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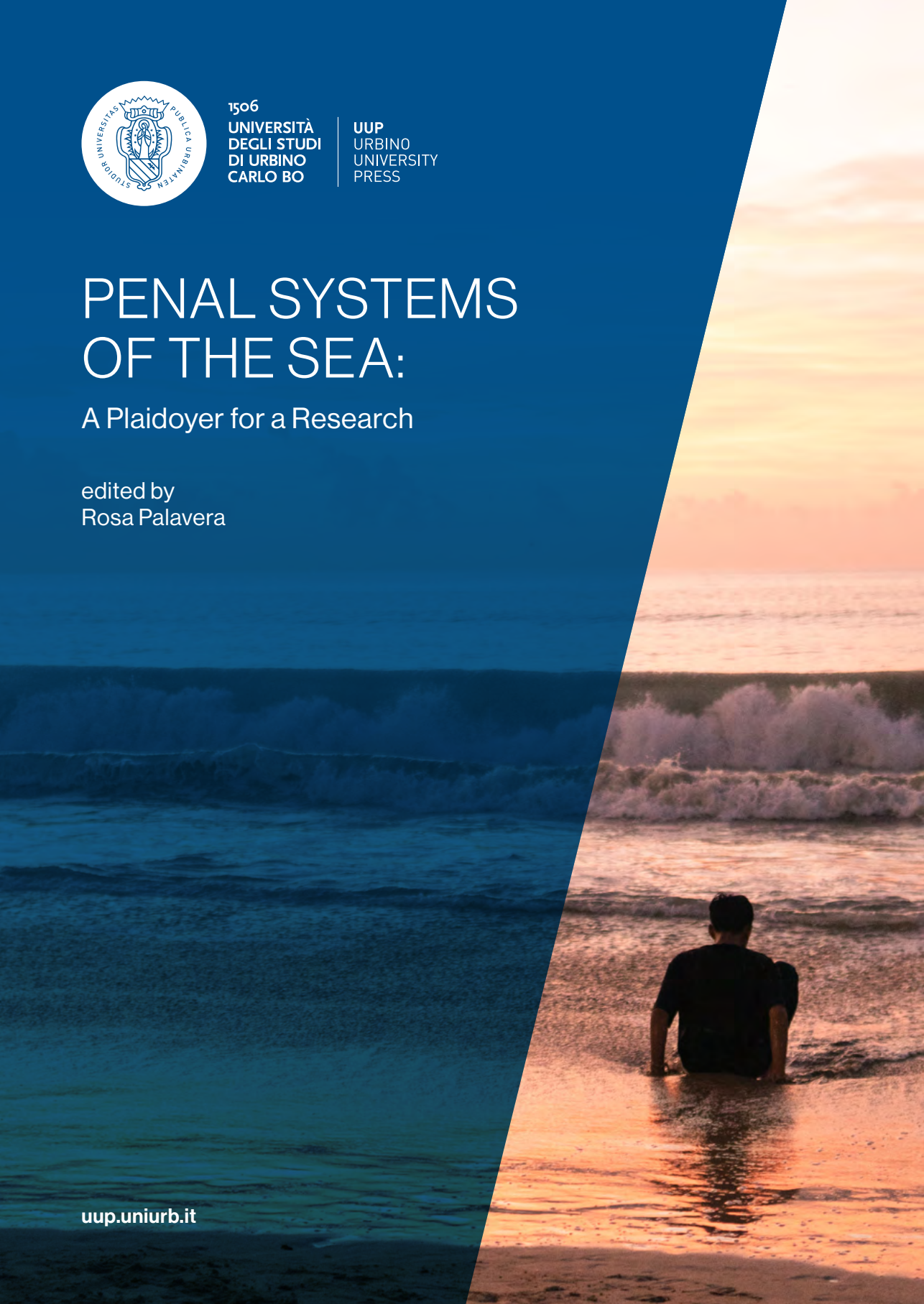
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PENAL SYSTEMS OF THE SEA:

A Plaidoyer for a Research

edited by
Rosa Palavera

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GIFT FROM A PHILOSOPHER

MY SEA

Luigi Lombardi Vallauri

The sea – like the desert, like the sky – is one of the fundamental landscapes of the soul, and thus for me one of the dimensions of universal secular mystique. I refer to the eight transmissions on “L’anima di paesaggio” collected in my *Meditare in Occidente. Corso di mistica laica* (Le Lettere, Firenze 2015/2024).

In the boundless inventory of evocations of the sea – ancient/modern, western/eastern, literary/scientific/pictorial/musical/spiritual – I quote arbitrarily, autobiographically from four poems that I recite to myself, which *enchantment* me: from *Le cimetière marin* by Valéry, *Undulna* by D’Annunzio, from *Aspasia* by Leopardi, from *I pastori* by D’Annunzio’s again¹. I do not quote Montale, because “Mediterraneo” in *Ossi di seppia* would exhaust all my space alone.

CIMETIÈRE MARIN

Midi le juste y compose de feux
la mer, la mer, toujours recommencée

Impartial noon patterns the sea in flame
That sea forever starting and re-starting.

UNDULNA

(Undulna, as the name implies, is the nymph who writes with delicate waves on the sand of the shore the music of the sea).

Ai piedi ho quattro ali d’alcèdine,
ne ho due per mallèolo, azzurre
e verdi, che per la salsèdine
curvi sanno errori dedurre.

Four halcyon-wings are on my feet,
a pair upon each ankle-bone,
blue and green, and they guide my flight
curving erroneous on the brine.

1 The choice of the English editions from which the excerpts are drawn is the responsibility of the translator, as follows: Valéry P. [Day Lewis C.], 1946. *The Graveyard by the Sea*, London: Martin Secker & Warburg; d’Annunzio G. [Nichols J.G.], 1988. *Halcyon*, New York: Routledge; Leopardi G. [Towsend F.], 1887. *The poems of Giacomo Leopardi*, New York, London: G. P. Putnam’s Sons.

...

Io l'onda in misura conduco
perché su la riva si spanda
con l'alga con l'ulva e col fuco
che fannole amara ghirlanda.
Io règolo il segno lucente
che lascian le spume degli orli:
l'antico il men novo e il recente
io so con bell'arte comporli.
I musici umani hanno modi
lor varii, dal dorico al frigio:
divine infinite melodi
io creo nell'esiguo vestigio.

...

O sabbia mia melodiosa,

...

brilli innumerevole e immense
alla mia lunata scrittura;

e l'acqua che bevi t'addensa,

lo sterile sale t'indura.
Il rilievo t'è tanto sottile,
dedotto con arte sì parca,
che men gracile in puerile
fronte sopracciglio s'inarca.
A quando a quando orma trisulca
il lineamento intercide;
pesta umana, se ti conculca,
s'impregna di luce e sorride.

...

Io trascorro; e il grande concerto
in me taciturna s'adempie,
dall'unghie de' miei piè d'argento
alle vene delle mie tempie.
Scerno con orecchia tranquilla
i toni dell'onda che viene,
indago con chiara pupilla
più oltre ogni segno più lene;
così che la musica traccia
m'è suono, e ne' rigli leggeri,
mentre oggi odo ansar la bonaccia,
leggo la tempesta di ieri.

...

Il molle Settembre, il tibicene
dei pomarii, che ha violetti
gli occhi come il fiore del glycine
tra i riccioli suoi giovinetti,

...

I conduct the waves in perfect measure
and make them spread along this shore
alga, sea-lettuce make a bitter
tangle-entangled garland for.
I regulate the lines of foam
left shining at the water's edge:
from the oldest to the one just come
I arrange them in a fine collage.
Human musicians use various modes,
Doric to Phrygian, in their works:
infinite tunes for the endless gods
are what I make from the faintest of marks.

...

O sand, my sheet of melody,

...

You shine, sand, in your countless grains
on my script that is shaped like the sickle
moon;
while the water you drink makes you more
dense,
and barren salt makes you more firm.
These signs are in a relief so low,
and traced with such care and sober art,
that even a child's arching brow
seems not so fine and delicate.
A three-furrowed track now and again
cuts right across the wavy line;
a human print, when it presses down,
is filled with light and seems to smile.

...

I travel across like the wind; this great
concert is mine who make no sound
from the nails upon my silver feet
to where my forehead's lightly veined.
With an easy ear I can make out
the tones of the wave as it comes to me,
and clear-eyed I investigate
the slightest sign that is far away;
so that the musical traces are full
of sound for me where now today,
sensing the calm is panting still,
I read the storm of yesterday.

...

Mildest September, the Flute-player
moving through orchards of our land,
eyes violet like wistaria,
youthful of face, curls all around,

fa tanta chiara con due ossi
di gru modulando un partèno
mentre sotto l'ombra dei rossi
corbézzoli indolge al suo genio.
Respira sicuro il mar dolce
qual pargolo in grembo materno.
La pace alcionia lo molce
quasi aureo latte, anzi il verno.
Onda non si leva; non s'ode
risucchio, non s'ode sciacquò.
Di luce beata si gode
la riva su mare d'oblìo.
La sabbia scintilla infinita,
quasi in ogni granello gioisca.
Lùccica la valva polita,
la morta medusa, la lisca.
In ogni sostanza si tace
la luce e il silenzio risplende.
La Pania di marmi ferace
alza in gloria le archi stupende.
Tra il Serchio e la Magra, su l'ozio
del mare deserto di vele,
sospeso è l'incanto. Equinozio
d'autunno, già sento il tuo miele.

...

Silenzio di morte divina
per le chiarezze solitarie!
Trapassa l'Estate, supina
nel grande oro della cesarie.

...

Bianche si dilungan le rive,
tra l'acque e le sabbie dilegua
la zona che l'arte mia scrive
fugace. Sorrido alla tregua.
A' miei piedi il segno d'un'onda
gravato di nero tritume
s'incurva, una màcera fronda
di rovere sta tra due piume,
un'arida pigna dischiusa
che pesò nel pino sonoro
sta tra l'orbe d'una medusa
dispersa e una bacca d'alloro.
Vengono farfalle di neve
tremolando a coppie ed a sciami:
nella luce assemprano lieve
spuma fatta alata che ami.
Azzurre son l'ombre sul mare
come sparti fiori d'acònito.

scatters his brightness far and wide,
sounding through two bones of a crane -
stretched in the shadow of the red
fruits of the arbutus - his tune.
The sea breathes gently like a child
held in his mother's lap and calm.
Halcyon days make the sea mild,
gold milk against the wintertime.
No wave gets up; there's not the slightest
wash or ripple heard or seen.
The lucky shore enjoys the light
by the ocean of oblivion.
The sand is endlessly glitterful,
rejoicing in each smallest grain.
Such sparkle from the polished shell,
the dead medusa, the fish-bone.
No slightest sound's made anywhere
by the light, the silence beams in candour.
Well-marbled Pania raises her
stupendous rocks in all their splendour.
Between Magra and Serchio
the sea is charmed. There are not any
sails. O mid-autumn, I feel as though
I am about to taste your honey!

...

A silence like that of death throughout
the sea and sky now both are clear!
Summer is passing away, stretched out
in the golden glory of her hair.

...

The shores are white and stretching, while
between water and sand the zone
on which I write with fleeting skill
disappears. I smile upon the calm.
Now at my feet the billow's mark,
burdened with black of scraps and tatters,
warps, a wet branch of a leafy oak
is lying between two little feathers,
and a dry fir-cone now opened wide,
which hung in a sounding pine once heavy,
lies by a round medusa spread
out and a single laurel-berry.
There butterflies like snowflakes come
trembling in couples and huge flights;
and in the light they look like foam
drifting about in loving rites.
Their shadows are azure on the sea
like scattered flowers of the aconite,

Il lor tremolio fa tremare
l'Infinito al mio sguardo attonito.

flickering so that it seems to me
the trembling expanse is infinite.

ASPASIA

(The ex-enamoured celebrates with exultation his sapiential liberation from the immeasurable ardour for the real woman rather than for the woman «daughter of the mind, the amorous idea». Now that the «long and bitter servitude» is vanquished, that is «broken and on the ground scattered the yoke» of enchantment, that the amorous «long rambling» is dead, Giacomo can say to himself «contented embrace / judgement with freedom»).

...
E conforto e vendetta è che su l'erba
Qui neghittoso e immobile giacendo,
Il mar la terra e il ciel miro e sorrido.

Yet some revenge , some comfort can I find
... here upon the grass,
Outstretched in indolence I lie, and gaze
Upon the earth and sea and sky, and smile.

I PASTORI

Settembre, andiamo. E' tempo di migrare.
Ora in terra d'Abruzzi i miei pastori
lascian gli stazzi e vanno verso il mare:
scendono all'Adriatico selvaggio
che verde è come i pascoli dei monti.

...
E vanno pel tratturo antico al piano,
quasi per un erbal fiume silente,

...
O voce di colui che primamente
conosce il tremolar della marina!
Ora lung'h'esso il litoral cammina
la greggia. Senza mutamento è l'aria.

...
Isciacquò, calpestiò, dolci romori.
Ah perché non son io co' miei pastori?

September, it's time we went. Time for migration
Now shepherds in my land of the Abruzzi
forsake the folds and travel to the ocean
which is for them the savage Adriatic
as green as are the pastures on the mountains.

...
Taking the ancient drovepath to the plain,
as if upon a silent grassy river,

...
Now hear his voice, the first to catch the shiver
and quiver of the coastal waves once more!
And now the flock are walking by the shore.
In changeless air without a breath of wind.

...
A wash, a trample, noises that are precious.
And why, I ask, am I not with my shepherds?

I PERMIT MYSELF A FEW LOUISIAN ADDITIONS

The sea, the sky, the desert
are icons of the infinite,
are icons of the bottom of the soul
which is the pure field-of-consciousness, the *ātman*,

the immense-emptiness, *śūnyatā*,
the living support of all contoured mental appearing.
The sea is a landscape of obedience.
The sea is sky on earth.

The sea has the *soul appeal* of going further and further seaward, of going again and again without arriving, without returning, it has the *appeal* of suicide by exaltation.

The sea has been for millions of millennia, much longer than the earth, the exclusive environment of life. For millions of millennia, there has been nothing but ocean life.

The sea has been the immense, unknown horizon of supreme heroism; and it can become the propitious environment of agile, delightful pleasures, of uninventoryable Nureyevian tumbles in the enveloping yielding. Horizon, partner. Or, as Montale says to the twentyish Esterina, «*Esiti a sommo del tremulo asse, / poi ridi, e come spiccata da un vento / t'abbatti fra le braccia / del tuo divino amico che t'afferra*».

The sea is the total friend of the stars: it covers but a single degree of the 180 of the sky. What a rapture!

The sea makes you release your grasps. It is not an object; you don't seize it. It is the antithesis of shopping. It is not an id, a "that", it is if anything a Buberian You.

In a logic of complementarity, the great void (sky, sea, desert) and the manifold fullnesses of life are co-principles, necessary to each other. The East has as its sapiential announcement, perhaps supreme, the identity of *saṃsāra* (the totality of life's small and great fullnesses) and *nirvāṇa* (a boundless vibrant emptiness, the one on which, as Montale says, things «encamp» «for the usual deceit»). Certainly, the final word belongs to *nirvāṇa*: not to the shores, whatever they are, but to the sea. Descriptions, speeches, must ultimately flow into the «superhuman silences», into the «profound stillness» of which, precisely for Leopardi, the sea is icon. To claim to dominate, to acquire, enlightenment with concepts is - says Śāṅkara - to want to «roll up the sky like a skin». You cannot roll up the sky, the sea, the soul like a skin.

Again, after the sea-meditation, telegraphically some interaction between my body and the sea-partner: the *rocciamare* (alternating climbing of stacks and diving), the rowing around entire small islands, the swim against the light without a mask (so as to see, with naked eyes, not sharp

objects but lights), the swim hundreds of metres from the shore creating a horizontal liquid mountain peak with a view “from above” of kilometres.

But of course the culmination of the hymn to the sea is the hymn to Water, first logically possible molecule at the beginning of billions of years, system of impressive extensional prevalence on the surface of planet Earth, intrinsic mother of life... I can but refer to the chapter “Acqua” of *Meditare in Occidente*.

I terminate (of course I do not conclude) with a minimal, factual-poetic evocation of what a human body feels ‘bathing’ on a shore not plagued by too many human bathers.

SUMMER, NUDITY

No human hand caresses like the wind
No human embrace envelops like the sea
No human mouth kisses like the sun.