

# Chapter 11

## “Fossilized Presents”. The Photo-Textual Nostos in Sicily from Elio Vittorini to Giorgio Vasta

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### Abstract

Analyzing Giorgio Vasta's *Spaesamento* (2010) and *Palermo. Un'autobiografia nella luce* (2022), alongside Elio Vittorini's *Conversazione in Sicilia*, illustrated with photographs by Luigi Crocenzi (1953), this chapter explores the theme of *nostos*, or return, highlighting the contrast between the seemingly static nature of the South and the ostensibly dynamic character of the North. The analysis centers on two key concepts: the backward movement toward an insular space, in this case Sicily, and the complex relationship between human and non-human entities, illustrated, on one hand, by the reification of human figures and, on the other, by the “eloquence” of material bodies, both natural and artificial, such as animals and objects, namely *technofossils*. Examining not only thematic elements but also the formal strategies that represent them, particularly the use of photography and photo-textual composition, this study shows how both authors employ Southern Italy as a synecdoche, representing broader ecological, political, and cultural tensions. Through ecocritical and geocritical perspectives, Sicily emerges as both a representative part of Italy and of a Global South, challenging conventional North-South binaries and offering a redefinition of Southern identity.

### Keywords

return; ecocriticism; geocriticism; photo-text; Global South.

## The *Nostos* as a New Perspective on the South

In contemporary literary theory, it is becoming clear that it is impossible to consider a text without analyzing its geography: a work may be influenced by various spatial factors, such as where it is written, where it is set, or the author's place of origin. As a result, the geographical positioning of a text has proved to be fundamental for critical analysis, especially in recent decades with the rise of geocriticism<sup>1</sup>. Alongside this development, the concept of "Global South" has emerged across various research fields. This term has gained preference over the previously dominant "Third World", as it more accurately reflects recent geopolitical shifts, especially those related to migration. Importantly, this term is not just geographical — it does not solely refer to countries located in the southern hemisphere — but encompasses broader social and political dimensions:

[...] the 'Global South' (like democracy, development, and many other concepts) is now the place of struggles between, on the one hand, the rhetoric of modernity and modernization together with the logic of coloniality and domination, and, on the other, the struggle for independent thought and decolonial freedom. From the perspective of the global north, the global south needs help. From the perspective of the inhabitants of those regions that are not aligned with the global north, the global south names the places where decolonial emancipations are taking place and where new horizons of life are emerging. (Levander and Mignolo 2011: 5)

In recent years, this not-only-geographical perspective has been complemented by the growing field of ecocriticism, which examines how the relationship between humans and their environment is portrayed in literature<sup>2</sup>, thus aiming to map a *geography of ecology*. Ecocritical studies recognize the importance of understanding the divide between the global North and South, acknowledging that the environmental crisis disproportionately affects southern countries and societies due to factors that are not only geographical but also political, social, economic, and cultural. In a new postcolonial awareness, several scholars then ask:

How can nature be historicized without obscuring its ontological difference from human time? Moreover, what becomes of this need for a renewed sense of place when colonialism and globalization deny local land sovereignty, and

1 Geocriticism is a method of literary analysis and theory that integrates the study of geographic space, see the works of Bertrand Westphal (2007, 2011, 2016, 2019). For a survey of the main theoretical studies on geocriticism, see also Flavio Sorrentino (2010).

2 Cf. Robert T. Tally Jr. and Christine M. Battista (2016). About ecocriticism in Italy, cf. Caterina Salabè (2013), Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann (2014), Ken Hiltner (2015), Serenella Iovino (2015b, 2016), Nicola Turi (2016), Niccolò Scaffai (2017), Serenella Iovino, Enrico Cesaretti, and Elena Past (2018), Scott Slovic, Swarnalatha Rangarajan, and Vidya Sarveswaran (2019), and Marina Spunta and Silvia Ross (2022).

when pollution, desertification, deforestation, climate change, and other forms of global environmental degradation remind us so forcefully of the ecological interdependencies of any given space? (DeLoughrey and Handley 2011: 4)

It is the intention of postcolonial ecocriticism to answer these questions and to consider «the landscape (and seascape) as a participant in this historical process rather than a bystander to human experience», and to recuperate «the alterity of both history *and* nature, without reducing either to the other» (DeLoughrey and Handley 2011: 4). Works that emphasize local specificity, especially when shaped by the dominant culture of a symbolic global North, therefore fall within this critical framework. Consequently, it becomes essential to study south-centered stories that depict these environments from a natural and geographical, but also cultural and political viewpoints, and thus to see how nature and history concretely intersect.

In this regard, applying the concept of the Global South to Ecocritical Studies<sup>3</sup> is especially relevant in a country like Italy, because

the concepts of southernness elaborated in the Italian context in relation to the peninsula's southern regions have had a substantial impact on the construction of Italian identity and on Italy's relationship to both Europe and countries located in the hemispheric south. (Polizzi 2022: 16)

In Italy, continues the scholar, we can see «both the *mezzogiorno* as the south of Italy and Italy as the south of Europe», without forgetting, though, that «both the *mezzogiorno* and Italy as a whole have historical and present links, through migration and colonialism, with the ‘Global South’» (Polizzi 2022: 15).

Since it is indisputable that the existence of a South implies the existence of a North — and vice versa — it becomes particularly interesting to analyze literary texts where both places, or more precisely, both concepts, are present. This includes narratives that depict not only journeys from south to north or north to south, but also return journeys, or *nostoi*. The narration of movement back towards the south of Italy — I will examine in this essay the emblematic Sicily — possesses specific characteristics such as themes, style, and rhetorical tropes. In her essay *Il moto immobile*, Marina Paino has already explored the theme of return in Sicilian literature:

Indeed, the *nostos* to the native place seems to be the only possible journey for Sicilians, a journey understood as a return and not as a departure, given that the logics of stillness variously tend to prevent any form of departure from the island. Like any movement à *rebours*, this one too is naturally charged with regressive instances, which are intertwined on the one hand with the mournful and

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3 About the concept of Global South and the relationships between Southern studies and Ecocriticism, cf. Slovic, Rangarajan, and Sarveswaran (2015), and Zackary Vernon (2019).

mortifying ones of a present that is apathetically extraneous to life, and on the other with the memory of a lost past, regretted and happily distant from reality. (Paino 2014: 6; my translation)

As the title of Paino's essay reveals, the return to the homeland is a *motionless motion*, by which the subject always returns to the state of departure, which is, however, not only a geographical place but also a social, political, and cultural one:

the representation of immobility thus manifests itself as self-defence against a long succession of oppression and injustice and, at the same time, as a denunciation of it, metaphorically coloured by ideological values that are sometimes inseparable from existential ones. (Paino 2014: 5; my translation)

The *nostoi* analyzed by Paino (in the works of Elio Vittorini, Gesualdo Bufalino, Vincenzo Consolo, Leonardo Sciascia, and others) are all representative of an attempt at change that is never fulfilled, with the returnees constantly finding themselves back at their starting point, as if caught in a recursive and never-ending journey.

Given those theoretical foundations, this contribution aims to read two works by Sicilian writer Giorgio Vasta, namely *Spaesamento* (2010) and the phototext *Palermo. Un'autobiografia nella luce* (2022) featuring photographs by Ramak Fazl, alongside Elio Vittorini's *Conversazione in Sicilia* in the edition illustrated by Luigi Crocenzì's photographs ([1953] 2007). This analysis will focus on two concepts: the movement backwards toward an insular space, in this case Sicily; the relationship between human and non-human entities, signified on the one hand by the reification of the human, and on the other hand, by the «eloquence» of material bodies, both natural and artificial (Iovino 2015a), such as animals and objects.

These works have in common not just the theme of *nostos*, but also a formal strategy to represent it, namely the integration of images. While *Spaesamento* is not a phototext, the two other works certainly are, and the layout, the content of representation, and the interplay between words and images profoundly affect the overall composition and the meaning conveyed, as I will demonstrate through an analysis of both text and images<sup>4</sup>.

The two intranational returns of Silvestro Ferrauto, the protagonist of *Conversazione in Sicilia*, and Giorgio Vasta — from Northern Italy (the former

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4 Phototexts are considered a subset of the broader category known as iconotexts. The iconotext is «an artifact conceived as a non-illustrative, but dialogical, relationship between text(s) and image(s), where text(s) and image(s), while forming an indissoluble iconotextual unity, each retain their own identity and autonomy» (Nerlich 1990: 268). The bibliography on phototextual practices has now become increasingly extensive; below are the most recent references within the Italian context: Andrea Cortellessa (2011), Michele Vangi (2005), Michele Cometa (2016), Giuseppe Carrara (2020), and Lavinia Torti (2023).

from Milan, the latter from Turin) to Sicily — occur fifteen years after their respective departures, but result in a different perception, hence a different narrative, of the homeland. In Vittorini’s case, the return is bittersweet, a dreamlike reunion with rural Sicily, whereas Vasta, with *Spaesamento* and *Palermo*, feels an insurmountable distance and a sense of estrangement from his city. The interaction between Northern and Southern Italy unfolds through two apparent antinomies: the North is a place from which to start, the South is a place to which to land; the North is dynamic and in motion, while the South is static, fixed in time and space.

## Palermo as a Synecdoche of Italy, or the Images of a Global Sicily

Moving backwards myself, I will begin by analyzing Vasta’s work before addressing Vittorini’s earlier one. In *Spaesamento* the Sicilian author recounts a three-day return to his hometown of Palermo and describes it with the detachment of a foreigner. Below is the incipit:

At first there is a piece of paper that I crumple between my fingers. I press it with my fingertips against my palm until I decide to get rid of it; the treadmill is still standing in the rumble of the airport and this green and white boarding pass with the flight, gate and seat numbers is no longer needed, while getting rid of it, as I do every time I arrive in Palermo, serves me to *accept the return*. (Vasta 2010: 3)<sup>5</sup>

Vasta’s *nostos* is quite unique since it is not really narrated: *Spaesamento* opens with the protagonist-author already in Palermo, the journey itself having been completed by plane, thus temporally zeroed. Paradoxically, this *nostos* begins with arrival, and it is only when the narrator begins to move through his hometown that spatial movement becomes explicit, pervasive, and exploratory. The character is thus a «human probe that goes around the city recording phenomena, gaping like a mouth that wants to devour beets of life» (Vasta 2010: 9). This description immediately juxtaposes the hyper-technical (in the word *probe*) with the hyper-physical (in the word *mouth*), ultimately culminating in the hyper-natural (life is consumed in *beets* bites). Vasta conceptualizes this experience as a process of “coring” (*carotaggio*), a term he himself employs:

[...] I think that if the condition of the core drilling is the randomness of the sample taken, then even here, now, *I can become a sampling machine*, a mobile drilling machine, and *extract from space and time those cores of reality* useful, perhaps, to get an idea of where I am, to describe the form of this disorientation. Because I have everything I need: a space — Palermo — and a time — these last three days of

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5 All translations from Vasta’s books are mine.

holiday: normal reality, random reality, and the presumption and hope of being able to extend the study of the part to an understanding of the whole. (Vasta 2010: 9; italics mine)

If the island is often regarded as a fragment detached from the *continente*, then here Sicily becomes a synecdoche for the entire Italian country. While it is spatially, anthropologically, and socially distinct, for Vasta — an outsider in his own land — the insular space of Southern Italy functions as a piece for understanding the whole, it serves as a sample. As Vasta notes later in the text: «being the city of contingency, where history and project vanish, where past and future are not there, Palermo has turned out to be a reliable sample. Here Italy can be seen very well» (2010: 106). All the components of the city — humans, animals, plants, and objects — are subject to the coring process, are viewed as fragments of a greater whole. This is why Vasta seems to adopt a materialistic ecocritical perspective on his environment, one that aligns with

the study of the way in which material forms (natural and not) – bodies, things, elements, toxic substances, chemical agents, organic and inorganic matter, landscapes, etc. – interact with each other and with the human dimension, producing configurations of meanings and discourses that we can interpret as “stories”. (Iovino 2015a: 104)

In Vasta’s works, what stands out most is the interplay — or more precisely, the contamination — between the natural and the non-natural for different reasons: humans are described and depicted with dehumanized features, while natural and mineral objects participate in the narrative as they are imbued with agency; human-made objects, instead, become part of nature, layering the earth’s surface as fossils of the contemporary world.

This dynamic is made explicit from the outset of *Spaesamento*, where men and women seen through Vasta’s gaze are described using dehumanizing and caricatured epithets that often liken them to natural objects. Vasta refers to characters as the «lake-lady», the «cosmetic woman», the «man with a Topinambur head» or simply «Topinambur» (Vasta 2010: 12, 15, 13). Through this synesthetic style, the author portrays these humans not as individuals with agency, spirit, or the capacity for action, but rather as objects observed from an external perspective, whose movements and changes are dictated by external forces (such as the sun and heat in this case). While elements in the text actively shape the surrounding environment and serve as narrative agents, humans, by contrast, are mere witnesses to the transformation and destruction of places, becoming themselves observed bodies and data samples. They serve as focal points for the *probe*-Vasta, who is consequently objectified, even by his own hand. The following passage illustrates this:

the cosmetic woman remains silent, observing — both nearby and from a distance — the bodies that move from one palm tree to another to strike and consume. The industrious life of destruction. This is matter, she adds in a clear whisper. This is how matter functions. (Vasta 2010: 110)

Here is another example: «One by one, catechumens of a religion of sand, other children — many with mycoses, several with erythema — kneel before a wire-frame, receiving the material and quietly focusing on their construction» (46).

Vasta often bases his descriptions on their material composition rather than their surface appearance:

I think about how much I liked, inside, to perceive the materials and recognize them: there was the zinc of the counter — the zinc that is also in human blood; there was the wood of the chairs and stools, the mad metal of the cutlery, the grit of the floor, the sandy mortar of the plaster of the walls and the glass of the glasses; I stood in the middle of the room [...] and I felt the extraction of minerals, the steel industry, the cast iron of the ironworks, the matter broken down and recomposed to make forms and artefacts. (Vasta 2010: 29-30)

This persistent reference to matter is significant, as it is interpreted as an explicit homogenization of all elements that constitute the perceived world, encompassing both living beings and inanimate objects. While the descriptions in *Spaesamento* give tangible, material form to things, this is partially replaced and enhanced by the presence of photographs in the more recent phototext *Palermo*. The book is divided into two sections: the first, titled *Un'autobiografia nella luce* (An Autobiography in the Light), is written by Giorgio Vasta; the second, *City of Phantoms* (originally in English), features 77 photographs taken by Ramak Fazel, who had previously collaborated with the Sicilian author on the phototext *Absolutely Nothing. Storie di sparizione nei deserti americani* (2016)<sup>6</sup>.

Photography, which ontologically freezes time, immobilizes it, capturing what no longer exists (among others, see Barthes 1980), serves here as a metaphor for the structural immobility of the landscape. This is why Vasta, for example, chose not to date the photographs. Fazel's images, says the writer, «do not identify a specific historical time, but a recurring, repetitive time, always the same» (Scarafia 2022). The time captured by Fazel in *Un'autobiografia nella luce* is therefore a «fossilized present» (Vasta 2010: 113): Vasta uses this definition in *Spaesamento* to describe something not merely antithetical but rather a substitute for a past that, in Sicily — at least the one he experienced and writes about — changed only superficially. It is a past that, in essence, does not exist. As the narrator notes:

6 Cf. Maria Rizzarelli (2017), Giuliana Benvenuti (2020), and Corinne Pontillo (2021).

the persuasion that there is no escape, never — the consciousness of living in a world already decided and recursive, and therefore the certainty of being, as soon as they are born, veterans — is so deeply rooted in Palermo as to be *ahistorical and biological*. Here, there is no history, the diachronic perspective is a waste of time. There are only *immemorial bodies*, the way experience is born each time virgin and radically devoid of memory. (Vasta 2010: 61)

While in *Spaesamento* humans are portrayed as immemorial bodies, living passively an ahistorical time, in *Palermo* Fazel's photographs depict dehumanized human beings, often in pieces. Faceless heads, limbs, and body parts are detached from their corporeal wholes: an arm is seen reaching for books on a shelf, another touches a cat in a domestic setting (identified in the text as the author's home at Via Sciuti 130 in Palermo<sup>7</sup>); a hand tries to catch a fish, while two others break a wire; finally, two hands exchange money for the purchase of the traditional *pane ca' meusa* (sandwich with spleen), unintentionally mimicking Michelangelo's famous *Creation of Adam*. Alongside these objectified and fragmented human figures, Fazel's landscapes are dominated by human-made artifacts — cars, buildings, flags, foosball tables, and bars — which reflect historical imprints even in the absence of people. Yet, when humans do appear in their entirety, they are engaged in collective, ritualistic, and repetitive actions — playing cards, dancing, eating, or driving — in which individual agency and identity dissolve. Thus, humans become components of a still life (*natura morta*), with the human figure transformed into a natural object embedded in the landscape. Collective rituals, in turn, evoke a sense of premodernity and ahistorical time, much like that seen in *Spaesamento*, where actions endlessly repeat in a circular, natural, *biological* rhythm.

In fact, in both photographs and text, nature and culture are intertwined, often tensely. A particularly emblematic photograph illustrating this tension between natural and non-natural elements, and between movement and stasis, is the penultimate image in the *City of Phantoms* section: a dinosaur, whose enlarged detail — a synecdoche — also appears on the removal band of the book's cover (a drawing of a dinosaur appears on *Spaesamento*'s cover as well). The dinosaur serves a dual role: it is both an animal — an extinct and no more existent one — and a human-made object, the relic of an abandoned amusement park. It is a metaphor for the inherent antiquity, abandonment, and fossilization to which the island of Sicily has been subjected. As a result, it is a metaphor for the negative outcome of the cultural evolution of the world, and at the same time it explicitly refers to an archaeology of human production: in fact, it is not an actual fossil but a gigantic toy, an artifact that, abandoned, has become part of the landscape, perhaps destined to remain embedded in the earth, absorbed into the lithosphere.

7 About the presence of *autofiction* in this contemporary iconotext and other ones, see Lorenzo Marchese (2024).





**Fig. 11.1** – *City of Phantoms* (Vasta and Fazel 2022), © 2017-18 Ramak Fazel - by kind permission of Humboldt Books

This dinosaur is, in essence, a *technofossil*, a product of human civilization that could one day form part of Earth’s geological record (Zalasiewicz et al. 2014). It is not merely a fossil of technological progress but also a *fossil of culture*, a specific one, Western culture (or the Northern one, in other words: capitalist culture). In this regard, the photograph adjacent to the dinosaur image depicts two flags: one of the United States and the other of Palermo’s football team. The availability of the U.S. flag for purchase in Palermo, alongside the distinctly local flag of the football team, highlights the pervasive influence and cultural penetration of Western, particularly American, culture into even the most localized contexts. This juxtaposition underscores the blending, or contamination, of global and local identities within the city’s cultural fabric. In her analysis of obsolete objects in post-apocalyptic literature, Valentina Sturli notes that in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), when the protagonist offers his son a can

of Coca-Cola, the beverage becomes a totem of the late-capitalist, pre-apocalyptic world, and simultaneously, a fossil of an “archaic” culture: «the gesture of the child drinking a Coke, perhaps one of the most emblematic images of globalization, is transformed by the father’s officiation into a ritual of memory» (Sturli 2022). Similarly, Fazel’s photograph of the dinosaur stands as a fossil from a bygone era, but that, paradoxically, continues to exist in the present, once again, in a «fossilized present» (Vasta 2010: 113). The dinosaur, doubly immobilized — first as an objectified toy and second as a static photograph — epitomizes the tension between movement (the journey of the traveler who has returned after years of absence) and the immobility of abandoned objects and spaces. As a massive symbol of waste, it encapsulates the concept of *rifiuto*, a term Vasta repeatedly invokes, describing the *waste* and *refusal* (both *rifiuto* in Italian) that envelop the so-called progress of the South<sup>8</sup>. This theme surfaces again when the writer, in the textual section of *Palermo*, recounts a vision that Fazel later captures photographically in the second part of the book:

An old man with a bald head sat reading the *Giornale di Sicilia* [...]: the headline read *Rifiuti* (*Waste*), but that word transcended the local news, *rifiuti* did not refer to the refuse piling up in the streets, it did not concern the surface, but rather the deep core of the city: its intimate, emotional structure, that which endures over time: to refuse, to reject (*rifiutarsi, rifiutare*). (2022: 30; the picture is at p. 84)

The photograph and the passage above underscore one of the central southern issues, as places, objects, and people left behind become waste, remnants, the result of a modernization process that is only superficial. As Derobertis notes, «the pursuit of modernity in the South has predominantly produced waste and has not addressed any supposed *delay* in modernization compared to any North» (Derobertis 2009: xviii). Waste, therefore, emerges as a byproduct of movement and progress, rather than a consequence of presumed stagnation of the South. In this light, it seems fitting that in *Spaesamento*, much like *Palermo*’s dinosaur, Vasta does not truly move (nor progress) within the city; rather, he «stand[s] and absorb[s]» (Vasta 2010: 31), reflecting upon the reality that the Sicily he portrays has, in fact, changed, but only on a superficial level.

When the author notices the many bars that have been closed and replaced by shoe and bag shops, his attention is drawn «precisely to the *converted spaces*» and to the «transformation of the city into a realm, of the real into a realm, [to] Palermo’s capacity to have powerfully introjected the *cosmetic work* underway in urban spaces throughout Italy» (Vasta 2010: 28, *italics mine*). In another instance, he describes a bar:

8 For a study of waste in contemporary literature, see Francesca Valdinoci (2019).

More than history, I think. This is the bar of the present. A place, that is, in which the bulldozer of simplification has managed to flatten and lacquer everything. [...] I have experienced this idea of furnishing in Turin, Rome, and Milan, and it is the concretization of the Italian furnishing mono-intuition of the last fifteen years, the abrogation of local signs to the advantage of a theoretical national taste in which *the present* dominates everything. (2010: 30)

This denial of the past — of premodern specificity — and the erasure of local identity in Palermo stem from a superficial, *fake*, adaptation — it is a cosmetic, it is a trick — to national dominance, which is primarily the dominance of the north. Like in Fazel’s photographs, Palermo is not represented as an icon of local specificity, it is instead never really showed, becomes indistinguishable, with no recognizable glimpse of it provided. Precisely because Palermo — as said — is everywhere, it serves as a synecdoche for Italy. Even though we cannot dwell on this point, similarly, Silvio Berlusconi, the political figure to whom the entire second part of *Spaesamento* is dedicated, also functions as a synecdoche for the North, and therefore for Italy as a whole: «Berlusconi is a zone» (Vasta 2010: 110).

## Silvestro Ferrauto, the Stranger from within and the Yet-Unwronged World

Elio Vittorini’s work presents a different case due to technical and historiographical factors; however, both authors share a common tension between the movement of the returnee and the perceived immobility of the South, and they both conceptualize Southern Italy as a synecdoche, representing Italy as a whole on one hand, and the broader notion of all Souths (a Global South, indeed) on the other. In a note of 1940, Vittorini explicitly states that *Conversazione in Sicilia* is not autobiographical, and that «the Sicily in which his story takes place is Sicily only by chance, I like the sound of the word “Sicily” better than “Persia” or “Venezuela”. As for the rest, I imagine all manuscripts are found in a bottle» (Vittorini 2000: XVII). Despite his claim, it is no coincidence that Sicily is the chosen setting, nor that the alternatives Vittorini provides, Persia and Venezuela, are both regions generally recognizable as belonging to a global South. And although the Sicily depicted in this *nostos* serves as a metaphor for universal reality, conveyed through a lyrical and mythical, ahistorical realism, the novel’s strong autobiographical dimension remains undeniable. In fact, when *Conversazione* was written, the world in which Vittorini lived and wrote was oppressed by fascism and the Spanish Civil War (Vittorini serialized the book in the journal «Letteratura» between 1938 and 1939, before publishing it with Bompiani in 1941). The novel presents a pointed critique of both Francisco Franco’s regime in Spain and Benito Mussolini’s fascist rule in

Italy. Vittorini himself, formerly a committed leftist fascist, chose to join the Spanish Republicans against Franco when the Spanish Civil War erupted in 1936, a conflict that caused him profound personal grief for the death of his brother. He publicly called for Italian fascists to support the Republicans, but, as expected, this plea received no backing.

In contrast to Vasta's work, the return journey of Silvestro Ferrauto in Vittorini's novel is recounted from the very outset, even before his departure. The protagonist is confronted with a crossroads — both spatial and socio-historical — between north and south, hesitating over whether to embark on the journey at all:

I found myself then facing two paths for a moment — one turning back home, into the abstraction of those massacred crowds, into the same calm, the same hopelessness; the other turning back to Sicily, to the mountains, into the lament of the fife that was playing inside me; into something which might not be as dark a calm and as deaf a hopelessness. To me it was still all the same whether I took one path or the other, humanity was doomed either way, and I found out there was a train leaving for the South in ten minutes, at seven o'clock. (Vittorini 2000: 10)

Silvestro's journey begins in Milan and is concretely marked by stages and encounters, and composed of pieces of places, from Syracuse «as far as Scicli, then going up, via Ragusa and Gela, to Enna, Nicosia, Sperlinga, Petralia, and descending again to Caltanissetta so as to return to Syracuse via Caltagirone and Vizzini» (Vittorini 2006: 368). His journey unfolds among the «long green slopes of orange trees and malaria» (Vittorini 2000: 34), where memories of his childhood in Sicily surface with a dreamlike quality, a memory filled with «Sicily, prickly pears, sulphur, Macbeth, in the mountains» (9). Here, the blending of cultural and natural elements is notable, as seen in the intrusion of William Shakespeare's character; this interplay is seen through the many descriptions of the natural landscapes and of Sicilian men and women, often depicted with hybrid lexical constructions, combining animalistic and dehumanizing traits, although they appear less monstrous than Vasta's creatures. For instance, Silvestro's mother is described as «mother-bird, mother-bee» (85).

In both Vittorini's and Vasta's works, the relationship between humans and their environment is shaped by the antithetical nature of the subject, who, though returning to his homeland, is also a stranger to it. Silvestro, for example, is referred to as a «stranger» (137, 141) by a knife grinder and is questioned by a Sicilian boy on a ferry, «Are you Sicilian?» (13). Silvestro returns to the South with a sense of nostalgia because he has witnessed the «wronged world» (146) and now comes back to a place that seems to remain untouched. The knife grinder reassures him, «the world has been wronged, but not yet here, inside» (Vittorini 2000: 146). Yet, despite the loss of humanity — rooted in both existential and historical suffering — Vittorini seems to confer upon the people of

the South a kind of natural, paleo-industrial ritual that shields them from harm inflicted by a symbolic cultural North.

Even in the 1953 phototextual edition, featuring Luigi Crocenzi's photographs and published long after the war, there is a palpable sense that nothing has changed. As Vittorini himself says:

Between the distant years of 1937 and 1938, when I wrote the book, and the year 1950, when the photographs illustrating the seventh edition were taken, there has been the war, the fall of fascism, the liberation, and five years of peasant struggles against the medieval power of the landowners and their supporters, whether neo-fascists or monarchists. Yet, despite all this, the Sicilian farm laborer or miner still lives, in the essence of daily life, almost as I remembered seeing him live during my childhood in 1937 and 1938. (Vittorini 2006: 370; my translation)

Given this, the landscape of Sicily, as recounted by Vittorini and photographed by Crocenzi, is, as Maria Rizzarelli notes in the afterword to the 2007 anastatic reprint, a «landscape that seems to remain immune to the transformations of history» (Vittorini 2007: viii), which mirrors, as we have seen, the apparent yet superficial transformation of Palermo depicted by Vasta. It is not Silvestro who halts his journey, but Sicily itself, that paradoxically has «become motionless» (Vittorini 2000: 185), as if the island were the one needing to make a symbolic journey toward the future, toward progress and modernity; a journey toward the North, which remains impossible, as Sicily is situated in the South and is metaphorically still. Yet, because of this immutability and metonymic nature, Sicily, despite its seeming timelessness, becomes an ideal vantage point from which to observe historical and social change, or as Rizzarelli puts it, «in its 'spiritual variants,' Sicily presents itself as the best observatory of historical and social change» (Rizzarelli in Vittorini 2007: viii). The use of the word *spiritual* is not insignificant in this context: in fact, *Conversazione* shares with Fazel's *City of Phantoms* and Vasta's *Spaesamento* the deliberate abstraction and ethereal treatment of human and non-human bodies. Just as Fazel's faceless, voiceless, and tattered figures are defined by light and shadow, many of Crocenzi's photographs also emphasize these elements, highlighting the interplay of presence and absence, movement and stasis. On one hand, the photographs portray men and women rooted in the places they inhabit, though the close-up shots often decontextualize their faces. On the other hand, these individuals are depicted as shadowy figures resting on the ground or buildings with dark silhouettes, like ghosts. Additionally, many of the images feature people wearing traditional Sicilian headgear, and, much like in Fazel's work, they are often captured in collective rituals where individuality is nearly absent. The deliberately blurred photographs visually emphasize the text's atmosphere of rarefaction and its «larval physiognomy», as Rizzarelli defines it (2007: xvii). Furthermore, Vittorini's text is suffused with allusions to spectral figures and ghostly presences. For instance,

Silvestro's father, who has abandoned his mother, is an absent presence, embodying the concept of a *larva* in its dual sense, both *ghost* and *mask*: his occupation as an actor reinforces this duality, blurring the lines between appearance and absence. This allusion to a spiritual and ghostly component is also present when Silvestro speaks of the people he encounters: «those who suffered personal misfortune and those who suffered the pain of the wronged world were together in the nude tomb of wine, and could be like *spirits*, finally parted from this world of suffering and wrongs» (Vittorini 2000: 163; italics mine). Human actions, though not material like fossils, take on an eerie permanence as ghosts, whose intangible nature paradoxically makes them even more enduring, forever haunting the earth. Silvestro himself refers to these spectral remnants as «phantoms of human action, the wrongs against the world and against humanity risen out of the past. They weren't really the dead but phantoms; they didn't belong to the earthly world» (171)<sup>9</sup>.

Thus, the Sicily of *nostos* becomes a space that, while seemingly untouched by war — ironically, the most prominent feature of modern civilization — also serves as a vantage point from which to observe contamination precisely because it remains unscathed by it. At one point, upon entering a shop, Silvestro reflects on this paradoxical position, revealing Sicily as both untouched and yet intrinsically tied to the world's suffering and wrongs:

The smell was good, in this heart of ours, among the invisible ropes and strips of leather; a smell of new dust, of earth not yet contaminated by the world's wrongs, the wrongs that take place on the earth. Ah, I thought, if I really believed in this ... And it was not like going underground, it was like following the trajectory of the kite, having the kite before my eyes and nothing else, only darkness, and having a child's heart, Sicilian and all the world's. (145)

As we can see from the last sentence («Sicilian and all the world's»), what emerges also from this case study is a form of *Southern synecdoche*, a *clipping effect* created specifically by the gaze of the returnee. In these instances, *nostos* is no longer a movement from the continent to the island characterized by a series of vicissitudes, as traditionally understood from the *Odyssey* onward. Instead, the journey begins with arrival, and it is not always the person who physically moves, but rather the gaze that returns, focusing on both the apparently old — symbolized by the South and the self from fifteen years earlier — and the seemingly new, represented by the North, superficially advanced yet deeply enmeshed in cultural and technological failures. This return from the Continent to the island thus transforms itself from a re-encounter with insularity and the South into a cognitive tool for perceiving the whole, not only the global South

9 For the presence of *spectral remnants* and phantoms in phototexts, see Ezio Puglia (2018), and Giuseppe Carrara (2024).

but also the global North, seen from the perspective of those who have experienced both and who exist in a liminal, in-between space.

In this regard, Franco Cassano’s concept of *meridian thought* becomes relevant as it transcends the notion of the South’s temporal backwardness, instead viewing the South «as an autonomous point of view, not as a non-North» (Cassano 1996: 11). Polizzi elaborates on this idea, stating: «in establishing connections among many different ‘Souths’, Cassano finds a strategy for developing a kind of thought that is simultaneously global and local and does not constitute an indulgent apology of the South» (2022: 29).

While Vittorini viewed the South as *not yet* North — exempt from both cultural and technological developments and the subsequent horrors — Vasta’s texts align more closely with Cassano’s thought:

this autonomous form of thought necessarily starts by taking to task what national modernity has meant for the Italian South where, according to Cassano, the project of development has produced more problems than it has solved. (Polizzi 2022: 29)

Vasta’s work suggests not that Southern Italy is entirely emancipated, autonomous, or not backward in relation to the North, but rather that the horrors of modernity, manifesting as superficial or *cosmetic*, have affected all spaces and identities, dissolving the distinction between North and South. In this sense, once again, the South becomes merely a part of the whole, a synecdoche for the entire country. This aligns with Ulrich Beck’s observations:

The circularity of this social endangering can be generalized: under the roof of modernization risks, *perpetrator and victim* sooner or later become *identical*. [...] Here it becomes clear that the Earth has become an ejector seat that no longer recognizes any distinctions between rich and poor, black and white, north and south or east and west. (Beck 1992: 38)

This creates a form of negative hybridization, a cycle of displacements and returns, where the human experience of progress, marked by cruelty, intersects with nature’s devastation, blurring the boundaries between the two. Neither is merely a spectator of the other’s catastrophic ordeal, as both are subjected to the same apocalyptic forces. As noted in the introduction, human and environmental destruction are inseparable.

In this sense, both Vasta and Silvestro, as returnees from the North to the South, occupy a liminal space, part of an intermediate civilization between the past and the present. They have witnessed the pre-modern world now lost, as well as the destructive or superficial realities of the modern world. When they gaze upon their native island, they see an older world that no longer exists, yet paradoxically persists precisely because of its apparent absence. The landscape,

objects, and people — suspended like ghosts between the present and the after-life — symbolize this civilization caught between the archaic and the modern, between a world rooted in nature and one that continually rejects it.

In short, the contamination of places is inseparable from the contamination of humans, and vice versa. The distinction between humanity and nature collapses, as both have undergone a shared, negative metamorphosis. If humanity is part of nature, it is because both have been equally transformed by the destructive forces of progress.

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