

The Mediterranean and its Hinterlands

Preface

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The twenty-four papers published here have been selected by peer-review from the proceedings of a conference convened by Helen Goethals and Isabelle Keller-Privat held in Toulouse in September 2016. We would therefore like to begin by taking this opportunity to thank all those who made that conference possible. Funding was generously granted to us by the Conseil régional of Occitanie and by the English Department, the Language faculty and the Scientific Council of the University of Toulouse-Jean Jaurès. Our research centre Cultures anglo-saxonnes offered not only generous funding but also, in the presence of its President Nathalie Cochoy and that of its secretary Hanane Sernoune, much-appreciated moral support. For expert help with the logistics and the communication of the conference, we extend our thanks to Elodie Herrero and Benoît Colas and to Andrew McCrae, the Australian photographer who took the picture of Mount Etna viewed from the theatre at Taormina, featured on the cover of this issue. And, last but not least, we owe thanks to our editor, Françoise Besson, and all the staff of the Presses universitaires du Midi who have made possible this, the fifty-eighth issue, of *Caliban*.

Conferences have many origins and in this case the idea for a Mediterranean theme came from, of all places, a major administrative change. In 2016 the entire regional map of France was redrawn, and out of this a new region emerged in the south-west: *Occitanie*, linking the départements of the formerly landlocked Midi-Pyrénées to départements such as the Hérault which bordered on the Mediterranean. This not only reconnected two of the oldest universities in France, Montpellier and

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Toulouse, but it also implied that the moment might be ripe to extend academic interest in Mediterranean culture inland from its shores. Undaunted by what Fernand Braudel called a "huge, fragmented and contradictory world which has been excessively studied by archeologists and historians" but nevertheless humbled by the wealth of studies produced by universities and institutes located on the shores of the Mediterranean, the conveners of the conference proposed looking at the entire Mediterranean area from a new point of view: that of its hinterlands.

Participants were invited to take as their starting point the proposition that much of what animates the Mediterranean world—considered as a real or an imagined homeland—comes from the paths that lead both towards and away from it. The focal point of the studies would be neither the fact nor the idea of the inland sea itself but that of its terrestrial hinterlands, those hazy borderlands at once so characteristic of the Mediterranean, and whose fuzzy edges never quite manage to define its limits. The novelty of such a perspective led to an enthusiastic response and the final event brought together twenty-nine internationally-known scholars and five plenary speakers.

Since the conveners work in the English Department of the University of Toulouse-Jean Jaurès, most of the final papers examine experiences from the English-speaking world, but the original conference was more interdisciplinary than this selection of papers might suggest. Particular mention should be made of two lively panels whose activities, for reasons of space and coherence, are not included here. One panel, headed by Corinne Bonnet, brought together members of the research group [Patrimoine, Littérature, Histoire](#); the other, headed by Danielle Cornot, included members of the pluridisciplinary research group *In Vino Varietas*, drawing on their recent publication *Les Arts et métiers de la vigne et du vin. Révolution des savoirs et des savoir-faire* (Presses universitaires du Midi, 2016).

The conference originally bore a bilingual title, **Mediterranean Hinterlands: le pays en profondeur**, with the term 'hinterlands' serving to suggest three possible paths into the conceptualization of an inland Mediterranean: the geographical, the political, and the literary.

The geographical meaning of 'hinterland' held out a deceptively simple point of departure, as can be seen from its surprisingly short entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

Hinterland (from German *hinter*, behind + *land*, land) The district beyond that lying along the coast (or along the shore of a river); the 'back country'.

Viewed geographically as a term defining a particular kind of space, the hinterlands of the Mediterranean were ill-defined areas that 'lay along' or, in other words, juxtaposed water. This notion of juxtaposition, present in many of the papers gathered here, was strikingly explored during the conference in the *lecture-écran performée* proposed by poet Pascal Poyet and photographer Françoise Gorja. Against a background of photographs, the poet read out the text he had composed from the classical image of that literal hinterland of the past and future which, according to Tiresias, awaited Odysseus after his homecoming and which he would recognize when he, the mariner, met the landlubber:

Carry your well-planned oar until you come
to a race of people who know nothing of the sea,
whose food is never seasoned with salt, strangers all
to ships with their long slim prows and long slim oars,
wings that make ships fly. And here is your sign—
unmistakeable, clear, so clear that you cannot miss it:
When another traveller falls in with you and calls
that weight across your shoulders a fan to winnow grain.¹

With the poet speculating on the object that was being named or not-named, photographs were projected onto a screen and manipulated so as to demonstrate the estranging effects produced by constantly-changing juxtapositions of images.

Returning to the *OED* definition, we notice that from the first the hinterland is a 'district', an administrative term which serves to show how rapidly the geographical shades into the geopolitical. The short definition of 'hinterlands' is illustrated by three examples of its usage, all drawn from the 1890s, a decade marked by the apogee of what was then called the New Imperialism:

¹ Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles, London: Penguin Books, 2006, 253.

1890 *Spectator* 19 July, The delineation of the Hinterland behind Tunis and Algiers. **1891** *Daily News* 12 June, Lord Salisbury even recognizes the very modern doctrine of the Hinterland, which he expounds as meaning 'those who possess the coast also possess the plain which is watered by the rivers that run to the coast' **1897** Mary Kingsley, *West Africa* 408 The inhabitants of the shores and hinterland of Corisco Bay are ... savages.

Picking up this geopolitical thread were two of the plenary speakers at the conference, and two of the most pre-eminent historians of the Mediterranean: David Abulafia and Nicholas Purcell.

David Abulafia, *in absentia* because he was called away on Mediterranean business, pondered the implications of viewing the maritime history of the mediaeval Mediterranean from the point of view of what lay beyond its shoreline. The author of *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* drew attention to the trade emanating from hinterlands and which then converged on cosmopolitan seaports such as Smyrna, Alexandria, Venice and Dubrovnik. He pointed out that food supplies from the interior underpinned the political emergence of civilisations such as that of the Etruscans. In the contemporary world, however, such peaceful interchange had been fractured by decolonization, and the pastoral image of the Mediterranean masked harsh realities of violence and loss. Nicholas Purcell also laid stress on the connecting powers associated with hinterlands but the co-author of *The Corrupting Sea* argued that if the conceptual limits of the Mediterranean world were constantly being extended by contemporary historians, it was precisely because so much of interest was now being found on the ragged edges of that world.

The connections suggested by the historians were naturally present in the minds of the writers and literary critics whose work has been gathered into this volume. Many of these agreed that it was, paradoxically, a sea, the "unplumbed, salt, estranging sea" which in enabling us to experience distance simultaneously encourages us to make connections. The English-speaking poets, essayists and novelists of the Mediterranean have continuously translated, adapted and transformed the languages and myths found on its shores. They have seen in the Mediterranean Basin a crucible to redefine the modernity of each successive literary generation and which draws us into a sensitive awareness of those who dwell on other shores and of the world which exists beyond its shores. The imagining of hinterlands teaches us to hear the needs of others "within the deep heart's core" and this

inner knowledge creates a poethical space in which we learn to write and read alongside others, in the associative space in which we, following Yves Bonnefoy, can find *l'Autre à portée de voix*.

For, indeed, it was not so much an idea as the actual 'delightful wisdom' of the poet Yves Bonnefoy who was the *fons et origo* of the conference. Our 'hinterlands' were in fact the *arrière-pays* which the French poet had so suggestively evoked in the essay first published in 1972, entitled *L'Arrière-pays*. Yves Bonnefoy was still alive when the conference was first conceived and, despite his failing health, there were hopes that he would be able to attend. Alas, he was to die in July 2016. His essay, however, had been translated into English in 2012 by Stephen Romer, maître de conférences at the University of Tours and a poet in his own right. The English poet-translator was present at the conference, able not only to discuss his translation but also to talk about the Mediterranean connections between his own work and that of Yves Bonnefoy, particularly in the conversation between "Roman Stele, Ravenna" and "Les Tombeaux de Ravenne".

Yves Bonnefoy saw the Mediterranean as a *pays en profondeur*, mysteriously inaccessible, and whose myriad paths and waterways called forth rêverie and longing:

Si les rivages m'attirent, plus encore l'idée d'un pays en profondeur, défendu par l'ampleur de ses montagnes, scellé comme l'inconscient. Je marche près de l'eau, je regarde bouger l'écume, signe qui cherche à se former, mais en vain. L'olivier, la chaleur, le sel qui se déposera sur la peau, que vouloir de plus – pourtant le vrai chemin est celui, là-bas, qui s'éloigne, par des passes rocheuses de plus en plus resserrés. Et plus je vais vers l'intérieur, dans un pays de la méditerranée, plus fortement l'odeur du plâtre des vestibules, les bruits du soir, le frémissement du laurier, changeant d'intensité, de hauteur (comme on le dit d'un son, déjà aigu) vont se faire, jusqu'à l'angoisse, évidence, bien que close, et appel, bien qu'impossible à comprendre.

If shorelines attract me, the idea of the interior does still more, of a country protected by its gigantic mountains, sealed off like the unconscious. Walking at the water's edge, I watch the foam moving like a sign trying to form but never doing so. The olive tree, the heat, the salt encrusting the skin—what more could one want—and yet the true path is over there, winding away, following rocky passes that get narrower and narrower. And the further inland I go, in a Mediterranean country, the more strongly the smell of old plaster in hallways, the sounds of evening, the rustling laurel, changing in

intensity and pitch (as one says of a high note), combine to suggest, to the point of pain, traces that are enigmatic, and an invitation impossible to understand.²

Interestingly, Bonnefoy, himself a fine translator, had rejected the use of 'hinterland' in the title of Romer's English version, for reasons which he explained in the preface:

The title of the book also proved to be a problem, since it takes on many nuances throughout the text. 'Hinterland' has harsh, even military, associations to the French ear, and is quite unable to render what is a straightforward phrase, although it naturally sets the mind dreaming. In the same way, 'back-country' is too heavily charged with ideas of poverty or even backwardness, when my own *arrière-pays* is a dream of civilisations superior to our own. I found in the adjective 'landlocked' a good deal of what my phrase contains but then some examples of my *arrière-pays* are islands ...

But there was more: Stephen Romer's plenary talk brought a new element to the idea of hinterland. The living poet was anxious to share with us his translation of Bonnefoy's last, posthumous work, *L'Écharpe rouge*, and the passages he chose were those that related to the dead poet's imaginary return to Toulouse, the town associated with his father's mysterious red scarf. It was then that the conveners realized, with a *frisson*, that their own invitation to Bonnefoy may well have been part of that hinterland which inspired the poet to his last published rêverie. And so the words of Yves Bonnefoy remained, literally as well as figuratively, the presiding spirit of the conference. We are therefore all the more pleased to be able to offer, as a fitting epigraph to this volume, both a few tantalizing lines from *L'Echarpe rouge* and their as yet unpublished translation by Stephen Romer.

² Yves Bonnefoy, *L'Arrière-pays*, Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1972, 2003, 17-18. Trans. Stephen Romer, Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2011.

Et voici qu'il découvre
Une enveloppe vide, mais refermée.
Il la retourne,
Quelqu'un y a noté un nom, une adresse,
C'est à Toulouse,
Des mots qui barrent la page,
Jetons cela aussi, s'exclame-t-il,
Mais il ne le fait pas, non, il se souvient,
Il aperçoit, au fond de sa mémoire
Un homme, rencontré une seule fois
Dans une vieille maison, jamais revue,
Quand lui avait à peu près vingt-cinq ans,
Des murs peints à la chaux, quelle délivrance
Pour qui vient du papier à fleurs des chambres pauvres !

Yves Bonnefoy, *L'Écharpe rouge*, Paris : Éds. Mercure de France,
2016, 18.

And now he finds
An envelope, empty but sealed.
He turns it over,
Someone has written a name, an address,
It is at Toulouse,
Words scribbled over the page,
Throw that out too, he exclaims,
But he doesn't, no, he remembers,
He sees, it is a distant memory,
A man, encountered only once
In an old house, never seen again,
When he was about twenty-five years old.
The walls were whitewashed, what a release
For someone coming from those poor rooms
With their flowered wallpaper!

Translation by Stephen Romer, forthcoming from Seagull Books.