

APULIAN RITES: ON THE LOVE OF PLACE

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than believe what we see.

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It isn't easy for Europeans to love a place. Which is a provocative way of saying it isn't easy for modern people to do so.

They may love their home, but love will dry beyond the bounds of tender childhood impressions (and even this latter can turn sour, as familiarity breeds contempt).

We—moderns in general—are biassed towards language, and sooner see what we believe than believe what we see. Nor do we often believe in beauty. Put differently, we see what we *say*, and we're always saying something, always talking. To make things worse, there is now little chance of meeting a true representative of 'place.' The anonymous custodians who hold the spiritual keys, so to speak, are sparse and aged.

Of course, we can make for enthusiastic travellers. Enthusiasm for a place can fill the pages of travel-logs, and enthusiasm can entice, just as eloquence can ape erudition. But for the most part, Europeans don't know Europe. They look at her through impertinent, foreign eyes.

Acquiring actual 'love of place' costs the time it takes to get to know it. But that isn't all it costs. Love comes at a price, as a prize. It is a thing given. And not just given in return for waiting patiently at its threshold. It rewards us for knowing *where* to knock: for recognizing its door among the many doors.

We can't dwell properly in a place—or discern the taste of a meal, or write the history of a country—without loving it, just as we have to love to *make love*. Today, most of what we say and hear about places, even about our own homes, is fornication.

We join ourselves to things we do not love, and so join them imperfectly. We travel to places we do not mean to respect. The gaze of the tourist is violent. The crowded, loud search for “iconic” sights and comforting stereotypes is pornographic.

When love comes, it removes the veils from a place, revealing it together with its *archetype*. The more veiled it was, the more this archetype contrasts with its popular *stereotype*, just the same as some people give us an accurate first impression and others do not (for which reason we should also distrust persons who always trust their first impressions—*they know not of veils*).

For my part, I have read very few foreigners able to describe Spain—of Europe, she seems to be among the countries who wears the most veils, and who has had the most veils heaped upon her.

But it isn't my country I want to describe. I only want to have the manner in which I received love for a certain place committed to writing.

The shade of those loves we receive is conditioned by our vision, just as their shape corresponds to our vocation. We bring ourselves. We give of ourselves. However, psychological debris can mix unedifyingly with purer intuitions. It is necessary that we inhabit our vantage, the perspective we represent, our existential vocation and spiritual temperament, while cleansing it of spurious thought, mental noise, unearned associations.

In its fullness, the seal of love that allows us access to the depth of a thing (including of a place) comes by way of what the ancients would call its guardian angel, its angelic intelligence. From there, we may imagine its being embellished by the ministering agents of intermediate realities—faeries, elves, etc.—even down to the tree or grotto we are sat in (assuming these are allied to the human cause, for, surely, many of that genus have become corrupted).

Dior—the fashion company—chose a traditional folk dance and musical genre from the

Italian region of Puglia as the theme of its 2021 “Cruise” Collection. This was marked by a [performance](#) with local dancers in the city of Lecce. It was an inspired choice, albeit not without spurious elements. The event was unfortunately backgrounded by a gaudy display of lights entirely out of keeping with the city’s local Baroque architecture, which can be lavishly detailed but retains a rigorous, linear austerity.

In the course of the dance, a sample of an old [recording](#) was played: an archaic chant, intoned by an elderly, now deceased, Pugliese woman. Her name was Lucia de Pascalis.

Her singing resembled [Gaelic psalm chanting](#), [Japanese Biwa](#), and other traditional genres recited the world over. Today, we decode this kind of sound as a species of melancholy, but I suspect this is because our emotive palette has lost a colour. The emotion in question is truer and more ancient than what we now mean by melancholy.

In Puglia, the dance that accompanies this singing is called the *Pizzica* (“pinch” or “small bite”). It hearkens back to Dionysian rites practised in the *Magna Grecia*, and refers to the fever and the temporary madness with which a woman might be afflicted after receiving the mysterious bite.

The Pizzica dance is said to cure the effects of a *tarantula* spider, but also imitates the bee’s relationship to the flower. In [describing](#) the Pizzica,

Salentine dancer and musician Ada Metafunne describes the relationship between the movements performed by the man and woman by stating that the woman must be like a flower, which the man as the bee dances around. This image reinforces the aspect of courtship.

Knowing something of its history, the first time I encountered the dance and its song, these evoked Dionysian images of taurine sacrifices and natural effulgence. In particular, I recalled that passage of Virgil’s *Georgics* in which the poet discusses how bees can be

made to rise from a slain bull, ready to pollinate fields and reinvigorate nature.

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A dream

Falling into a half-sleep of the sort that carries some quantum of vision, I imagined a king mired in the affairs of court. So busy was that king, that he could not spare a moment to survey his domain, and so he would send his soul out to roam about the kingdom for him instead. One day, however, his soul did not return to inform the king of how the realm was faring. He went looking for it, therefore, and found it in a wilderness, having taken the horned, bovine form of a beast of prey. It had become so wild, in fact, on account of being separated from the king, that it attacked him, and he was forced to slay it, whereupon he fell into a deep sleep. For they enter into themselves, those who overcome their own soul.

Now a great, buzzing tumult emerged from the slain bull. When we try to still our souls, the many thoughts and concerns that keep it agitated will rise against us, like a swarm of stingers—but this energy can be harnessed. By not reacting to the needles of his mind, the king found that they soon became calm, passing from dangerous swarm to honey-making hive. His mind was now sweet, so much so that the king did not want to ever return to court.

Meanwhile, the slain bull decomposed. Dust returned to dust, and the elements took what portions of the king's soul were owed them. But none had rights over its heart, which remained in the bony carcass.

Back at court, the king's men spent their time arguing over who had caused their lord to leave and when he might return. In this manner, they were soon at each other's throats. Only one person, a young woman, seeing the chaos into which the kingdom was descending, decided to go searching for the lost king.

It was not long before she found the hive and the heart, but she did not recognize the sleeping man, who was by now covered in dirt and overgrown hair. All the same, she picked up the heart, like Minerva saving the heart of Dionysus. In his slumber, the king sensed that it had been stolen by a woman. He wondered about her, and so a single bee left the hive. The rest stayed together, but this one desired to know another. It stung the woman and she began to dance feverously, which movement finally roused the king from his contemplation. The two fell in love and returned to court together, where they would be wed.

When our psyche becomes averse to us, we may subdue it through contemplative immersion, whereupon the temptation to become a renunciate, denying duty and the world, can be powerful. And yet, our path will not be complete until after we return from that wilderness.

When these dreamy panels subsided, I woke up. The sun had long since set to my left, and I imagined Rome to my north—the imperial capital herself, dancing the Pizzica, waking a proverbial emperor from his slumber. The dream’s residual impression now suggested to me the perennial tale of the sleeping king who awaits the appointed hour at which he may return. Barbarossa’s slumber at Kyffhäuser; Ogier the Dane at Kronborg; Frederick at Etna; Constantine XI at the golden gate.

Thereafter, Puglia and her traditions would be symbols. The thick-fingered hands and deep-lined faces of her fishermen; her people’s taste for raw fish; the mercury-like glint of her Adriatic coasts, the gold of her wheat; her native cheeses, formatting the richness of milk’s unaltered flavour; her waist-high stone walls apportioning *trulli* dwellings, each conspicuously sporting a white alchemical sigil on its dark grey stone cones.

And her initiatic circles, her rolling chants, her night.