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Book Review: Serenella Iovino, *Ecocriticism and Italy. Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation* (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 183 pp.



Along with Monica Seger's *Landscapes in Between – Environmental Change in Modern Italian Literature and Film* (University of Toronto Press, 2015), Serenella Iovino's book *Ecocriticism and Italy. Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation*, winner of the American Association for Italian Studies Book Prize 2016, constitutes, to date, the most important ecocritical publication in English on Italy. Both highlight the ethics of ecological engagement and how human and nonhuman forces have crafted or irremediably modified the landscape of post-war Italy. However, whereas Seger structures her study around the work of key writers and filmmakers, "places" are the focus of Iovino's work. Places are interpreted as texts, as material narratives, since through them "we read embodied narratives of social and power relations, biological balances and imbalances, and the concrete shaping of spaces, territories, human, and nonhuman life" (3). This approach sees the author as intimately connected in the experiencing of the places she narrates, which coincide with her own existential trajectory and are intertwined with a variety of other texts, ranging from literature, visual arts, cinema, theatre, to memoirs and activist or philosophical works.

The places discussed are among the most representative of a country that, contrary to what is often perceived from the outside, does not present a "canonical" landscape but one that is "ecologically hybrid and environmentally ambivalent, halfway between unspeakable beauty and complete abandon" (3). Making reference to the title of a book edited by Serpil Oppermann and Iovino herself (Indiana University Press, 2014), we can define Iovino's scholarly practice as a form of *Material Ecocriticism*, an approach that turns on the world of matter, of chemical substances and elements, highlighting how they are intimately connected with narratives and stories. It is in fact through materiality that bodies interact with each other, as the book demonstrates in the course of its four-part journey to Naples, to the Venetian Lagoon, to three areas affected by earthquakes (the Belice Valley [Sicily], Irpinia [Campania] and L'Aquila [Abruzzo]), and, finally, to the Langhe in Piedmont.

In chapter 1, "Bodies of Naples: A Journey in the Landscape of Porosity", Naples, the author's native city, is interpreted through the image of "porosity", which over time has been attributed to Naples' streets, walls and its volcanic aura; starting with Walter Benjamin's memoir, where the adjective "porous" attached to Naples is recurrent, and moving to Curzio Malaparte's novel *La pelle* (*The Skin*, 1949), in which nature's violence and human violence over Naples's "bodies" act in concert. The chapter touches on issues such as ecomafia and toxin-related diseases, pollution, marginality, and Naples' lack of citizenship and "collective protection". The corporeality of the city, the identification of

the various bodies that constitute Naples, is the unifying element of Iovino's reading of the city; where "humans and nonhumans, hybrid bodies that coalesce with the materiality of places and natural forces, [interact] with flows of substances, imagination, and discourses" (15).

In chapter 2, "Cognitive Justice and the Truth of Biology: Death (and Life) in Venice", the focus is on the Venetian Lagoon, in particular on Venice, revisited through the trope of *Death in Venice*, and on the nearby industrial city of Marghera, considered by the author as Venice's alter ego. The latter city is sadly linked to the petrochemical company Petrolchimico accused by the magistrate Felice Casson of "mass murder, environmental disaster, mass culpable homicide, missing workplace safety, water and food poisoning, and the construction of illegal waste dumps". Like porosity for Naples, what comes to characterise Venice is its "amphibious nature", evident at various levels, from the material to the semiotic, allowing for various readings of facts and events that have dramatically changed the biological balance of the place. In the "caranto", the solid clay of the lagoon bed, Iovino identifies, instead, the physicality of the city as well as the interdependency of the structure of the lagoon with its fundamental biotic features; while the high and low tides, the breath of the lagoon, represent the precarious balance on which Venice is founded.

In chapter 3, "Three Earthquakes: Wounds, Signs, and Resisting Arts in Belice, Irpinia, and L'Aquila", the linking theme is rubble, a theme the author unfolds in narratives of "debris, abandoned places, the victims seen and unseen", taking as "voices" the "placeologist" Franco Arminio, the filmmaker Sabina Guzzanti, philosophers like Benedetto Croce and Ernesto De Martino, and the economist Manlio Rossi Doria. Earthquakes represents a threat for forty-five per cent of the Italian territory and have shaped a landscape of wounds with their catastrophic effects; in the Belice Valley (1968), whole villages were relocated, and in Irpinia (1980) the consequences of the reconstruction were even more devastating than the shock of the earthquake itself. In L'Aquila (2009), finally, even more disastrous ecological and political repercussions were experienced through a slow earthquake. These tragic events have given way to new energies of resistance. Perhaps the best example comes from Gibellina in the Belice Valley, where art was used to forge a new identity and to consolidate links with the past. Iovino tells us how Gibellina came to be a museum city for postmodern art. The most astonishing achievement in Gibellina is Alberto Burri's *Cretto* (1985-1989), which was created by covering the remains of the medieval village with a cast of white concrete, preserving in that way the original layout of the village. What Burri manages to capture with his cast is Gibellina's lost voice, "turning its silence into a solid white cry, incorporated as an image and as a sign in the enduring life of the western-Sicilian ecosystem" (103).

The final chapter, "Slow: Piedmont's Stories of Landscapes, Resistance, and Liberation", focuses on Piedmont, the region where the author currently lives. Iovino tells us how there are stories of blood and violence behind the joyful and prosperous image of Piedmont and its vineyards, and narrative resistance transforms this into a collective work of creative liberation, from the Slow Food movement to advocacy for

environmental justice. The unifying narrative theme here, drawing a parallel with the winemaking process, is “encounters and combinations”. Well-known for their wines, the Piedmont sites discussed, known as the Langhe, are also sites of struggle, bloodshed, and resistance. Iovino refers to Cesare Pavese and Beppe Fenoglio’s novels, which have captured the violence of the war as well as that of vinedressers and peasants; and then focuses on the work of Nuto Revelli in particular (1919-2004), a friend of Primo Levi, who has left a monumental oral history archive on this area and its people. Revelli, who fought in the Second World War and after the fall of Fascism became a partisan, was moved to record what he witnessed during the Resistance but then felt a duty to collect stories from other people, thus creating the kind of micro-history that is often ignored in official accounts. Revelli created an extensive archive of oral histories to give an identity to the “defeated” men and women of his land. He also wrote two books, *Il mondo dei vinti* (*The World of the Defeated*, 1977) and *L’anello forte* (*The Strong Link*, 1985) to “shed light on a world of rural poverty and migrations”. These two works focus on women’s roles in their families and address the disappearance of the peasant class, the abandonment of mountainous regions and the destruction and pollution of large swathes of countryside.

Another aspect of land liberation is found by the author in the Slow Food movement, which was established in Bra in 1986 by Carlo Petrini to prevent the decline of local economies by re-evaluating gastronomic traditions in terms of cultural biodiversity. However, what we find out about in the book’s epilogue is how the slow stratification of injustices has shaped these lands. Revelli and Petrini’s work offers a valuable counter-narrative that highlights the importance of the environment in which food is grown against the lethal impact of asbestos, which for years the Eternit factory disseminated in Langhe-Roero and Monferrato. Although it was declared illegal in Italy in 1992, asbestos is still bought and sold today. Its environmental impact, Iovino muses, is “even slower than wine’s time” (153). This bitter twist at the end is a poignant reflection on the Anthropocene based on the association between the lengthy chemical processes involved in the maturation of wine and the chemical processes at work which are gradually destroying the environment.

The book offers insightful stories of ecological struggle that provide illuminating examples of the interconnectivity of human and nonhuman landscapes, showing how forms of resistance have been developed and acted in a variety of texts and contexts. The scrupulous and rigorous research of this work is coupled with a beautiful writing style, which effortlessly traverses and connects various disciplines, and is an inspired labour of love by the author for her country, its people, places, and literature.