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**The Mediterranean as a Cultural
Palimpsest:
A Critical Reading of Predrag Matvejević's
Bréviaire méditerranéen**

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ABSTRACT

This study, entitled *The Mediterranean as a Cultural Palimpsest: A Critical Reading of Predrag Matvejević's Mediterranean Breviary*, examines how Matvejević, through a fragmentary and poetic style of writing, constructs a critical cartography of the Mediterranean as a space of conflictual coexistence. It specifically investigates how his work constitutes a counter-discourse to dominant identity narratives, valorizing plurality, cultural memory, and the circulation of knowledge.

This study proposes a cross-reading of Predrag Matvejević's *Mediterranean Breviary* (1992), combining literary hermeneutics, geopoetics, and theories of cultural memory (Assmann, Ricoeur). The analysis is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that engages with postcolonial studies (Said), the philosophy of relation (Glissant), and geocritical approaches (Westphal). In the face of contemporary geopolitical simplifications, this research demonstrates how the work deploys a palimpsestic writing in which the historical, linguistic, and cultural strata of the Mediterranean space intertwine.

The methodology articulates three complementary approaches: a textual analysis attentive to the techniques of fragmentary writing and intertextual networks, a geopoetic reading of spatial representations, and a study of the mechanisms of cultural memory. This triple lens illuminates the manner in which Matvejević constructs a literary counter-cartography of the Mediterranean, valorizing circulations over borders, hybridizations over identity purisms.

The study reveals how the *Breviary*, through its fragmented architecture and narrative polyphony, epistemologically performs the concept of the cultural palimpsest. The work thus appears as a laboratory of relational possibilities, offering invaluable tools for rethinking intercultural dynamics in the Mediterranean today. Finally, this research underscores the political relevance of an approach that transforms literature into a space of resistance against essentialisms and identity-based rigidities.

Keywords: Mediterranean, palimpsest, cultural memory, otherness.

INTRODUCTION

« There is not one Mediterranean, but many Mediterranean. » This inaugural statement from Predrag Matvejević's *Mediterranean Breviary* (1992) sets the tone for a singular work, situated at the crossroads of poetic essay, geopolitical reflection, and cultural archive. Amidst the resurgence of identity tensions and migratory crises on both the southern and northern shores of the Mediterranean, this text emerges as an essential reading for conceiving of this space not as a mere geographical zone, but as a historical and symbolic matrix in perpetual transformation. In this context, the central question raised by this article is: how does Predrag Matvejević's *Mediterranean Breviary* propose a literary and critical cartography of the Mediterranean as a space of conflictual yet fruitful coexistence of civilizations? More precisely, it aims to interrogate the modalities by which the work's fragmentary writing and generic hybridity deconstruct homogenizing representations of Mediterranean identity, while simultaneously giving rise to a thought of relation, shared memory, and passage.

This article is part of an interdisciplinary reflection on the Mediterranean envisaged as a territory of civilizational confluence, a site of exchanges, conflicts, cultural superimpositions, and plural memory. At a time when this sea is once again burdened with migratory tragedies and political tensions, it becomes essential to reread the texts, literary, historical, and philosophical, that reveal its constitutive complexity and allow us to question dominant narratives about Mediterranean identities.

The choice of the *Mediterranean Breviary* as an object of study is justified by its dual literary and anthropological scope. The work adopts a singular, fragmentary, and polyphonic posture, mirroring the Mediterranean it depicts. Matvejević, a Croatian writer from the Yugoslav space, embodies within his own biographical trajectory the plurality and tensions that characterize this cultural area. Far from offering a unifying synthesis, the author weaves a sensitive cartography, made of words, ruins, ports, forgotten languages, and shared memories.

The stake of this study is to understand how Matvejević's text constructs a representation of the Mediterranean as a space of conflictual yet fruitful coexistence of civilizations. It will examine how this work transcends essentialist or identity-based approaches to Mediterranean culture to propose an interstitial, relational, and profoundly poetic vision of this space.

To this end, we will employ a methodology of literary, hermeneutic, and intertextual analysis, drawing upon insights from cultural studies, geopoetics, and postcolonial criticism. Particular attention will be paid to narrative devices, cross-cultural references (Greco-Latin, Arabo-Muslim, Judeo-Christian, Ottoman), and the Mediterranean ethos constructed through the author's fragmented writing.

The principal objective of this research is to demonstrate that the *Mediterranean Breviary* constitutes a model of transcultural writing, capable of conceiving the Mediterranean as a form of civilizational palimpsest, simultaneously a geographical space and a symbolic construction, sedimented by history yet traversed by constant circulations of meaning, peoples, and narratives.

2. The Mediterranean between unifying myth and fragmented reality

2.1 The Mediterranean as a civilizational matrix

Far from being reducible to a mere geographical entity or a homogeneous basin, the Mediterranean asserts itself as a historical space of plurimillennial stratification, a true matrix of civilizations. This idea is masterfully formulated by Fernand Braudel, who declares in *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* that "the Mediterranean is not one country, but a thousand countries" (Braudel, 1949/1977, p. 17). By articulating a reading of the *longue durée*, Braudel envisions the Mediterranean not as a fixed unity, but as a shifting structure shaped by time, peoples, and exchanges. What constitutes civilization in this space is not the linear continuity of a single people or a single culture, but rather the thickness of time, the density of intersections and recompositions. A place of passage and superimposition, the Mediterranean functions as a living fabric whose threads are drawn simultaneously from history, geography, and the forms of daily life.

This perspective finds a remarkable echo in Predrag Matvejević's *Mediterranean Breviary*, which takes up and amplifies this vision by insisting on the constitutive plurality of Mediterranean space. Far from offering a historicist or evolutionist reading, Matvejević proposes an archaeological and sensory vision of the Mediterranean as a palimpsest: « Civilizations do not succeed one another here; they accumulate » (Matvejević, 1992, p. 25). Each culture does not replace the previous one but comes to settle upon it, like an additional stratum within a constantly transforming whole. This relationship to a deferred, cumulative temporality marks a rupture with the linear narratives of great national or imperial histories. What the *Breviary* reveals is a plural, discontinuous Mediterranean, made of traces, vestiges, and survivals, a sea that preserves and juxtaposes rather than erases or unifies.

The Mediterranean thus appears as an open civilizational matrix, where Greek, Latin, Arab, Jewish, Ottoman, and European contributions coexist without hierarchy. This conception makes possible a reading of the Mediterranean as a dialogic space, not merely a conflictual or conquering one. Matvejević's perspective does not deny the violences, wars, or dominations, but it insists on the capacity of this space to absorb, transform, and redistribute knowledge and practices, often through invisible mediations such as languages, trades, and everyday gestures.

This profound plurality, this fabric of circulations, resistances, and hybridizations, invites us to conceive of the Mediterranean not as a frontier between civilizations, but as a relational space where cultures intersect, respond to one another, and rewrite themselves. It is precisely this dynamic between fragmentation and continuity that will be the focus of the following section, devoted to the internal tensions that traverse the Mediterranean, caught between geopolitical ruptures and cultural persistences.

2.2 Ruptures and continuities in mediterranean space

If the Mediterranean can be conceived as a plural civilizational matrix, it is also, and perhaps above all, a space of historical, cultural, and political tensions, where circulation has never abolished fractures. Indeed, wars, conquests, crusades, religious expulsions, colonizations, and modern conflicts have profoundly marked its shores. This coexistence of civilizations has not been achieved in harmony, but in a permanent ambivalence, made of conflicts, negotiations, dominations, and resurgences. Predrag Matvejević underscores this repeatedly in his *Mediterranean Breviary*, evoking this constitutive tension between dispersion and continuity: « This world is at once fragmented and continuous: it has been invaded, disputed, traversed, and then recomposed » (Matvejević, 1992, p. 39). The sentence crystallizes the idea of a geography perforated by ruptures, yet one that preserves deep-seated forms of subterranean coherence, perceptible through cultural practices, languages, and know-how. It is this double dynamic, apparent dissolution and slow sedimentation, that makes the Mediterranean such a complex object for contemporary thought.

This complexity has been particularly analyzed by Edward Said in *Orientalism*, where he demonstrates how Western representations of the Mediterranean Orient have constructed an imaginary of radical otherness, serving imperial projects. For Said, the Mediterranean Orient is not an objective reality but an intellectual and political projection, charged with orientalizing the Other in order to better exclude or dominate him (Said, 1978/2005). From this perspective, the Mediterranean becomes an ideological theater, where the dialectic between inclusion and exclusion, familiarity and exoticism, belonging and othering unfolds. This dialectic is not only visible in scholarly representations, but also in the linguistic and religious fractures that traverse Mediterranean space. The coexistence of Latin and Arabic, Greek and Turkish, of Hebrew, Arabic, Cyrillic, and Latin alphabets; the historical tensions between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; the divisions between continental European culture and insular or North African culture. All these elements show that the Mediterranean cannot be reduced to a stable entity: it is in perpetual recomposition, worked by lines of fracture that divide it without ever annihilating it.

It is precisely this dialectic of tension, between apparent separation and persistent interconnection, that Matvejević seeks to capture in his fragmentary, non-linear writing. Through his approach, the author proposes a rhizomatic vision of the Mediterranean, where

each point is simultaneously a crossroads and a rupture, a node of memory and a site of forgetting. These internal tensions prepare the ground for a more literary reading of the *Mediterranean Breviary*, no longer as a mere descriptive text, but as a complete work, where writing itself becomes a form of knowledge.

3. A poetics of fragmentation and plurality

3.1 A Hybrid Form Between Essay, Narrative, and Archive

Predrag Matvejević's work resists traditional generic classifications. Neither a novel, nor a strictly academic essay, nor a genuine travelogue, it belongs to a liminal mode of writing, situated between literature, anthropology, and cultural memory. This heterogeneity is constitutive of the work, whose form is inseparable from its content: the Mediterranean plurality that Matvejević describes finds formal expression in the fragmentation of the text, its non-linear arrangement, its discontinuous diction. The writing mirrors the fragmentation of the space it explores. One key to entering this dynamic of writing is offered by Roland Barthes, who in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1972) valorizes fragmentary forms as sites of resistance to totalizing discourse. The fragment, far from being a lack, becomes a mode of enunciation in its own right, bearing tension, openness, and suspense. The *Breviary* operates according to this logic: each entry (often organized around a word, an object, a place) constitutes a micro-narrative, a stratum of the Mediterranean palimpsest. The text thus constructs itself through successive touches, refusing narrative sequence in favor of a sensitive cartography.

In line with Gérard Genette's analyses of transtextuality (*Palimpsests*, 1982), one could say that Matvejević adopts an architextual and intertextual mode of writing, mobilizing citations, historical knowledge, mythological evocations, religious or literary references, without ever hierarchizing them. This weaving is also dialogical in the Bakhtinian sense: the voices of the text are plural, heterogeneous, reflecting the polyphony of a civilizational space traversed by competing and intertwined cultures (Bakhtin, 1970).

More recently, the work of Hélène Cixous and Nicole Loraux has highlighted the importance of so-called « minor » or oblique forms of writing for thinking about memory, exile, or conflicts of belonging. From this perspective, the *Mediterranean Breviary* could be read as a writing of the gap, neither personal testimony, nor fiction, nor strictly scholarly essay, but rather a threshold writing, or, in Françoise Lionnet's terms, a « writing in relation », which deconstructs the boundary between subject and culture, text and territory (Lionnet, 1995).

It is also from this perspective that we can invoke the concepts of the sensitive archive (Didi-Huberman, 2003) and shared memory (Assmann, 2013), which allow us to conceive of the breviary form as a tool of discontinuous transmission, well-suited to the Mediterranean

heritage. The recourse to objects, everyday words (bread, the jar, the sea, ruins), fragments of forgotten cultures, makes the text a living archive where traces are constantly reactivated by the very act of writing. The work of memory in Matvejević is not commemorative but archaeological and relational; each fragment is an interface between past and present, between the local and the universal.

Finally, this fragmented form resonates with the poetic approach of Édouard Glissant, for whom the form of a text must reflect the poetics of its space. In *Poetics of Relation* (1990), Glissant proposes a model of « archipelago » writing, which rejects centered and linear narratives in favor of fruitful discontinuity, tremor, and multiplicity. The *Mediterranean Breviary* is, in this respect, an archipelagic work par excellence; each entry is an island, connected to others not by causal logic but by a shifting memory and a shared sensibility.

Thus, the formal hybridity of the *Mediterranean Breviary* is not a gratuitous stylistic originality; it constitutes the very device through which the text produces knowledge about the Mediterranean, in all its constitutive dissonance. The fragment, polyphony, the living archive, and the poetics of tremor become so many modes of access to an irreducible cultural complexity, which the author neither seeks to synthesize nor to hierarchize. This formal construction of the text as a mirror of Mediterranean plurality prepares the ground for the next part of our analysis, which will focus on the sea itself, no longer merely as a backdrop or symbolic object, but as a site of memory, passage, and translation, through which civilizations have exchanged far more than commodities: words, gestures, narratives.

3.2 The sea as a realm of memory and translation

In the fragmentary narrative, the sea is not merely a geographical element or a backdrop; it constitutes a central, almost ontological figure, which structures thought, memory, and writing alike. It is at once what connects and what separates, what carries across and what swallows up, the material medium of exchange and the immaterial symbol of remembrance. Matvejević envisions it as a liquid memory, bearing invisible vestiges and erased narratives, where History is written not in stone but in water. He writes: « This sea preserves what books forget » (Matvejević, 1992, p. 61). The sea thus becomes a vector of cultural memory, in the sense developed by Jan Assmann, who defines memory as a process of transmission through symbolic supports, gestures, objects, and spaces (Assmann, 2013). In the *Breviary*, ports, islands, coastlines, submerged ruins are so many shifting sites of memory, where heritage is constantly reactualized through fragile signs: the name of a fish, a shared proverb, a preserved recipe, a transmitted word. This maritime memory, often oral or embodied in simple objects, resists national narratives and reveals another history of the Mediterranean, silent yet tenacious.

Furthermore, Matvejević insists on the role of the sea as a space of permanent translation. He states: « Words travel on this sea, often more than men » (p. 57), thus underscoring the idea of a commerce of languages, wherein Greek, Arabic, Latin, Hebrew, and Ottoman terms circulate, transform, and settle upon shores and within dialects. This process resonates with Paul Ricoeur's definition of translation as a form of linguistic hospitality, a way of welcoming the other into one's own language without denying the distance (Ricoeur, 2004). The sea in Matvejević thus becomes a space of cultural translation, not always harmonious, but alive, active, at times conflictual, a place where languages do not unify but recognize one another. From a poetic perspective, the Mediterranean sea also embodies what Gaston Bachelard called a « space of dynamic reverie » (Bachelard, 1942), a site of collective and individual projections. But in Matvejević, this reverie is always rooted in the materiality of the real: nets, boats, nautical charts, spices, dialects. It is a poetics of the concrete sea, a human sea, traversed by gestures, practices, and memories.

Finally, one cannot ignore the political dimension of this sea. It is also a contemporary cemetery, the theater of recurrent migratory tragedies. If Matvejević does not write directly about the shipwrecks of the twenty-first century, his text anticipates them from a long-term perspective, recalling that the Mediterranean is as much a space of hospitality as of exclusion. It is traversed by a constitutive ambivalence, that of connecting and rejecting, of opening and controlling, of exchanging and destroying. This tension resonates with Édouard Glissant's analysis of the sea as a site of shared memory but also of collective trauma (*The Sea, Memory, the World*, 2009). Thus, through the literary treatment of the sea, Matvejević constructs a transversal, mobile, intercultural memory, wherein the sea becomes the true subject of Mediterranean history, a sea that thinks, that remembers, and that translates. It constitutes the poetic and symbolic heart of the *Breviary*, from which a Mediterranean not of borders but of relation is redrawn. This sea of memory and translation is peopled with human figures: the anonymous, exiles, fishermen, bearers of languages and knowledges. These are the forgotten voices and modest faces, those figures often excluded from grand narratives.

3.3 Anonymous figures and the memory of those forgotten

In the author's Mediterranean essay, history is not told through kings, empires, or dates, but through minute gestures, anonymous bodies, and silent knowledges. He thus inscribes himself within a counter-hegemonic writing tradition, seeking to restore voice and visibility to those whom official narratives have erased: fishermen, artisans, merchants, sailors, scribes, and exiles. These modest figures, scattered throughout the work, form an subterranean memory of the Mediterranean, at once concrete and universal. The author describes Mediterranean history as carried not by the powerful but by the humble: « The Mediterranean belongs to those who did not write history but who bore it » (Matvejević, 1992, p. 102). This quotation expresses an ethical and poetic choice: that of turning away from dominant

narratives in order to document lived, embodied history, transmitted through daily gestures and oral traditions. This displacement of the gaze toward the margins resonates with contemporary approaches in cultural history (Chartier, 1990; Burke, 2004) and with work in postcolonial studies, which, following Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), invites us to provincialize the narratives of Western modernity.

In Matvejević's work, the figure of the fisherman, for example, is not merely a typical character of the coastlines; he becomes a vector of a long temporality, a witness to sea currents, trade routes, ancient beliefs, and the language of the winds. Through him, a form of empirical knowledge is transmitted, more sensory than intellectual, yet laden with memory. These figures are often nameless, without date, without precise location, yet they embody a Mediterranean from below, close to the earth and the sea, traversed by losses, migrations, and hybridizations. Matvejević's approach here aligns with an aesthetics of the infra-ordinary, in the sense of Georges Perec (1973), where the most banal elements (bread, oil, wind, stone) are invested with mnemonic and cultural depth. The word "bread," for instance, becomes the subject of an entire entry in the work: "Bread is the same from Salerno to Sfax, from Thessaloniki to Oran, and yet it never has the same taste, never the same history" (p. 88). Through this approach, the author puts into practice what Michel de Certeau (1980) called the "coming to voice of ordinary practices," recognizing a historical and symbolic value in existences deemed minor or invisible by national or imperial narratives.

This narrative choice also carries a contemporary political resonance. It allows for the weaving of a Mediterranean genealogy of mobilities and marginalities, reinscribing the figures of exile or passage within a long history of crossing. Today's migrants find an echo in the refugees of yesterday, in Phoenician merchants, Andalusian sailors, or Sephardic Jews. In this sense, Matvejević's work participates in a work of rehabilitating diasporic memory, at the crossroads of social history and the poetics of the sea. These anonymous figures that Matvejević brings to the surface thus compose a poetic anthropology of the Mediterranean, where each silhouette carries within it a fragment of civilization, a crossing of language, or a silent heritage. Their discreet presence in the text becomes a gesture of resistance to forgetting, a form of alternative archiving.

This attention to the forgotten completes and deepens the vision of the sea as a space of memory and translation. It also prepares the transition toward a more conceptual reading of the work, where writing itself becomes a critical and geopoetic tool, allowing for the reconfiguration of the Mediterranean's cultural cartography.

4. A Geopoetics of tensions and crossings

Matvejević's work is distinguished by a strong geopoetic dimension, in the sense developed by Kenneth White (2001), that is, a mode of writing that does not merely describe

space but makes it the very engine of thought, the rhythm of the sentence, the very structure of discourse. The Mediterranean is not here a simple decor or backdrop; it is a lived space, traversed, laden with memory and conflict, which writing attempts to translate without unifying it.

The geopoetics proposed in the *Mediterranean Breviary* (1992) is above all that of discontinuity. The text follows neither itinerary nor chronology, but proceeds by fragments, leaps, detours, variations, mirroring this inland sea made of capes, islands, gulfs, straits, and contrary currents. This fragmentary structure resonates with what Édouard Glissant calls a poetics of relation (Glissant, 1990), wherein identities are neither fixed nor pure but always in tension, produced by encounters, mixtures, and fractures. Glissant writes: « Relation is what connects without conflating, what links without reducing. » Matvejević's Mediterranean essay embodies precisely this posture. It connects scattered elements, objects, words, ports, myths, peoples, without ever enclosing them within a closed system. The text thus maps a Mediterranean traversed by tensions, where passages are never neutral. The vocabulary employed bears witness to this: invasions, departures, shipwrecks, crossings, exchanges, forgetting. Matvejević does not offer an idealized vision of a harmonious cosmopolitan space; on the contrary, he insists on the constitutive conflictuality of this space, its instability, its lines of fracture. As he writes: « One must map not borders, but passages » (Matvejević, 1992, p. 63). This lexical and structural choice corresponds to an ethics of writing: giving form to a world where identities are precarious, belongings are traversed, places are without fixity. From this perspective, the text can be read as a poetic map, in the manner in which Michel de Certeau conceives of writing as a walking through urban space, an act of reappropriation, a tracing within the invisible (De Certeau, 1980). From a more spatial perspective, Bertrand Westphal speaks of geocriticism to designate texts that problematize space, rather than merely describing it (Westphal, 2007). The *Mediterranean Breviary* is a perfect example. It transforms Mediterranean space into an object of thought, a field of tensions to be read, not conquered. It is no longer a matter of occupying or possessing a territory, but of interrogating it through narratives, silences, ruins, and lost languages.

Finally, this Mediterranean geopoetics is inseparable from an aesthetics of the threshold, as developed by Georges Didi-Huberman (2003) in his work on the sensitive archive. Matvejević's text navigates between presence and disappearance, knowledge and memory, testimony and silence. It proposes a cartography of that which trembles, that which is transmitted without being spoken, that which connects without dominating. In sum, the *Mediterranean Breviary* does not merely speak of the Mediterranean: it writes according to its logic, the logic of passage, of tension, of relation. It is this coherence between form, thought, and space that makes it a remarkable geopoetic object and a model of critical writing capable of apprehending the cultural and political discontinuities of the contemporary world. This critical and relational dimension of Mediterranean space prepares our reflection on the

manner in which Matvejević deconstructs identity discourses, in order to propose a thought of the multiple, founded on shared belonging and the refusal of essentialism, a reflection to which we will turn in the following section.

4.1 Multiple identities and the refusal of essentialism

One of the major stakes of Predrag Matvejević's Mediterranean essay is the questioning of homogeneous and fixed visions of cultural identity. Throughout his text, the author deploys a conception of identity that is profoundly heterogeneous, stratified, fluid, one that resonates with contemporary theories of fragmented subjectivity and intercultural relation. In the *Mediterranean Breviary* (1992), Mediterranean identity is neither an essence nor a pure origin, but an intertwining of multiple belongings, a heritage commonly traversed by exile, language, memory, and conflict. « I belong to this sea as to an incomplete alphabet » (Matvejević, 1992, p. 78). This sentence alone encapsulates the refusal of a totalizing identity. It suggests that identity is not a coherent whole, but a lacunary text, traversed by voids and othernesses, made of unfinished citations, resonances, losses. The Mediterranean individual as drawn by Matvejević is always situated between several cultures, often arising from conflicting religious, linguistic, or national traditions, a figure of the « in-between, » dear to Homi Bhabha (1994), who speaks of a *third space*, a hybrid space of identity negotiation. This approach resonates with the analyses of Amin Maalouf in *In the Name of Identity* (1998), where he denounces the narrowing of multiple identities under the pressure of communal or nationalist logics: « Identity cannot be compartmentalized. It cannot be divided into halves or thirds. [...] It is an indivisible whole » (Maalouf, 1998, p. 21). Matvejević does not contradict this vision, but rather complicates it. For him, Mediterranean identity is not indivisible; it is precisely divided, displaced, shifting, and it is in this that it is rich. His writing defends a form of shared belonging, wherein several worlds coexist without hierarchy. This thought of coexistence finds an echo in Paul Ricoeur, who in *Oneself as Another* (1990) speaks of identity as narrative: it is constructed over time, through the stories we tell ourselves, and is recomposed through encounters and trials. The work thus adopts a post-national posture. Mediterranean identity is not defined by a state, a language, a religion, or a border, but by the capacity to welcome the other within oneself. This openness rests upon a logic that Glissant calls *creolization*, that is, a process by which cultures meet, mutually alter one another, and produce the unpredictable (Glissant, 1990). The *Breviary* is a profoundly creolized text, in its cross-references, its non-standardized form, its composite lexicon.

This dynamic opposes closed identity narratives, whether nationalist, religious, or civilizational. Matvejević avoids any temptation to mythify a unified or pacified « great Mediterranean »; on the contrary, he insists on the constitutive conflictuality of this space, where cultures intersect as much as they clash. But it is precisely within this tension that a form of cultural solidarity emerges, not founded on purity, but on the recognition of shared

impurity, a central theme in the work of Stuart Hall, for whom identity is always a position, never an essence (Hall, 1996). Thus, through his fragmented yet relational vision of identity, Matvejević offers a critical meditation on belonging to a plural world, where memory, language, and exile form the true markers of identity. This posture, at once humanist and political, extends the Mediterranean geopoetics analyzed previously and leads us to consider the essay not merely as an aesthetic object, but as a counter-discourse, capable of producing an alternative knowledge about history and civilizations. It is this role of literature as a critical power, capable of interrogating the structures of knowledge and dominant narratives, that we will explore in the following section.

4.2 Literary knowledge as mediterranean counter-discourse

The *Mediterranean Breviary*, in its form as well as in its vision of the world, stands at the crossroads of literature and cultural criticism. Through a fragmentary, mobile, and poetic mode of writing, the author elaborates a literary knowledge that seeks neither to impose a historical truth nor to trace a chronology of civilizations, but rather to offer a sensitive, plural, and decentered reading of Mediterranean space. This knowledge presents itself as a counter-discourse. It enters into tension with dominant narratives of history, whether imperial, nationalist, religious, or disciplinary. In the lineage of Edward Said, and particularly of *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), one can consider that Matvejević deconstructs the forms of knowledge that have historically served to organize Mediterranean otherness according to hierarchical categories between East and West, North and South, civilization and barbarism. Like Said, he refuses the purported neutrality of historical and scholarly narratives, and claims for literature a role as subversive narrative, capable of disturbing the established lines of power and knowledge: « Knowledge lies not in conquest, but in waiting and listening » (Matvejević, 1992, p. 90). This statement illustrates a fundamental intellectual posture: that of humble, relational knowledge, attentive to margins, silences, and details. Far from an authoritative narrative, Matvejević proposes a counter-history made of fragments, objects, ordinary words, things that resist official historicization. In this gesture, one finds what Jacques Rancière calls the *distribution of the sensible* (2000): the capacity of art, and particularly of literature, to redistribute voices, gazes, and forms of visibility within social and political space. This literary knowledge also functions as a form of poetic archaeology, in the sense understood by François Hartog (2003), who distinguishes between regimes of historicity. The *Breviary* does not reconstruct the past according to a linear or progressive temporality, but rather according to a logic of re-manence and survival, wherein the present is haunted by multiple strata of the past. Each fragment of text becomes a kind of archaeological site, where several cultural, religious, and linguistic layers, sometimes contradictory, often forgotten, intersect. This manner of writing and thinking history through interstices and discontinuities resonates with Édouard Glissant's conception of literature, for whom the narrative must be relational, opaque, and trembling. He writes: « Literature is the

space where the world holds itself in its irreducible totality » (Glissant, 1990). Matvejević's Mediterranean text embodies this philosophy; it refuses to reduce the Mediterranean to a model, an identity, or an origin. It prefers incompleteness, tension, polyphony, these alone can account for the complexity of the real. In this context, the *Mediterranean Breviary* appears as a critical literary apparatus, in the Foucauldian sense of the term: an arrangement of forms, discourses, and practices that unsettles established certainties, displaces centers, and revalorizes margins. It produces a knowledge that is non-academic yet rigorous, non-empirical yet experiential, one that enriches our understanding of the Mediterranean as a space of conflict and coexistence, of history and memory, of fracture and connection. This literary knowledge is therefore not a decorative alternative to the human sciences; it is a necessary complement, insofar as it allows us to think what escapes disciplinary frameworks, objectifying methods, and linear narratives. Through his fragmentary and sensitive writing, Matvejević implements an epistemology of relation, wherein subjectivity, memory, space, and language are inseparable. This critical function of literature, articulated with an ethics of listening and a poetics of the trace, grounds the singular power of this work and fully justifies its place within contemporary reflections on the Mediterranean, its multiple identities, and its constitutive tensions.

5. Resonances and extensions of the Mediterranean Breviary

5.1 Critical reception and legacy of the Mediterranean Breviary

Since its publication in French in 1992 (originally in Italian in 1987), the *Mediterranean Breviary* has sparked keen interest in literary, academic, and geopolitical circles alike. Rarely has an unclassifiable work, hovering at the boundary between essay, intellectual autobiography, and poetic archive, enjoyed such a wide circulation in such varied contexts. Translated into more than twenty languages, this text has been hailed for its capacity to conceive of the Mediterranean outside binary logics: neither Orientalism, nor Eurocentrism, nor cosmopolitan utopia. Its reception in France, Italy, the Balkans, as well as in the Maghreb and the Eastern Mediterranean, precisely reflects this power of transcultural resonance. In the former Yugoslavia, the text was initially perceived as an indirect taking of position against the ethnic fragmentation and identity withdrawals of the 1990s. Matvejević was read there as a cross-border intellectual, a witness to the culture shared between East and West, between Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. In France, the work was integrated into research programs on « Mediterranean identities », alongside authors such as Braudel, Maalouf, and Camus. Several academic studies in comparative literature, cultural anthropology, and political philosophy have seized upon it as a symptomatic text of contemporary identity malaise, but also as a model of critical writing.

In the Arab and southern Mediterranean worlds, the *Breviary* has found a particular echo among intellectuals concerned with migrations, colonial legacies, and the place of the

South within European cultural narratives. There, it is often read as a call for the recognition of the Mediterranean's historical plurality, and as an implicit critique of dominant discourses on integration or the clash of civilizations. Its non-fictional yet narrative character, its fragmentary composition, and its erudite depth have allowed the *Breviary* to establish itself durably within contemporary Mediterranean thought, becoming a transdisciplinary reference work of enduring significance.

5.2 Matvejević in Dialogue with Glissant, Maalouf, and Camus

Although Matvejević's work is unique in its kind, it nevertheless belongs to a broader field of Mediterranean thought and critique of closed identities. A comparative reading with other key figures such as Édouard Glissant, Amin Maalouf, and Albert Camus allows us to highlight the convergences and tensions between their respective visions of space, memory, and identity. Like Matvejević, Édouard Glissant elaborates a thought of space founded on relation, not as a simple interconnection between already constituted entities, but as an unpredictable dynamic of emergence and reciprocal transformation. In *Poetics of Relation* (1990), Glissant affirms that identities are not based on linear filiation but on a detour; identity is formed through the ordeal of displacement, contact, and trembling. In this respect, the Mediterranean in Matvejević functions as a space of continuous recomposition, where belongings are always shifting, never fixed. Where Glissant invokes the figure of the archipelago to symbolize this thought of discontinuity, a fragmented territory yet in constant interaction, Matvejević, for his part, mobilizes the form of the breviary: a non-hierarchical succession of entries, objects, places, languages. If Glissant valorizes opacity as an ethical condition of living together, Matvejević cultivates a form of fertile illegibility, where erudition is never totalizing but always fragmentary, lacunary, partial. Both move away from a logic of transparency and mastery, preferring instead a poetics of the trace, attentive to residues, survivals, and minor forms of knowledge. Moreover, their conception of history is non-cumulative but stratified and non-linear. In Glissant, relational history does not erase the wounds of the past; it works through them in the present, seeking to create new forms of coexistence. In Matvejević, this complex temporality is embodied in the Mediterranean as palimpsest, where civilizations do not abolish one another but superimpose, alter one another, sometimes clash, always transform. History is neither teleological nor glorious, but marked by ambivalence, loss, and recomposition. Finally, both authors defend an approach to space that is deeply political, without ever yielding to ideological instrumentalization. Matvejević's Mediterranean, like Glissant's Caribbean or Tout-Monde, is not a reconciled space but a space in tension, where literature becomes a tool of thought, a form of resistance against the essentialization of cultures and the closure of imaginaries.

If Matvejević's fragmentary and erudite writing seeks to restore the historical and cultural density of the Mediterranean, the work of Amin Maalouf, particularly in *In the Name*

of *Identity* (1998), extends this reflection from a more directly anthropological and political angle. Both refuse exclusive identity assignments and narratives founded on purity. In Maalouf as in Matvejević, identity is conceived not as an essence but as a composite fabric, at once fragile and evolving. Maalouf writes: « Identity cannot be compartmentalized. It cannot be sliced up, it cannot be divided into halves or thirds. I do not have several identities. I have only one, made up of all the elements that have shaped it » (Maalouf, 1998, p. 13). This vision of a stratified identity echoes the very structure of the *Mediterranean Breviary*, conceived as an accumulation of traces, languages, and cultural practices that are juxtaposed but not hierarchized.

Maalouf's approach is deeply marked by concern for the contemporary reality of wounded belongings. In *The Disordered World* (2009), he insists on the dangers of a global narrative polarized between victimhood memory and dominant memory: « Human history is a braid. We must not allow those who cut the threads to write the common narrative alone » (Maalouf, 2009, p. 82). This refusal of a univocal narrative is found in Matvejević in his manner of restoring the forgotten memories of the Mediterranean, those of sailors, anonymous scribes, vanished ports, words without fixed language. Both invite us to reconstruct more just narratives, capable of making room for complexity without yielding to fragmentation. There is also a profound convergence in their approach to intercultural dialogue, neither naively universalist nor relativist, but founded on the recognition of historical wounds, shared memory, and the exigency of translation. Where Maalouf speaks of the necessity to « defend all one's affiliations » in order to avoid being trapped by extremism, Matvejević responds with a writing of circulation, confluences, and passages. Their common project is thus as political as it is ethical: to resist identity confinement through the elaboration of narrative forms capable of bearing plurality without freezing it.

Finally, their visions converge in a certain lucid melancholy in the face of Mediterranean history. In Maalouf, this melancholy is expressed in the regret of a Mediterranean world « where one passed more easily from one language to another, from one faith to another » (*In the Name of Identity*, p. 92), while Matvejević evokes silences, ruins, the absent. Both, however, refuse nostalgia; they inscribe themselves within a critical archaeology of belonging, attentive to fractures yet oriented toward the future. In this sense, their writing constitutes an attempt to reinvent connection, founded on the awareness that the Mediterranean heritage can only be saved if it is reread through the prism of complexity, active memory, and radical pluralism. While Maalouf and Matvejević interrogate the complexity of multiple belongings within a fractured Mediterranean, Albert Camus embodies another Mediterranean posture, nourished by a sensory relationship to the world, founded on light, earth, and sea. The aim here is not to directly confront two systems of thought, but to identify subterranean resonances and, above all, structural tensions between two visions of the relationship to space and history. Camus, in *Nuptials* (1938) or *Summer* (1954), defends

a solar, almost timeless Mediterranean, where the connection to the world passes through the senses, the evidence of the body, and the plenitude of landscape: « This world facing me, I wed it, » he writes in *Nuptials at Tipasa*. He celebrates there a form of accord between human beings and nature, between ethics and the sensible. This aesthetic posture, profoundly pagan and classical, contrasts with Matvejević's approach, more fragmented, more archaeological, where the Mediterranean is not the setting for a possible unity, but the site of a plurality in tension, marked by ruin, crossing, and exile. Where Camus attempts to preserve a certain Mediterranean universality in the face of the threat of the absurd, Matvejević gives voice to disappeared languages, forgotten ports, nameless silhouettes. He thus moves from the myth of the unifying sea to a poetics of detail, vestige, and translation. If Camus stands on the side of tragic clarity, Matvejević inhabits the opacity of the palimpsest. However, it would be erroneous to oppose the two authors rigidly. A profound fidelity to the Mediterranean as an original site of thought and human experience unites them. Both perceive in this space a point of departure for a reflection on the human condition, on measure, limit, and justice. Camus writes in *The Rebel* (1951): « The Mediterranean does not deny, it weighs and judges » ; a formula that could also apply to Matvejević, in his manner of making ruins speak, not to lament them but to integrate them into a critical thought of history.

Finally, if Camus defends a humanism of measure, Matvejević proposes a humanism of translation, where the other is never converted but approached in his or her distance. The former attempts to save a Mediterranean-faced universality; the latter reveals the constitutive fragmentation of that universality, its composite, polyphonic, often forgotten nature. Their meeting point, perhaps, resides in their shared exigency of ethics in writing. In Camus, this passes through lucidity and restraint; in Matvejević, through the fragile inventory of a world made of remnants, silent transmissions, and erased echoes. Thus, Matvejević situates himself within Camus's critical lineage, not to extend him, but to decenter him, by restoring to linguistic, cultural, and religious margins a full place within Mediterranean narrative. It is within this tension between light and shadow, between classicism and palimpsest, that a true genealogy of contemporary Mediterranean writings is drawn.

Matvejević synthesizes these dimensions in an archive-writing, where each word constitutes trace and passage. Through the *Breviary*, he proposes a model of the Mediterranean intellectual, not rooted in a territory, but inscribed within historical and cultural flows, open to multiplicity and incompleteness. These critical and intertextual resonances confirm the singular place that the *Mediterranean Breviary* occupies in the field of Mediterranean writings. At once anchored in a plural literary tradition and oriented toward a political thought of relation, Matvejević's work crystallizes the constitutive tensions of this space, while sketching the possibilities of a shared imaginary. By conjugating memory, otherness, and literary knowledge, it invites us to rethink the boundaries of belonging and the forms of coexistence. It is from this formal density and critical scope that we may now draw the

principal lessons of this study.

6. CONCLUSION

This work has illuminated the singular richness of Predrag Matvejević's *Mediterranean Breviary*, a work at the crossroads of genres, which invites reading both as a literary text and as a critical cartography of Mediterranean space. Through its fragmentary, mobile, and archipelagic writing, the author elaborates a genuine poetics of relation (Glissant, 1990), wherein identity is no longer an essence to be recovered, but a shifting weave of memories, languages, and interwoven narratives. Far from seeking to erase conflicts or idealize a lost Mediterranean unity, Matvejević reveals a stratified, tense yet fertile space, where « civilizations do not succeed one another here; they accumulate » (Matvejević, 1992, p. 25).

In answering our central question, how does this text propose a critical and literary cartography of the Mediterranean as a space of conflictual coexistence? the analysis has shown that the *Breviary* articulates aesthetics, memory, and politics with subtlety. It inscribes itself within what Jacques Rancière calls the *distribution of the sensible* (2000), reconfiguring the audible voices and forms of visibility within the cultural field. Through the simplest of objects ; a jar, a loaf of bread, an ancient word, Matvejević restores a living archive (Didi-Huberman, 2003), where history is told through traces and silences, not through official chronologies. The *Breviary* thus brings forth an alternative literary knowledge, at once critical and poetic, capable of contesting essentialisms while proposing new interpretive frameworks for understanding cultural identities.

This text also resonates with Paul Ricoeur's conception of identity, for whom « identity is always narrative » (1990). The aim here is not to reconstitute an origin or a purity, but to narrate an open belonging, constructed through otherness, translation, and incompleteness. Matvejević thus composes a work that thinks from the margins, embracing trembling and heterogeneity as principles of coherence. However, this research possesses limitations inherent to its object: focused on a single work, albeit a dense and foundational one, it would benefit from being extended through a comparative study with other Mediterranean writings, particularly Arab, Jewish, African, or Balkan ones. Moreover, a deeper dialogue with the tools of mobility anthropology or critical geography could enrich the literary approach by broadening the theoretical framework.

Finally, this study opens stimulating research perspectives. By articulating cultural memory, fragmentary writing, creolization, and geopoetics, it proposes conceiving of the Mediterranean not as a fixed space, but as a laboratory of the constitutive tensions of living together. The *Mediterranean Breviary*, through its unclassifiable style and evocative power, demonstrates that literature does not merely represent the world; it invents it otherwise,

redeploying our ways of inhabiting it, narrating it, and inheriting it. As such, Matvejević's work constitutes a major contribution to cultural, literary, and postcolonial studies, and an anchor point for any reflection on contemporary forms of plurality, memory, and relation.

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