

The Sea That Diffracts: Dante, Glissant, and Braudel's Mediterranean

Akash Kumar

University of California, Berkeley

With respect to my particular specialty of Dante studies, I would submit that the impact of Fernand Braudel and of Mediterranean studies as a point of emphasis has been varied: We have been, insular field that we are, late to the game. I can point to recent publications such as Roberta Morosini's *Il mare salato: Il Mediterraneo di Dante, Petrarca e Boccaccio* (Viella, 2020) or to the more polemical *Dante and the Mediterranean Comedy* by Andrea Celli (Palgrave, 2022). Perhaps the more sustained mode of thinking about Dante and the Mediterranean has been the more-than-century-long debate over Dante and Islam (to put it more precisely, whether Dante may have drawn inspiration from the Islamic visionary tradition) since the publication of Miguel Asin Palacios's book *La escatologia musulmana en la Divina Comedia* (1919). What has long been interesting to me with regard to the debate over Dante and Islam is how very caught up it is in nationalism: detractors said that Asin Palacios was simply trying to assert Spanish influence and centrality; those on the other side said that Italian scholars were trying to protect their own national, cultural, and religious interests at the expense of shutting out the rest of the world.

Braudel's Mediterranean is of course a very appealing way to think beyond the nation, something that is particularly important to my work on Dante. This is not just a matter of decentering and looking to the sea as a whole but also drawing us into the geographical and topographical complex, before getting to the stuff of human history. The two faces of the Mediterranean for Braudel are "compact, mountainous peninsulas," and in between, "vast, complicated and fragmented stretches of sea, for the Mediterranean is not so much a single entity as a 'complex of seas.'"¹ Not just the one thing, but a complex.

Part of this fragmentation is of course the islands, the archipelagoes. And that is a model that I have been interested in with respect to Dante's *Purgatorio* as an island that is obviously

¹ Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, trans. Siân Reynolds (Harper & Row, 1972–73), 1:23.

implicated in this attention to the nonhuman, to the contours and boundaries of space. Dante's island is of course a world apart, an otherworld, on the other side of the planet. But it is still earth-bound, and it has much to offer with respect to thinking about the Mediterranean from a differently grounded, or perhaps differently thalassic, perspective.

My recent work on Dante has been oriented to Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant's notion of archipelagic thought. The whole world is archipelagizing and creolizing, writes Glissant in his 1997 *Treatise on the Whole-World*, asking us to change the way we relate landmasses and languages to one another.² I look at moments like Dante calling Morocco home in *Purgatorio* 4 and the hybrid language of Tuscan and Occitan in *Purgatorio* 26 as moments in which we might see the merit of reading Dante archipelagically.

In his earlier *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant offers the Caribbean as a model for new global paradigms, and he does so by means of departure from the enclosed geography of the Mediterranean:

Compared to the Mediterranean, which is an inner sea surrounded by lands, a sea that concentrates (in Greek, Hebrew, and Latin antiquity and later in the emergence of Islam, imposing the thought of the One), the Caribbean is, in contrast, a sea that explodes the scattered lands into an arc. A sea that diffracts. Without necessarily inferring any advantage whatsoever to their situation, the reality of archipelagos in the Caribbean or the Pacific provides a natural illustration of the thought of Relation.³

The Caribbean (or Pacific) archipelago is here revealed to be a way of embodying relationality and openness, diffracting as compared to the Mediterranean concentrating and distilling.

Are the Glissant model and Braudelian model compatible? I'd like to suggest that they might be, that we might think of the diffractive, rhizomatic possibilities in the Mediterranean as well. Islands might help us do that, especially that most curious imagined island on the other side of the planet that is Dante's *Purgatorio*. Indeed, I'm particularly taken with Braudel's phrasing of the Aegean archipelago as "being so scattered over the sea as to be inseparable from it."⁴ It is in these in-between spaces, in these fusings of land and sea, that we might shift our ways of reading to engage in what is not nationalist. (Here I'm reminded of Erich Auerbach's "Philology and 'Weltliteratur,'" in which he writes, "Our philological home is the earth; it can no longer be the nation."⁵)

What is the Mediterranean when it is seen in its crossing, as Ulysses speaks of seeing "l'un lito e l'altro," one shore and another, in *Inferno* 26 before he goes beyond the limits? What is it when seen from an island on the other side of the world, when instead of any Italian toponym, Dante calls his home Morocco in *Purgatorio* 4? What is the Mediterranean when it is seen from outer space, as Dante looks back to his home planet and twice describes it as nothing more than

² See Édouard Glissant, *Treatise on the Whole-World*, trans. Celia Britton (Liverpool University Press, 2020).

³ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (University of Michigan Press, 1990), 33–34.

⁴ Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, 1:149. We might expand on this notion of "archipelago," especially in light of its medieval usage as the very name of the Aegean Sea; see, for example, Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 2.4.13.

⁵ Erich Auerbach, "Philology and 'Weltliteratur,'" trans. Edward Said and Maire Said, *The Centennial Review* 13, no. 1 (1969): 17.

an *aiuola*, a threshing floor, and yet individualizes the full extent of Ulysses' mad flight across the Mediterranean in *Paradiso* 27?⁶

Braudel writes of the "life of the sea, a vital force" that can take hold of lands across it and come to dominate all. He then reflects on how far we might extend the Mediterranean, writing, "The historical Mediterranean seems to be a concept capable of infinite extension. But how far in space are we justified in extending it?"⁷ Can the Mediterranean go beyond itself spatially? Braudel characterizes this question as difficult and controversial, but perhaps the fundamental one we should be asking. I think what Glissant offers with the Caribbean model of the sea that diffracts (a model that he too, it should be said, seeks to infinitely extend and make global) is not a competing vision so much as a way of bringing out the transformative possibilities of Braudel's Mediterranean that is not distilled over millennia in the enclosed "center" of civilization or as a form of imposed domination that spreads across the sea, but rather a new mode of thinking about the connective possibilities of the open sea and lands scattered in an arc upon it. The possible island world of Dante's *Purgatorio* might help us to see that archipelagic potential a bit better. [A]

⁶ All references to the *Commedia* are from the Digital Dante edition: <https://digitaldante.columbia.edu/dante/divine-comedy/>; the specific verses referenced are *Inferno* 26.103 (for "one shore and the other"), *Purgatorio* 4.139 (for "Morocco"), and *Paradiso* 22.151 and 27.86 (for "the threshing floor").

⁷ Braudel, *The Mediterranean*, 1:167.