, nature triumphs over centuries of the efforts of men. If man has ever believed in truly pacifying nature, this place will disillusion him. Here Greece leaves us on tiptoe, an ever more sublime host to our thinking. [...]

[...]

Everywhere on these shores one has the sense of an eternity which acquires its earthly form as though by illusion; but it is a tangible illusion: reality is pitiable precisely by the grace of its extraordinary ambiguity. The fragility of its appearances testifies all the more to the height and ungraspability of its substance. Here life seems a vision, with what in every vision in effect slips out of reach, if in every glance there is also a farewell. Here one gains mastery over life with the eyes. Seeing is seeing things that change, hours that seem like things. Beneath every conquest is the subtle artifice of spectacle: beneath every thought also. Here one feels watched even within one's most intimate self: hence a more jealous closure of oneself, a diffidence as brusque as it is disarmed. What ardour is in these glances! Everyone is a particle of the fire which, between the Aeolian Islands and Etna and everywhere along this coast, is the implied leavening. Everyone carries it with them, into these valleys perpetually on the point of shifting from the pastoral to the tragic.

On the northern coast of Sicily, Hellenic colonisation was spread thinly, without great epicentres. To the west of ancient Himera is Termini Imerese, where the crudest of the Syracusan tyrants, Agathocles, was born, and where Heracles, guided by the Nymphs, refreshed himself in the restorative waters after his bout with Eryx.⁴⁴ To the east is Cefalù, which also may have grown out of the calamities of Himera. Alongside its ashen-grey cliff, a sort of immense natural Castel Sant'Angelo, there rises the Norman church,

built in a shelly limestone similar to that which we saw had been used in the Greek temples, at Paestum for instance, but with a more subtle mixture, a more crumbly compactness, which glows in the evanescent and illusory light peculiar to these places, which it restores to nature even as it tries to flee from nature. This is a visionary Sicily; perhaps those other navigators, the Normans, knew better than the Greeks how to read its coasts.

XV – Tindari⁴⁵

Tindari encapsulates this forgetful awareness of Greece. High above the sea, reaching out into the middle of the gulf of Patti, between Capo Calavà and the slender, silvery peninsula of Milazzo, Tindari welcomed us in pastoral calm, bringing us face to face with the loveliest watercolour of the Tyrrhenian we had ever seen: the sea of a Japanese print. Here we really expected to see the *roselli*, a kind of white swan which they told us about at Palinuuro.⁴⁶ Much of the city has slid into the sea, swept away by a landslide, so Pliny says; and leaning out over the precipice we see strange, lunar tongues of sands emerging, with the play of currents, from the sea floor. A silvery fine dust blurs the infinite distance all around. Watching over it in silence, here there is the most incredible Greek theatrette in the world. It is small, and the seating tiers, which are of a silvery silicate, succumb here and there to a green gully where sheep browse; you could never see sheep so pastoral they seem imaginary: tethered to a peg, they are the only regulars at the theatrette, the low sun seems to get entangled in their fleece and to give their astonished idiocy the same importance as the restless surfacing of the seating tiers; in place of the fallen scenery, there is the spectacle of the green plunge towards the sea, with the Aeolians ghosting on the horizon. We might compare it to the theatres of Taormina, of Syracuse, but this theatrette, with its beauty not delirious but muted, does not lose in the comparison. Here nature retains a human form, but has returned to being nature. Here, if anything, we would see best not the fatal tragedies of Aeschylus, but the familiar “corrections” of the myth brought about by Stesichorus.

[...]

Tisias, who was known as Stesichorus, co-ordinator of choruses, is the first Greek poet of the western Mediterranean, from the end of the Seventh Century B.C.. Between Homer and Pindar this legendary figure emerges in the West, who in the fatiguing period of the elaboration of

myths manages an interpretation, an arrangement of them that we could call rational. Between lyric and epic, he uses an intermediary language, with an impassive transfusion of epic data into lyric, and vice versa, which seemed, and is, a great thing. The most Doric of the Greek lyrics, that is the most impersonal, so it was said, with his psychological explanation of myth he decisively opened the path to Euripides and even Theocritus.

[...]

We go on, thinking: not far from here flourishes the great broad-leaved wild fig with broad leaves Ulysses clung to in saving himself from the black sea of Charybdis.⁴⁷ And so, arriving here, Nausicaa has turned to us with the voice of the sea: we heard nothing else.

XVI – Elea⁴⁸

Elea is almost, at least for now, more a dream than an archaeological reality. The Alento, advancing down its broad valley of multicoloured patches, far-reaching, through the Cilento mountains, has spread out a dusty plain north-east of the hill of Elea, precisely where the sea once reached in and surrounded the whole place, recalling its birth, refilling it with light – that strange light of the sea – and with mirages. The sea is now far away, off-white, soundless as we climb up through the “yellow thorns”, a species of genista, which in the sunlight inflame this high ground deserted by any other voice. Another village died up here, on the ruins of Elea, Castellammare della Brusca: born soon after the year 1000, by 1600 it was already a memory: now an ancient little church has become a farm hut, but is uninhabited, and the fortress, further on, belongs to a priest who no longer lives here because he was frightened away by lightning. In all, it seems that Elea wishes to preserve its solitude. Few ruins see the light of day. The rest is all underground. Whoever reaches the acropolis and contemplates the plain on the south-west, stretching towards Marina di Ascea and in the far distance, a great whale turned blue by the horizon, Capo Palinuro; whoever approaches the fortress which tightly hugs the ancient traces of Elea left open at its feet, will forget themselves: it is possible to feel spreading all around the shape intuited by Parmenides: the sphere without shadows, without relief, without folds, spreading in the mind. Here space is like time. The enduring moment echoes out from this centre, all around, in a thickness that can be seen and touched. Magic, infinite, the true silence of Being, unmoving,

unchanging, incorruptible. If even a dash of new colour runs through it, it is like blood reddening on the round cheek of a young girl. Truth, the “well-rounded Truth” of Parmenides, is still a virgin truth. The fire running through it is that of the intelligence enraptured by the fire of poetry, but which does not lapse into imagining traditional theogonies. The mind rebels not against poetry, but against false imagining: that mind desires poetry returned to its earliest steps.

[...]

One day, from faraway Colophon, there arrived here the rhapsodist Xenophanes, absorbed in the development of Ionian speculation.

[...]

Here he began to claim that the earth is finite in its upper part, in which we move about, limited by the air; and that it is infinite in its lower part, which makes things take form and grow from an intermixing of earth and water. Our Earth, like an extraordinary plant, put down its roots here; as well as whoever held it in his thoughts, he too put roots down here, having carried it with him on the infinite, rolling expanses of the Mediterranean. Xenophanes said furthermore that the shells found in the mountains and the imprints of fish in Sicilian caves showed how the Earth had slowly freed itself from the waters that submerged it in the beginning. It was an emergence from the Flood. On these very shores. And the seeds of this knowledge which Xenophanes carried with him seem to coincide with the Greek adventure in the west: it is a knowledge which knows of water and of earth: truth ripples like the eye of the sailor, of one seeking a homeland, and who set out to discover it far from the Persian tyranny. An affair of water and earth: as land is outlined on the horizon after an unending navigation.

[...]

The world is not yet completely born: we are its eternal youth. The crows, even the crows which fly away from the castle of Bruca in the fragrant sunlight have a childlike cry: their cawing seems to ripple in a cradle, it does not recall death. And only here, among the many crows which come to the ruins, did we have this strange sensation: that they might be at the origins of the world, a moment of distraction before its rigorous logic. Descending, we pass by the opening of the railway tunnel that perforates the acropolis of Elea, and Sestieri⁴⁹ points out to us that the stones of the tunnel archivolt, so beautifully carved, are none other than the stones

which the Eleans themselves had worked. He makes a disappointed gesture, and who can blame him, but what a marvellous tunnel mouth!

XVII – The coast of legends

Between Palinuro and Paestum, as far as the mouth of the Sele, extends a coast which has not finished holding back all its surprises. Here there are always new discoveries and new hypotheses. The left bank of the Sele was even part of very ancient Oenotria,⁵⁰ which spread to the east as far as the Gulf of Taranto. The Oenotrians, who by the Fifth Century B.C. had branched out into Morgeti, Siculi and Italics, are the most ancient inhabitants of this patch of Italy, and they are spoken of like the ancient Dorians who came to Italy seventeen generations before the Trojan War, following the two sons of Lycaon, king of Arcadia, Oenotrus and Peucetius. In this way we see opening out in Magna Graecia a positively fabled Greekness, or at least a Doric-ness, which likens the Oenotrians to the Arcadocypriots; and the Greeks of the colonies known to history did no more than rejuvenate a land that, *ab antiquo*, was similar to their own. Besides, along the Ionic and Tyrrhenian coasts we catch more and more glimpses, in the substratum, of a land held deep and tight by a unity of lineage, indeed the Oenotrians, which discoveries confirm. When one speaks of pre-existing populations at the advent of the Greek colonies, we must not forget these Doricising foundations. This is the coast on which, as far as Campania, the Chalcidian sailors spread the legend of the travels of Ulysses. And Elpenor, companion to Ulysses, and helmsman to Menelaus, have lent a little of their shadow to Palinuro. Here scientific research picks out the origins of myths, rediscovering their basis in a history which can be glimpsed through a cloak of legend, and which is no less fascinating. Even the foundation of the Heraion, at the mouth of the Sele, whose discovery constitutes the greatest archaeological surprise of our time, was attributed by Strabo to Jason and his Argonauts. What does this show if not that ancient sailors landed at the mouth of the river and, as a sign of thanks, founded a sanctuary which over the centuries was destined to grow so much in fortune as to become a sort of Delphi or Olympia of Magna Graecia?

We arrive at Paestum from the south, cutting through the middle of mountainous Cilento; first along the valley of the Alento which sends from side to side across its slopes, where we too are invaded by that light which

is diffuse, uniform, solitary but also, from switchback to switchback, serene and absorbed by the farmlands and crags far away, without reflections, and ourselves made almost transparent, so that the journey unfolds in silence and with each of us reading in the other, without error, the calm becoming lost and absorbed in that land; and then heading down on to the plain of Paestum where it is evening, and the temples rest in the first long shadows, their columns and architraves becoming once again the tentacles of that mysterious nocturnal coral polyp which feels around, hunting outsiders: there is something terrible about night at Paestum, especially if some wind clouds up the hard, stony air. Then the temples seem to extinguish themselves, seeking the original darkness: their travertine, so luminous and animated by day, and patient with the temptations of life, becomes blacker than the night, redescends to chaos, chases man and his designs into a fabulous mirage: history. At night the temples of Paestum disappear from history and its dimensions as from any human comprehension: in the shadows they seem to breathe like ferocious animals, and the plain, as far as Capaccio on one side, and far away to the deaf sea on the other, seems to ring with a savage howling, as from a lion or a tiger, like the forest or the desert. To sleep at Paestum demands a fearless heart.

1952, Translated at the University of Sydney, 2011

Eugenio Montale

On the Sacred Way

To the telluric laceration of the Earth's crust the reply, in Greece, is an almost luxurious richness of poor vegetation. Little or nothing new for whoever knows the Italian landscape; but for us variety meddles with the continuity of pleasure, it provokes a satisfaction that alters hour by hour and does not allow the fruitful ruminations of a most elevated boredom. We Italians enjoy our landscape by the teaspoonful; while in Greece the measure is the gallon. Here the meddling of the human species, too, is thwarted. It is possible to travel one hundred kilometres meeting only a few donkeys or a few goats; and the only snag is the great torpedoes of tourists, frequent, fast and bothersome. Those who troop off on these trips, though, have the advantage of being able to spend the night more or less comfortably

outside Athens, because the best hotels belong to the tourist agencies, which reserve rooms for their own clients. The lone traveller has very little hope of spending the night at Delphi or at Olympia if he does not have his own caravan; and he must limit himself to a few brief incursions followed by a necessary return to base.

Arriving at Delphi, whoever does not wish to retreat to Athens has only two choices: either to be ferried along the seashores of the Peloponnese, where the landscape is much less interesting but where there exists the possibility of finding a decent hotel; or to carry on as far as Lepanto, along a road riddled with scree and holes, judged unfeasible even by guide-books printed many years before. And this was the solution that I myself had to choose, because at Lepanto someone was waiting for me: an important personality who knows perfectly our language and our literature.

But first I should say something of Delphi, the sacred place castled along an impervious rise that dominates the buttered steep of a waterless river and a little triangle of sea, far off. At Delphi, I was told by my friend Fenton, an American writer who has lived in Greece for years, one must settle for waiting a long time for the hour of revelation. Failing that, one must limit oneself to admiring the famous *auriga* with the enamel eyes and to immersing one's hands in the fountain of Castalia while expressing, mentally, a wish. I did not hold back from this rite, but unfortunately my wishes were many and at odds and I do not think they can be granted. Around Delphi there are ruins of all kinds that can be visited on mule-back. The air of Delphi is electric, exciting, probably mystic; but mystery and tourism cannot be reconciled. There exists, if I am not misinformed, a project, backed by UNESCO, to found at Delphi a *phalanstère* reserved for intellectuals, poets and writers "at a high level" in the hope that a flicker of sacred fire will fasten to their souls. But I do not see how a Hölderlin or a Friedrich Nietzsche (neither of whom ever came to Greece) could find any advantage in lodging in such a friary. Probably the few elect will be chosen according to scientific criteria overseen by technocrats of intelligence and literary production. And Greece, the truly immortal Greece, will be known and venerated only by a few great spirits who will have never set foot there.

Not that the Ellada of today could disappoint a "sentimental" traveller (a type of tourist that is destined to disappear) because even today it can offer much to those who have eyes and sensibility; but it is a question

of years. Allow the river of tourism to turn to a flood and even here you will see the consequences. For now the Greek landscape has known how to defend itself: I suppose constructions that are too high are forbidden by certain laws, and also by the fact that here we are on volcanic ground, jolted by not uncommon earthquakes. The one sad exception, the Hotel Hilton, under construction in Athens: a monstrous semicircular building⁵¹ which will be able to host at least a thousand people. Another hotel of enormous proportions rises at an altitude of one thousand one hundred metres on the mountain of Parnitha, sixty kilometres from the capital. It cost enormous sums and this expenditure even threatened the stability of the Government. However on the summit of that mountain, which in winter is covered in snow, the white stain of the hotel cannot be called a dissonance.

A miracle of harmony, on the other hand, is the long snaking road that leads from Athens to Eleusis, to Thebes (earthquaked several times and today little more than a village), to Levadia and finally to Delphi. Here the vegetation has the highs and lows of an epic in which aspiration alternates in phases with nourishing torpor. The landscape is all a succession of irregular strophes; the evident work of man does not arrive at making of it a humanistic frame. The valleyings and the brief uprisings exchange one with another, the pines, the olive trees and the eucalyptus give place to little vineyards protected by drystone walls made of large stones. A thick flock of goats can be seen assembled, with goatherd and dog, in the shade of a tree. But perhaps the greatest surprise is elicited by the variety of minute grasses, by the velvety cushions that reclothe the rocks, by the proliferating wild red berries. The daylights are often blinding, the wind that sighs from distant throats disturbs the carpet of mosses in places where some splashes of green insist on growing on ledges of rusted earth. Monotony and waste, misery and subterranean convulsed exuberance seem thus the characteristics of this "sacred way" of the ancient world. The most frequent bird is that black magpie streaked with white that the Spanish call *hurraca* and that is seen in such quantities only in Provence and Catalonia. The crows, too, are numerous; later the falcons will appear. After Delphi I saw two, young, robust, squabbling amorously on a little wall by the road, indifferent to the passing of our car.

Leaving Delphi, having had a brief look at what is left of the Temple of Apollo, the most tedious part of the journey began. At first the attention falls on an endless woodland of wild olive trees (endless but not so much as

to form a forest: more of an immensely long arboreal gallery), then the road becomes almost impassable, full of humps and holes, scattered with scree and mountains of debris. The sea can no longer be seen; one rises and falls continually surrounded by rocks and the vehicle is forced to travel almost at walking pace. On reaching the village of Amfissa we succeeded in finding two worthies of the township (a policeman and the mayor) who courteously offered to telephone to Naupactus (Lepanto) to inform our host that, with the help of the gods, we would arrive at our destination extremely late. In the meantime it had grown dark. We did not meet a living soul; on resuming the journey a wheel had to be changed. We would have felt more at ease if only we had been able to see the sea; but the road – if that rocky crust of earth could be called that – continually goes on rising through bristling rock faces and only in its last kilometres plunges over the little city. Luckily the worthies of Amfissa had kept their promise and on the last stretch we were met and relieved by the car belonging to our host, Mr. Novas, deputy of the college of Missolonghi, belonging to a dynasty of deputies of that college, many times a minister and academician at Athens. A writer and poet, as well as a politician marshalled alongside the *ralliement* of opposition political parties headed by Papandreou, Kyrios Novas is the most important public figure in Lepanto, his native city. Recently he rebuilt his house, destroyed in a fire during the civil war, and he has assembled an impressive documentation of all that has been published about the famous battle that unfolded almost four centuries ago off the coast of what is now Naupactus.

With him and with the bearded *papas* of the city, who arrived to give us his auspicious greetings (and what a surprise to see a thick black beard looming into our car window at dead of night) without incident we continued the journey as far as the hospitable house of our protector. On arriving there I consulted I do not know how many *carmi* and *epinici* [victory odes], for the most part published in Venice in 1571-72 in honour of Don John of Austria and his admirals. Nor does the rare collection end here, because it is completed with curious prints from that era: in one of these, evidently executed *ad hoc* by a modern draughtsman, it is even possible to see Cervantes, who with the one hand left to him is embarked on a fight to the death with a Turk.

Apart from this collection, which will eventually go to a local museum, there is not much to see at Lepanto. The port forms a quite harmonious ring and between little oleander woodlands one makes out the ruins

of a Venetian castle. There is much silence at Lepanto and if the little city possessed a comfortable hotel it could be recommended to anyone wishing to live out a few days in peace.

The following morning, waking up early, I heard the lamenting sound of a human voice, alternating with a chatter of sparrows. It was a travelling octopus salesman letting out his call. It is possible that in a few years the name of Lepanto will be associated in my memory with the tentacles and suckers of an octopus nest in a basket. All of Greece is this, it is *also* this, for whoever happens not to be an archaeologist and not to know how to command the relics of its vanished civilisation. It is a togetherness of natural apparitions that could be said to be impossible elsewhere and that in reality can be seen everywhere, but that only here assume the value of a mysterious calling: it is in the visionary magic of its landscape, poor but intense, indigent and sublime. Unfortunately such a discovery would have had another value in other times, when to come to Greece was a much more difficult undertaking. To become spiritual citizens of Greece meant something in the time of Byron who met his death here; it is impossible today for those who arrive by jet⁵² for a few days. And yet it is an error to come here with the soul of someone entering a museum. One must dissolve the fascinating and sometimes fearful curtain of images that are seen, of forms that are touched, to enter, live, into the Greece of today, to know its men, to learn how they love, what they can still give us and what we can learn from them. To know, in short, if there is a living Greece alongside the land of the dead that can be studied and loved while standing closed inside a library. And that is what sooner or later I would like to attempt, even if my visit today has been too brief.

1962, *Translated at the University of Sydney, 2011*

Notes

- 1 Giorgio Zampa, 'Cronologia,' in Eugenio Montale, *Tutte le poesie* (Milan: Mondadori, 2004), p. lxxvii.
- 2 Montale had been a mentor to Bigongiari and several other younger poets in the 1930s, when, despite the strictures of Fascism, Florence had a remarkably rich and liberal literary culture. When Bigongiari arrived in Florence as a student in the early part of the decade, Montale was director of the prestigious Gabinetto Vieusseux archive, a position from which he was later

sacked for refusing to join the Fascist party. Montale embodied the browbeaten stoicism of the intellectual unable to take action for fear of reprisals, waiting instead for better times. Bigongiari and company, who had grown up under Fascism and so had no experience of better political conditions, looked to him for moral strength as well as advice on poetry. On that count, Montale's contributions were invaluable, but his technical influence turned from inspiration into benign addiction. Montale's writing was increasingly turning inwards and voicing the ironies of ordinary life under repressed conditions. His style was abstract, pithy and memorable, built incrementally from densely-worked and emotionally loaded syllables, and it became infectious. Bigongiari and other poets such as Mario Luzi, Alessandro Parronchi and Alfonso Gatto had to work extremely hard not to lapse into it. They eventually succeeded and had diverse and interesting careers, but Bigongiari stayed closer to Montale than the others. He was also among Montale's most sensitive critics in that younger generation.

- 3 Piero Bigongiari, *Greece in Italy, or A Great Silence*, trans. Theodore Ell, in *Modern Greek Studies* 15 (2011), p. 75.
- 4 Piero Bigongiari, *L'elaborazione della lirica leopardiana* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1937), p. 7. My translation.
- 5 Giacomo Leopardi, "La Ginestra o il fiore del deserto," in *Canti* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1953), p. 135.
- 6 Piero Bigongiari, "Un lume velenoso," in *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963* (Florence: Le Lettere, 1994), p. 172. My translation.
- 7 Piero Bigongiari, "Ibis redibis," in *Tutte le poesie I: 1933-1963* (Florence: Le Lettere, 1994), p. 172.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 172. My translation.
- 9 George Gissing, *By the Ionian Sea: Notes of a Ramble in Southern Italy* (London: T. Fisher and Unwin, 1905), p. 9.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 13 Piero Bigongiari, *Greece in Italy, or A Great Silence*, trans. Theodore Ell, in *Modern Greek Studies* 15 (2011), p. 78.
- 14 George Gissing, *By the Ionian Sea*, p. 43.
- 15 Piero Bigongiari, *Greece in Italy, or A Great Silence*, trans. Theodore Ell, in *Modern Greek Studies* 15 (2011), p. 77.
- 16 George Gissing, *By the Ionian Sea*, p. 82.
- 17 Piero Bigongiari, *Greece in Italy, or A Great Silence*, trans. Theodore Ell, in *Modern Greek Studies* 15 (2011), p. 82.
- 18 George Gissing, *By the Ionian Sea*, p. 93.
- 19 *Ibid.*, pp. 130-131.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 15.
- 21 *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 166.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 187.
- 24 Martin Heidegger, *Sojourns: The Journey to Greece*, trans. by John Panteleimon Manoussakis (Albany: State University of New York, 2005), p. 12.
- 25 *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

- 27 Ibid., p. 4.
- 28 Ibid., pp. 55-56.
- 29 Ibid., p. 54.
- 30 Ibid, p. 3.
- 31 George Gissing, *By the Ionian Sea*, p. 235.
- 32 Walter Benjamin, "One-way Street," in *One-way Street and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 113.
- 33 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, V. When the water-nymph Proserpine is abducted to the Underworld, her companion Cyan despairs and melts in tears into her own river. Bigongiari's citation, "Nulla rimase lei che si potesse prendere," is from the Italian translation by Salvatore Quasimodo, a contemporary with a very different view of the legacy of Magna Graecia (see Introduction in previous issue). See Salvatore Quasimodo, "Proserpina, Cyane (Lib. V – vv. 385-520)," in *La vita non è sogno* (Milan: Mondadori, 1949), 29.
- 34 Between 415 and 414 BC an Athenian force, led by Alcibiades, Nicias and Demosthenes, attempted to conquer the territory of Syracuse. The invasion failed disastrously thanks to overconfidence, bungled tactics and acrimonious leadership disputes. The Athenians who survived the battles against Syracuse were scattered and confused. They were taken prisoner and were so numerous that they could only be held in quarries in the region described here by Bigongiari. There, hemmed in, diseased and starving, great numbers of them died, and only a few managed to return to Athens, much later, to tell of the catastrophe.
- 35 The original Vincenzo Rindone was a black market racketeer and robber in this area during the Second World War. He was gallant and charismatic but ruthless – landowners died at his hand. He avoided capture and escaped to Rome but was eventually discovered, tried and imprisoned for life. We should assume that the Vincenzo Rindone whom Bigongiari names here was a less noteworthy copycat.
- 36 Most sources date this event at 406 B.C.. Bigongiari's source may have differed or he may have been slightly mistaken.
- 37 Archaeologist (1859-1935) who pioneered the excavation of sites throughout the region.
- 38 Virgil, *Aeneid*, III, 701-705. *The Aeneid* was translated by C. Day Lewis in the exact year of Bigongiari's journey, 1952. Day Lewis renders this passage thus: "and now, far off, is Kamarina, which fate said / Must never be reclaimed, and the Geloan plains, / And Gela, which is named after its own wild river. / Then Acragas [Agrigentum] on its crag shows from afar its great walls – / A town renowned one time for its mettlesome breed of horses. / The wind blows fair, and we leave palm-fringed Selinus behind..." *The Aeneid of Virgil* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1953), 79-80.
- 39 Virgil, *Aeneid*, IV, 1-2 ("At regina gravi iamdudum saucia cura / vulnus alit venis et caeco carpitur igni...").
- 40 Pindar, Pythian Ode XII, str. 1.
- 41 Gellias, an opulently rich citizen of Agrigentum, met a tragic end. When the Carthaginians besieged the city he sought refuge in the Temple of Athena, but on realising that there was no redeeming the barbarity of the invaders, he set fire to the temple and was swallowed up in the flames.
- 42 A long and spectacular cliff running eastwards from the city of Agrigento.
- 43 Giacomo Leopardi, "Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese," in *Operette morali* (Milan: Garzanti, 1982), 147-158. In this philosophical fable an Icelander complains to Nature that he has been driven from place to place across the world by hardship and suffering, and that

he no longer believes that man can be capable of peace or happiness while Nature treats him so cruelly. Nature replies that it is not Man's place to expect anything from her, or to assume that the world is made to suit his happiness at all.

- 44 Eryx was a formidable boxer, but Heracles vanquished him.
- 45 In antiquity, Tyndaris.
- 46 The site of ancient Palinurus, in Campania. We should assume that Bigongiari had already passed through there on his way south, to return towards the end of his journey.
- 47 Homer, *The Odyssey*, XII, 425-436.
- 48 Bigongiari does not describe the journey from Sicily northwards to Campania.
- 49 Sestieri, we should assume, was Bigongiari's guide on this particular day.
- 50 Among the most ancient of names for the south of Italy; very little survives of Oenotria.
- 51 Here Montale uses the actual word *building*, the English intrusion into his Italian matching the intrusion of the Hilton.
- 52 Once again, the English word *jet* intrudes into Montale's Italian.

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Ναυσικά

Κωνσταντίνος Παρθένης, 1932