

INTRODUCTION

The World-Island



LANDINGS

Lampedusa can be reached from the south or the north. And that is what makes all the difference.

Those coming from the south had no other choice: to reach Italy, they had to take to the sea. When they make landfall, they are still survivors. On the same route, other fellow travellers drowned: their bodies will remain as invisible spectres, without graves or names, forgotten forever.

Those who come from the south and by sea, when they land on the island, walk barefoot; they wear wet clothes and sometimes a small bundle hanging from one hand; perhaps they hide a medical certificate or diploma in a pocket; they have carefully wrapped a cell phone in plastic so they can call their loved ones and announce that they have reached the shore. Because for days and nights, death had been close at hand, spitting the furious foam of the waves at them and instilling the murderous smell of oil into their throat and lungs.

Those who come from the south and by sea carry with them the weight of endless expectations. Even before the challenge of the crossing, they have often travelled for months or years, on roads of earth, stone and sand. They have crossed deserts or entire continents, working hard to pay, at each station, for the continuation of their way of the cross.

Those who come from the south and by sea have been exploited, insulted, tortured. They were robbed of their possessions, as well as their dignity. They submitted but did not give up. They were charged the exorbitant price of a ticket for Europe: on a rubber dinghy, or a so-called boat that is often no more than a tiny wreck of metal or badly glued planks. They found themselves crammed in with so many others; all forced to defy the sea without even knowing how to swim; all huddled together at the bottom of a floating coffin.

A Border Island on the Crossroads of History

Lampedusa and the Mediterranean

Dionigi Albera

<https://www.berghahnbooks.com/title/AlberaBorder>

Not for Resale

Those coming from the south and by sea shiver in the damp, salty cold. Their body is streaked with scars, grooves of unspeakable torture. Their mouth is parched with thirst, their stomach emptied by fasting and vomiting, vomiting and fasting. Their hands are covered in scabies and their nails are gnawed by work. They exhale the stench of oil, sweat and soiled clothes. A thousand circles of fatigue surround their eyes, but in their pupils shines the joy of reunion with dry land.

Those who come from the south and by sea have horrible memories of violence and poverty. Their shoulders bend under the weight of infinite hopes. For they do not just carry their own dreams, they support the mirages of entire families and villages. They have debts to repay and projects that have been waiting for generations for the grace of a good opportunity.

Those who come from the south and by sea have discovered that a horizontal world can hide vertiginous slopes. They now know the danger: when the waves bristle and rise up all around; when the water invades the hold; when dozens of bodies clumped together in a handful of square metres tumble down the rollercoaster of the waves.

Those who come from the south and by sea imagine that disembarking in Lampedusa means arriving at last. And yet it is only a brief moment of respite. A truce. There will be other waits, other journeys to break the morale and the back loins. There will be new imprisonments, underpaid jobs, wandering nights and impotent tears. There will be the beads of an endless rosary clutched by worn-out fingers. There will be a thousand and one sorrowful mysteries to endure.

Those who come from the north have several options for reaching Lampedusa. And they almost always choose the way of the sky. Many planes converge on the island, and they suddenly discover it from above, as a speck of dust in the middle of the water. As they approach, they greet it noisily, like huge seagulls. They circle it, then glide, with their wings swaying in the wind, until they reach, with infallible precision, the single runway that weaves its way between the cliffs and the houses. All year round, small planes provide the link with Sicily. During the long Lampedusan summer, from April to November, flights multiply. They swallow up masses of tourists in several Italian cities and almost immediately spit them out here. So, day after day, thousands of noisy, carefree Gulliver avatars discover this Lilliputian airport.

Those who come from the north and through the sky have travelled a few hours at most and have been comfortably seated. They have watched the map of the Mediterranean unfolding through the reassuring frame of the airplane window. They have dominated it from above; the price of the ticket included the rental of the sovereign power of the engines. From up there, the sea seemed flat and inoffensive, the waves nothing more than a light lace of foam.

Those who come from the north and through the sky, after flying over Sicily, have contemplated an expanse where water triumphs in its eternal battle with land. Islands are rare here, quite different from the abundant ones that dot the eastern Adriatic, where they form the lines and points of a mysterious geological alphabet running parallel to the coast. Nor can they be compared to the dancing islands of the Aegean, those countless dice cast by the gods on the surface of the water. It is from this ancestral sea that the meaning of archipelago (from the ancient Greek *Aigaión pélagos*) arose. This term seems a little exaggerated to qualify the three Pelagic islands of Linosa, Lampedusa and Lampione, which stay as forgotten crumbs on the immense liquid space. From above, one can discern the rounded shape of the first, full of volcanic undulations; then the microscopic rock of the second; finally, the narrow, elongated shape of Lampedusa stretches from east to west, turning its craggy back on Europe and bowing to Africa.

Those who come from the north and through the sky have suitcases full to bursting sleeping in the hold. They have packed bathing suits, masks, flippers, sun creams, shampoo and deodorant, without forgetting, of course, a few chic outfits to parade around the village, in restaurants, beach clubs and discos.

Those who come from the north and through the sky have pockets full of the dreams of so many holidaymakers. They are in a hurry to rest and unwind. They want to enjoy a few weeks of carefree leisure in this Caribbean surrogate, within easy reach and at a moderate price. They are already looking forward to the sea breeze, the sun's generous warmth, the freshness of the crystal-clear water, the diving sites, the sunset aperitifs, the boat trips to discover heavenly coves and perhaps, who knows, a glimpse of a dolphin or two.

THE REEF

The archipelago of the Pelagic Islands forms a single commune with little land and few inhabitants. There are almost 6,000 people on Lampedusa and around 500 on Linosa. Lampione, on the contrary, is deserted. However, if we take into account the marine area, the municipality becomes immense. Geologically speaking, it spans two continents. Linosa is the result of a volcanic eruption on the fault line where the European tectonic plate begins. Lampedusa is the extreme outcrop of the African landmass. The sea that separates it from Tunisia and Libya is not very deep. Less than 20,000 years ago, at the time of the last ice ages, umbilical cords of dry land ensured communication with the mainland. This is how African plant species – which are still endemic on the island and absent from Linosa – appeared.

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With rough tenderness, the inhabitants of Lampedusa call it *lo scoglio*: ‘the reef’. Indeed, it looks like a rock lost in the immensity of the surrounding sea. It is a little stone turtle where, for better or for worse, hundreds of thousands of migrants and tourists live together for part of the year on a twenty-square-kilometre site. It is a world-island, a microcosm of all contradictions, where the antipodes converge and almost brush against each other, without ever really meeting. They tread the same ground, often without even seeing each other, in a paradoxical contiguity. But, after all, paradox is constitutive of Lampedusa history.

The island is a postcard, a dream of sun and sea – a little shattered, it is true, by the state of neglect that piles up, with buildings everywhere and garbage accumulating by the roadside. In fifty years, everything has changed. For a long time, this extreme tip of the Italian state was a land of marginality and destitution. Then it discovered a vocation for tourism, at an increasingly frenetic pace. Today, agriculture has all but disappeared and fishing has become a residual activity.

The enormous resonance of Lampedusa’s name, which has become a symbol of the tragedy of Mediterranean migration, has not diminished its hedonistic attraction for holidaymakers. Indeed, one could almost say it has encouraged it. The influx of tourists has increased along with the number of migrants disembarking and the number of deaths. In short, the desire for sea and sun has not been disturbed by sorrow and pity.¹

Who in Europe has never heard of this island floating between Sicily, Malta and the African coast? With the development of migration routes in the central Mediterranean over the last twenty years, Lampedusa has become the embodiment of Europe’s southern frontier, the symbol of tragic sea crossings. Newspapers regularly mention its name as they list the sad toll of shipwrecks, deaths and survivors. ‘Lampedusa’ resonates with divergent echoes: on the one hand, solidarity and hospitality, in the spotlight during Pope Francis’s visit in 2013; on the other hand, the security threats posed by uncontrolled flows. The island has become a border post, with hundreds of Italian military personnel guarding the European wall. Numerous staff from the United Nations, the European Union and various NGOs are also stationed there. It is well known that in the two-faced Janus of the contemporary border, the humanitarian side is complementary to – and in some cases accomplice of – the repressive side.

Lampedusa is the southernmost bastion of Fortress Europe. It is a severe, authoritarian casemate from which intruders are hunted down. At the same time, it is a crack: a narrow breach through which a little air and light can filter, a glimmer of hope for those who dream of a better life. It is a land blessed and fantasized about, with a mythical name: four syllables whispered by so

many who journey through the roads of Africa. Lampedusa is both an open-air prison and a Garden of Eden.

CURIOUS TRAVELLERS

Because of its political and symbolic significance, the island attracts a colourful crowd of travellers who make curiosity their profession. Journalists come and go on a regular basis to ‘cover’ the news, or to follow politicians on the move, often just long enough to parade for two minutes in front of the cameras. Many writers have taken island life as the setting for their novels, while artists have chosen it as the subject of their work or the scenery for their performances. Leading filmmakers have devoted internationally acclaimed films to the island. Legions of sociologists and anthropologists have crisscrossed this small space to study the impact of migration and the mechanisms of border creation, making Lampedusa a kind of life-size laboratory for the social sciences. Endless pages have accumulated. I often thought of wandering the aisles of an imaginary library dedicated to Lampedusa. I glimpsed it, labyrinthine and disproportionate to the island’s tiny size. Its shelves would have intrigued Borges: they draw a map that stretches without limit and defies, by its dimension, the very reality it intends to represent.²

Every traveller comes with their own toolbox and a few goals in mind. I am no exception to the rule. I arrived with a suitcase full of books, my mind full of stories and history, like a wanderer emerging unexpectedly from the past. Indeed, the motivation that led me to Lampedusa, it has to be said, was atypical. My initial interest was aroused, over twenty years ago, by reading the already dated pages of an English scholar.

Frederick William Hasluck devoted himself to the study of relations between Christians and Muslims within the Ottoman Empire. He had developed an interest in this subject in 1913, during his honeymoon in Konya, Anatolia. He died prematurely in his early forties, seven years later, sadly leaving his immense research project unfinished. It took all the love of his wife Margaret to give shape, through the notes he had left behind, to posthumous research forever associated with their wedding trip. In the end, she succeeded in compiling a book³ that has become a monument to her husband’s memory and a point of reference for generations of scholars. The immense mass of information accumulated in this work included documents attesting to inter-religious exchanges in Lampedusa in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The epicentre was a small Marian shrine, frequented by both Christians and Muslims.

After being struck by this discovery, I pursued my interest in Lampedusa as part of a comparative study of shared holy places in the Mediterranean,

which I was conducting in the wake of Hasluck. I realized that other scholars had already carried out research into the history of this modest sanctuary, and from several points of view.⁴ I, in turn, became involved in the matter, casting my hook into a vast sea of paper. Some previously unseen preys have taken the bait, although there is undoubtedly still much to unearth – relying on a combination of perseverance, luck and serendipity – to bring other precious sources to the surface.

It often occurred to me that Lampedusa might have a particular significance in the history of the Mediterranean, by which I mean this heteroclite assemblage of land and sea, this inescapable and enigmatic unity that I have attempted, quite modestly, to explore, hoisting myself on the shoulders of a few giants who opened the way and cleared the horizon. Would it be possible to concentrate Fernand Braudel's sovereign, global and all-embracing gaze on a handful of square kilometres? To make it hover over this strip of land, which for several centuries was a discreet crossroads, a tiny synthesis of the Mediterranean space movement? To do so, I had to leave behind the libraries and the archives. Sooner or later, I had to set foot on Lampedusa, to touch this reality with my hands and eyes, to feel its landscape, to unearth the traces of the past in the present shape of the island, to probe the sediments and to sift through the layers that imperceptibly accumulated over the centuries.

For a long time, this project remained a little dream buried in a drawer: one that you open from time to time, basking for a moment in the prospect of a possible intellectual adventure, but which you immediately close again because the hours are numbered and you are irremediably occupied by more urgent matters. In the meantime, I had been following recent events in Lampedusa from afar and was aware of the increasingly central place the island was occupying in contemporary migration across the Mediterranean. This complicated matters. On the one hand, I saw even more ambitious horizons, imagining the architecture of a bridge boldly thrown between the past and the present, from which it could be possible to stand and observe probable currents of continuity. On the other hand, did not the accumulation of tragedies on this strip of land make the very idea of landing in Lampedusa to pursue a purely intellectual project futile, and even indecent?

After much procrastination, I finally decided to leave, accepting the risk of telescoping the past and the present. It was not long before I too was captivated by the island's unfathomable charm. I have walked, as far as I could, into its tangled meanders, amazed by its enigmatic complexity. With each new journey, I discovered other facets of the infinite kaleidoscope that animates local life, swarmed with actors who embody, each in their own way, the contradictions of our times. As a matter of fact, a hundred unsolvable

dilemmas give rhythm to the island's daily life against a backdrop made of chaos and tragedy.

ENCOUNTERS

The ancient sanctuary still stands (see [Figure 0.1](#)). In the sunlight, its immaculate steeple becomes dazzlingly bright and seems designed to make the blue of the sky even more sparkling. All around, a garden offers a mirage of greenery and freshness – rare commodities in summer that are often sought in vain by the rest of the island. On all sides, beneath the crust of recent transformations, traces of the past emerge. They are revealed by a parade of panels that tell the story of this place to visitors. Members of the Archivio Storico Lampedusa have installed them.

As I wandered around, I soon found myself welcomed by this group of passionate local historians, who have been working enthusiastically for several years, despite the indifference of the authorities – and also, it has to be said, of most of the local population. Almost every day, my footsteps took me back to the association's headquarters along Via Roma, the main street, where Nino Taranto, its president, officiated daily with courteous, ironic sagacity. How many enchanting hours I spent in this little oasis of calm, isolated from the island's summer turmoil, exchanging information and discussing history, while the music of Beethoven swung quietly over the whisps of the air-conditioning!

I was also quickly accepted by the Forum Lampedusa Solidale, a small, informal and disparate group (bringing together locals, volunteers from outside the island, priests and nuns) that works to alleviate the suffering of migrants, honour their graves and memories in the local cemetery and denounce the barbarity of the border. So, no doubt to soften a feeling of helplessness and guilt, I tried to help them as much as I could during my stays. Through these contacts, I gradually made the acquaintance of several young people working for humanitarian organizations based in Lampedusa.

One day, my friends from Sea Watch and Mediterranean Hope had a good laugh when, talking about my investigation, I said in a semi-serious tone that I was one of the world's experts on the history of the Lampedusa sanctuary. This incongruous association between the international academy and this insignificant building on the island had become a joke among them. They reminded me of it again that evening, with a knowing smile, when, as was often the case, we dined together and discussed their mission and their difficulties – in this case, the fate of a migrant rescue ship that the Italian authorities had been blocking for months in the port of Lampedusa using specious legal arguments.



Figure 0.1. The Sanctuary of the Madonna di Porto Salvo, Lampedusa, 2021.

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I love these young people who fight every day to spot boats in distress with the help of a small plane, to save lives at sea, to make the arrival of the survivors on the island less traumatic. That evening, I laughed with them and did not want to seriously justify myself. I could have told them that the

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island's history had a thousand ramifications and that, thanks to the tiny sanctuary and the traditions associated with it, the name of Lampedusa had been famous in Europe for centuries, long before its current tragic popularity. For a moment, I had the feeling that perhaps they were right, with their commitment firmly anchored in their bodies, their feet solidly planted in the present, their eyes fixed on the world of today and tomorrow. In the face of the daily tragedies that bloody this stretch of sea, what was the point of studying the past vicissitudes of a tiny piece of emerged land, and examining how they relate to the thousand-year history of the Mediterranean? Was it not absurd to hope to find a beam of light that would refract onto the contemporary world? At this point, however, there was no turning back. Like a spelunker, I had gone deep underground. I told myself that, perhaps, by working my way up the various geological layers, I would be lucky enough to emerge again one day into the open air, into the present-day landscape of Lampedusa. Then we could resume our conversation.

LANDSCAPES

I am back again. In winter, Lampedusa turns in on itself and gets ready for the next tourist season. The streets of the small town that occupies the south-eastern part of the island are orphaned from the hustle and bustle of summer. Numerous restaurants are closed, while the scaffolding of new buildings under construction can be seen here and there. In the few bars that are still open, locals crowd together, rubbing shoulders with groups of servicemen and staff from humanitarian organizations.

February and March are ideal months to stroll around the island. The sun is already warming the skin but not yet burning it. Lampedusa is easy to explore from one end to the other. Even inland, you never lose sight of the sea. Just a stone's throw from the urban centre, I wander through the vast tourist villages overlooking Cala Creta. At this time of year, they are asleep. I pass through them without meeting a soul. The waterfront restaurants and straw huts are silent, empty shells. Shoals of jellyfish dawdle peacefully in the emerald transparency of the sea.

I prefer to walk towards the ponent, far from the places colonized by the tourist industry. It is then that you discover just how varied Lampedusa's colour palette is. In summer, everything seems charred: only the blue of the sky and sea remains, set against the mineral tones of the landscape, dominated by limestone. Now everything has changed. Brought to life by rare showers, the green takes over and insinuates itself into the rocky monotony. The garrigue awakens. Tufts of herb sprout everywhere, soft cushions of wild thyme cover the ground. The leaves of the sea onions swarm next to the

bushes of wild fennel and fleshy succulents that creep across the soil. And then, to delight the eyes, there are the flowers. Almost always small in size, they come in all shades: from the purplish red of wild mallow to the pale pink of asphodel; from the bright yellow of the rocket or of euphorbia to the creamy white of thyme.

Heading west, I descend to Baia dei Conigli, which faces the tiny island of the same name. According to various international rankings, it is one of the ten most beautiful beaches in the world. And one really has to admit it is splendid. Fortunately, to limit the number of summer visitors who endanger turtle nesting, environmentalists have managed to impose a limited number of places on the beach, which can only be accessed from July to September by booking at least one month in advance. However, even with reduced numbers, the human load remains massive and the miracle of beauty is disrupted by the crowds of bathers. In late winter, on the contrary, no one clutters the view. Only the light footprints of seagulls trace the choreography of mysterious dances that, at one time or another, have taken place on the sand.

A little further west, there are reforested areas where Aleppo pines were planted some thirty years ago. They have often grown crooked, bent by the wind. I hold this image in my mind's eye, because it gives me at least a rough idea of the landscape that dominated the island for so many centuries, before radical deforestation in the nineteenth century led to an enormous ecological disaster. In a short space of time, the water table dried up and the earth covering the rocks was swept away by the winds, leaving only stones and sparse scrubby vegetation.

For a long time, farmers worked hard to protect the surface of their fields, surrounding them with stone walls and supporting them with terraces. I look at these ribs that cross the island, clustering here and there around the remains of old farmhouses (*dammusi*), which now have been abandoned. All that stays are the rubble, testimony to the immense effort that wore out the arms of several generations. The garrigue reigns, amid cactus and prickly pear trees.

In various places, the limestone soil has retained water from the latest rains. Puddles have formed. If I had the patience, I could sit quietly nearby and wait for the migratory birds, always numerous at this time of year. Some stop off on the island to quench their thirst in these little rainwater reservoirs before taking to the skies again. I find myself thinking that, by virtue of its location, this island really does have an immemorial role as a stopover for all those – human and non-human – who make their way across the central Mediterranean. It is first and foremost a land of passage: a place of rest and respite at the crossroads of the routes that intersect the inland sea.

SHIPWRECKS

Wandering around Lampedusa, I find it impossible to resist the attraction of my favourite place. To get there, you have to cross the Tabaccara plateau in the centre of the island. The secret passage nestles at the edge of the cliff. Just above the abyss, it leads to a comfortable stone balcony, where you can sit and contemplate the coastline from above. All around, the bare limestone walls tumble down for a hundred metres or so, plunging headlong into the turquoise water. Farther on, opposite, the microscopic Isola dei Conigli stretches out gently. All the rest of the horizon is sea.

In summer, the coves below are invaded by hundreds of boats carrying tourists. Music, shouts and laughter climb to the top of the rocky parapets. During the winter, however, all you can hear is the echo of the undertow. Here, a little rabbit bravely darts over the cliff; sometimes it suddenly makes a perilous swerve but manages to stay on course. Nearby, gulls swirl towards the sun-warmed crag. They skim it, then lazily abandon themselves to the updrafts, happily sucked skywards. From time to time, a coastguard boat can be seen patrolling the coastline, probably looking for shipwrecks or human remains.

In front of me, I can easily spot the place where Lampedusa's greatest tragedy took place. I mentally recreate the scene by placing it in the empty space of the sea.

At dawn on 3 October 2013, a boat loaded with Eritreans approached the Isola dei Conigli, barely a kilometre from where I am standing. Two other boats had already been rescued that night. No one suspected that a third was on its way. The scenario of the tragedy is unclear, and the negligence of the authorities has often been mentioned. In any case, the rescuers arrived too late.

The migrants could already glimpse the nearby land, and they could probably also see the reef in which I am settled now, tucked into one of its folds. They probably thought the worst was behind them. Here they were: two steps from the coast, two steps from salvation. Apparently someone wanted to signal the ship's presence by burning a blanket. The fire spread rapidly across the deck, causing general panic. Many people jumped into the water to escape the flames.

Not far from here, in this stretch of sea I am overlooking, a small boat was at anchor: some Lampedusans were spending the night there before setting sail on a fishing trip. They were the first to become aware of what was happening and to come to the aid of the victims, traversing a spectral landscape strewn with outstretched hands and corpses. They hoisted dozens of individuals to safety before fishermen and coastguards arrived to help. But it was too late: the sea had already swallowed 368 lives.

This tragic shipwreck caused a stir. Sadly, the tragedy was not unprecedented, but in this case the dead were clearly visible. It was impossible to look away. The bodies were recovered, placed in aligned coffins under a hangar at the local airport, and transferred to Sicily for burial. At the funeral, the Italian authorities had the absurd idea of inviting a representative of the Eritrean government, the very government from which many dead had fled. Several Italian and European political leaders came to Lampedusa to repeat the litany they proclaim year after year: this should have been the last time, such a hecatomb should never happen again.

A week later, on 10 October 2013, a fishing boat departing from Zuwara in Libya, loaded with several hundred Syrians fleeing the war in their country, was hit by machine-gun fire from militia. It began to take on water. On board, a Syrian doctor managed to report the situation by telephone to Italian and Maltese authorities, who shifted the responsibility for rescue to each other, allowing long hours to pass without intervening. The tragedy was consummated in the afternoon of the following day: the vessel sank some 60 miles from here. It was only then that Rome decided to send a military ship to the scene, as it was patrolling the area and had previously been ordered to stay away. When it arrived, some 260 people, including sixty children, had perished. Their bodies were not recovered. This made it easy to forget them.

In fact, the shipwreck of 3 October 2013 near Lampedusa is the visible part of a blood-red iceberg. Too many boats continue to drift into this sea. But these invisible tragedies do not arouse much emotion, as the dead disappear anonymously into the abyss, unknown to all. Sometimes, the currents carry a body to a Lampedusa beach, or a corpse is recovered near the island by the coastguard, or is caught in fishermen's nets. These are only faint traces, sporadic and quickly forgotten, rarely attracting the attention of the newspapers.

I think of the faces of the people who drowned in this inlet. They must have been similar to those I met when migrants landed on the island. If I close my eyes, I have the impression of hearing the voices of the drowned in the din of the waves below; like murmurs carried by the sea to this shore where I sit. This kaleidoscope of languages mingles with more ancient sounds: reverberations of other dead, echoes of hundreds of shipwrecks that have succeeded one another in these waters over the centuries.

TIMELINES

Early July 1551, a fleet of fifteen galleys in the service of Charles V, under the command of Antonio Doria (brother of Andrea, the famous Genoese captain), was heading for the Tunisian city of Mahdia, recently conquered

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by the Spanish. A sudden storm diverted it towards Lampedusa. In a night of rain and lightning, eight boats were wrecked a few hundred metres from here, under these very cliffs. A thousand people were killed. A few years later, the Sicilian historian Tommaso Fazello would describe this tragedy,⁵ adding that it made Lampedusa famous at the time.

I am trying to imagine what we would see if the water were to magically recede, uncovering the seabed. The wrecks of countless ships would appear. The frail barques in which the damned of the sea now crowd would stand side by side with ancient triremes or medieval galleys.

Today's migrant crossings are turning back the clock on the Mediterranean. In recent decades, technological advances had transformed it into a small, harmless basin that could be crossed quickly and safely by plane or on huge cruise liners. Now, those who set sail for Europe from the beaches of Libya or Tunisia experience once again the immense distances of yesteryear and undergo the same peripeties and dangers that have plagued navigation in these waters for millennia.

This ancestral fear has been expressed a thousand times by the winged words of poets, who know how to give voice to the mute feelings of those who have experienced it. In this cramped Mediterranean, so small that the shores that encircle it have justified its name of continental sea, 'in the middle of the land', sailors were sometimes obliged to abandon coastal navigation, breaking the visual umbilical cord through which they clung to the shore. When they set off from the coast, sky and water formed a single horizon: '*caelum undique et undique pontus*', wrote Virgil; '*de l'onda il ciel, del ciel l'onda è confine*', repeated Torquato Tasso many years later.⁶

Then comes the storm; the waves rage, roar and devour the ships. I am thinking of the prototype of all the Mediterranean tempests that have flooded into literature. It is found in Book 5 of the *Odyssey*. After days and nights of calm sailing, with a favourable wind, and when he can already see the forests that cover the isle of the Phaeacians, Ulysses is surprised by a violent gust unleashed by Poseidon. Huge, heavy, crushing waves slam into his boat, ripping off the rudder, breaking the mast through the middle and carrying away the antenna and sail. The raft's beams are scattered by the force of the waves, like dry straw blown by the wind. Ulysses groans about his sudden ruin. He tells himself that his destiny from now on is to suffer an obscure death. And yet he fights on, with all his strength, with all his courage.

I recall a few fragments by other literary giants who created fantastic storms by setting them in this sea. A few words from Virgil, Ariosto and Shakespeare parade through the uncertain theatre of my memory. I think of the more prosaic tales that chance circumstances have engraved in surviving documents that I have happened to read. It is always the same elements that recur in the testimonies of sailors, merchants, pilgrims, privateers and

soldiers. The fury of the waves rears its ugly head, day after day, year after year, fatal and always at the height of its powers. It is possible to perceive the sad monotony of natural elements. They apply the essential grammar of primordial forces, each time shattering and pulverizing the instruments built by human industry and sagacity. At all times, the shipwrecked find themselves naked, at the mercy of a power that takes hold of them and engulfs them.

From my observatory, from this wild balcony jutting out over the water, I can see the confused swarming of stories that have crossed this island and this sea. It seems to me that, in this tiny space, we could revive Braudel's dream of capturing the accumulation of different temporalities, under the brief, nervous oscillations of contemporary history – this prolix history, experienced 'live', buried under a profusion of documents: firstly, to recognize the stratum of geographical time, an almost immobile expanse, with cycles that are always restarted, based on the permanence of natural elements and human activities; then, above this deep plate, to unearth social time, shaped by the collective history of economies, civilizations, states and societies, with its background waves stretching over several centuries.

I might begin by tracing a provisional itinerary, by condensing into a small portolan the few bits of knowledge I had unearthed in the course of my quest. It would be, so to speak, an inverted portolan. Instead of guiding navigation from one port to another, from one island to another, it would be centred on a single point, planted in the middle of the sea, in order to follow its anchorage as well as its radiance and force of attraction.

Yes, it is time to leave, from this rocky overhang suspended over the void, from this island of all landings, to begin a journey into the past. Yes, it is time to set sail, to start the voyage.

NOTES

1. This cohabitation was studied by Vietti, 'Turisti a Lampedusa'; Id., *Unexpected Encounters*, 149–182.
2. If I were the librarian, in order to guide readers who are inevitably lost when faced with this voluminous and disparate collection, I would advise them to start by leafing through a few recent works, arranged on the various shelves: Cuttitta, *Lo spettacolo del confine*; Sanfilippo and Scialoja, *A Lampedusa*; Bartolo and Tilotta, *Tears of Salt*; Aime, *L'isola del non arrivo*; Migrant Image Research Group, *Lampedusa*; Cesa, *Lampedusa, aller simple*; Enia, *Appunti per un naufragio*; Valmir, *Pêcheurs d'hommes*; Friese, *Limiti dell'ospitalità*.
3. *Christianity and Islam Under the Sultans*.

4. Fantoli, 'Un'isola fra due continenti e un santuario fra due popoli'; Id., 'Ancora sull'isola di Lampedusa'; Fragapane, *Lampedusa*; Kaiser, 'La grotte de Lampedusa', Mercieca and Muscat, 'A Territory of Grace', Remensnyder, 'Compassion, Fear, Fugitive Slaves'.
5. *De Rebus Siculis Decades Duae*, 9.
6. *Aeneid* 3,193; *Gerusalemme Liberata*, XV, 24.