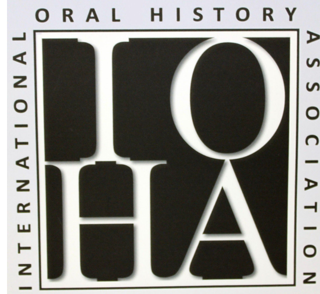

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"Memory and Narration"

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NOT TO BE QUOTED WITHOUT PERMISSION

1. When the editors of *Palabras y silencios (Words and Silences)* asked me for a text of my presentation at the 2018 international Oral History conference in Finland, I told them I did not have one. I never speak from a prepared text; even if I have notes, I ad lib depending on the spur of the moment and the mood of the audience; and most of the times I don't really remember what I said anyway. Then, in the depths of a semi-forgotten laptop I found a list of sound and video files I used (or planned to use) and a few lines of quotes, and memory came back. So this is not the paper itself but rather a summary, reconstruction and, to some extent, expansion. Basically, I connected two distinct projects on which I had been working: a 2018 book I had just published on Bob Dylan's classic "A Hard Rain-s a-Gonna Fall" and its folklore background, and the project on migrant music in Italy that I have been collecting and promoting since 2008. In a way, as we shall see, they are both stories of how cultures and people travel all over the Earth, different forms of what we now call "globalization."

2. Written in 1962 around the time of the Cuban missile crisis, and first recorded in his 1963 *The Freewheeling Bob Dylan* album, "Hard Rain" is the apocalyptic vision of impending doom, a disaster that is about to happen and perhaps is already on the way. "Hard Rain" is couched in modernistic images influenced by symbolist poetry, yet its structure is patterned after a traditional ballad found throughout the English-speaking world but possibly of Italian origin, known as "Lord Randal" or "Il testamento dell'avvelenato". Both Dylan's song and its folk antecedents share the same incipit and the same pattern, a dialogue between a mother and a son who has left home, wandered into the wilderness, discovered evil, treason and death (in the ballad, he was poisoned by his "true love"), and returns home to leave his last message or make his will before he dies. In order to show the connection, I played Bob Dylan's song, a version of the Italian ballad (first documented in Italy in 1629; it has been collected in Italy until as late as 2004, and I recorded a beautiful version in Rome in 1973), and "Lord Randal" as sung by the great Scots folk singer Ewan McColl.

Bob Dylan:
Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son
Where have you been, my darling young one?
I've stumbled on the side of twelve misty mountains
I've walked and I've crawled over six crooked highways…

Sandra Mantovani, Italian folk revival artist (based on a text collected in 1859):
Dove sì stà ier sira, figliol mio caro fiorito e gentil?
Dove sì stà ier sira?
Sun stà dalla mia dama, signora mama, mio core sta mal,
sun stà dalla mia dama, ohimè ch'io moro, ohimè.
[Where have you been last night, my Darling flowery and gentle son? I went to see my lady, mother, my heart ails, I'm dying, alas, I'm dying)

Ewan McColl (learned from his mother):
O whaur hae ye been, Lord Randal, my son?
O whaur hae ye been, my bonnie young man?
I've been to the wild wood, mither, make my bed soon,

For I'm weary wi' huntin' and I fain wad lie doon.

3. The unparalleled power of this song – which Patti Smith aptly chose to perform at the in-absentia ceremony for Bob Dylan's Nobel Prize – lies in the way it connects a modernist vision and poetics with the depth of centuries of oral tradition and folk memory. Yet, one crucial difference remains.

In more than 200 versions I have collated from Italy, England, Scotland, Ireland, and the United States, the young man is bonnie, handsome, flowery, gentle, but never *blue-eyed.* The color of the hero's eyes, the color and symbol of innocence, then, is Bob Dylan's specific contribution to the meaning of the story. Blue eyes are the color and symbol of innocence: not only in the sense that he does no evil but most of all in that he is not even aware that evil exists. Only a blue-euìyes innocent can be shocked by the discovery of what Bruce Springsteen would later refer to as "the meanness in this world": much of the power of Dylan's song lies in the implicit vision of a promise betrayed, of a failed entitlement that goes with a sense of innocence.

In fact. I wrote my Bob Dylan book as a rehab therapy after a year spent editing a critical Italian edition of Toni Morrison's selected novels. When I went back to the ballad, I couldn't help but notice that the title of Toni Morrison's first book is *The Bluest Eye*, the story of an African-American child who is driven literally insane by the impossible desire of having the same color eyes as the icons of popular culture, cinema and advertising. African-American people, by and large, do not have blue eyes.

This is not a secondary detail, and Black artists who cover the song are well aware of it. The Staple Singers change it to "my wondering son"; Peter Tosh sings "my brown-eyed son" (and we all remember Chuck Berry's "Brown-Eyed Handsome Man", a synecdoche for a handsome, and unspeakable, brown-*skinned* man). In Dylan's song, however, the color of the hero's eyes has less to do with the color of his skin than with the expectations that go with it. In "Bob Dylan's Dream", a song included in the same album, Dylan recollects his youthful view of a future in which "we thought we could sit forever in fun" and "the one road we travelled would never shatter or split"; yet, as the blue-eyed son leaves home, he meets darkness, confusion, deception: the roads are many (at least six) and they are "crooked", not just geometrically but morally, dishonest. Blue eyes and white skin, then, means a sense of entitlement; black mothers do not wait from their children to come back before telling them what awaits them in the world outside (one thinks of a couple of Bruce Springsteen songs, "Black Cowboys" or "American Skin", that are precisely about this). And I was also reminded of my own young students, who went out to demonstrate again the masters of globalization in 2001 in Genoa, expecting to claim their rights and meeting instead the murderous violence of the state.

4. "Hard Rain", then, is *about* the color of the hero's eyes. If you are blue-eyed, you're all right, you're a traveler, a wanderer, an explorer, an expatriate; if you're brown-eyed, get back, you're an *immigrant***.**

At this point, I remembered other brown eyes. I showed a picture of African migrants camped on the boulders by the shore of Ventimiglia, on the French-Italian border. They had come from different parts of Africa, mainly from the former Italian colonies of Eritrea and Somalia, but European regulations forbade them from crossing into France – while on the other hand, as they chanted in the sound file I also played, "We are not going back". None of them has blue eyes.

When I was writing about Dylan's blue-eyed hero, it had not occurred to me that "Hard Rain" could also be about them. Like him, they have literally walked and crawled on crooked highways, stepped in the middle of sad forests, been out in front of dead oceans; they have been met by lines of police with their hammering batons a-bleedin', they have whispered and talked with their tongues broken while nobody was listening, they have seen many people starving and many

people laughing (when Dylan sang about “guns and sharp swords in the hands of young children,” was he singing about the machete-toting child soldiers of Sierra Leone?).
They came with expectations, but with no entitlement – illegal, undocumented - and stood on the ocean ready to start sinking rather than go back.

Entitlement and expectations were, indeed, the theme of several of the songs I found in my migrant music project. I chose to play two of them. One was composed by Geedi Yusuf, a young migrant from the former Italian colony of Somalia. I also showed a not very good picture I took in which you do not see the color his eyes very clearly, but anyway they are not blue. Geedi sang:

Istaranyeeri baan ahayoo
Istaranyeeri baan ahayoo
Italiya osbitaan u ahay
Afrikan aan ahayoo
Afrikan aan ahayoo
Animal armi qaataan ka ordeynaa

Afrikana ma ahin
eoropana ma ahin
Imminka intee nahay innagu?
[*I am a foreigner, I am a foreigner / I am a guest of Italy. I am African, I am African / I am on the run for arms-bearing animals/We are Africans, we are not Europeans / Where are we all?]*

And he explained:

> Nobody asked me why I wrote it. When I arrived here I didn’t understand the language and I kept hearing this word, *stanier*, *stranier* [deformed pronunciation of *straniero*, foreigner] and I didn’t know what it means and what the people who addressed me by this word meant, I was wondering what it meant, it must be an insult, it must mean stupid, something like that. After I had been here three months and came to the school I understood what it meant, that people did not accept these foreigners, that they turned their heads as soon as they knew this word, as in disapproval. At that point I understood that it was a word that was used for refugees, for people who came from outside, to designate the people who were not part of this country, of this place. In fact in the first verse I also say *ospite* [guest], I learned this word when I received my *permesso di soggiorno* [temporary residence permit]. Permesso di sog*giorno* – permit to remain for *giorni* [days]. Somalis have no recognized passport, we were asked to pay to have a *titolo di viaggio* [travel permit], to move. But it’s no use, you can only travel inside Italy, it’s like a metro season ticket. It’s all here: *permesso di soggiorno*, *titolo di viaggio*. These three things – the word *straniero*, the *permesso di soggiorno*, the *titolo di viaggio* made me understand that I have no law that makes me an equal here, but I am only a guest.

In other words, being a *guest* means that you will never be allowed to call this place your home, that you’re only here on sufferance. But in spite of all, you are here to stay. The other song I played is by an immigrant from Punbjab who works in the dairy farms of the Po plains where parmesan cheese is produced with the milk of the cows the lovingly tends. Jajit Raj Mehta tells a story of success: he has managed to stay, find work, become and Italian citizen. He can call the town of Piadena his home, and is not homesick because, on his Italian passport, he can actually go

back, visit India any time he chooses, return to the place that he now calls home. He sings Italian words to a Punjab temple melody :

Vengo da lontano	I come from far away
non vado via	I am not going away
nato sulla terra	I was born on the land
dove vive mamma mia	Where my mother lives
siamo otto fratelli	We are eight siblings
tutti andati via	All have left
uno vive Canada	One lives in Canada
tre l'Inghilterra	Three in England
quattro in Italia	Four in Italy
tutti andati via	All have gone away
vengo da lontano	I come from faraway
non sento nostalgia	I am not homesick
faccio lavori duri	I do hard work
faccio lavoro un po' sporco	A work that is a little dirty
lavoro in stalla	I work in the stable
abito in cascina	I live on the farm
dove urlano vitelli, mucche	Where calves and cows scream
cantano galline, civette	Chickens and owls sing
quella è casa mia	This is my home

5. While I'm at it, a digression. I didn't go into this in my presentation in Finland, but it's useful to make sense of the whole thing. In "Hard Rain", the hero leaves home and meets with an impending apocalyptic doom. In "Lord Randal" \ "Il testamento dell'avvelenato", the hero leaves home to hunt in the wilderness, is poisoned by his "true love" and comes home to make his will and die. Now, why does the "true love" murder him, and what kind of mother is this who, while her child is dying, worries about what he will leave her in his will?

This would be a correct question to ask if we were dealing with a novel or a movie, with realistic characters endowed with psychology and motivation. This, however, is not what the ballad is about. The ballad, honed by time and reduced to the bare essential minimum, turns the characters into archetypes; the opposition between the home and the wild wood, the mother and the "true love", then, is a metaphor of tension between the known, the safe, the familiar on the one hand and the unknown, the dangerous, the new on the other. In other words, the true love kills Lord Randal precisely because she *is* his true love – that is, the new, the future.

For the people who created and preserved the tradition of the popular ballad, the future did not always mean progress – or, progress did not always mean an improvement on their lives. The times in which the popular ballad flourished in England or Scotland are those in which enclosures, vagrancy laws, the privatization of the commons turned an impoverished rural peasantry into a marginal and often illegal and vagrant proletariat. How many times were the rural communities that express their presence in history through the ballad tradition threatened, violated, destroyed by "the new" in the form of wars, invasions, forced migrations, famines, natural disasters, plagues, economic crises – how many times have they felt that they were in the hands of forces beyond their control, *subaltern* indeed, but not at rest in their subordination?

Here, again, analogies and differences between "Hard Rain" and "Lord Randal" are revealing. In Dylan's song, the catastrophe that's a-gonna fall is an apocalyptic end of the world; all

the hero can do is warn us about it and the sink to his death. In “Lord Randal”, the hero dies, but rather than sending a message of doom he makes his will. By giving to each family member a legate that identifies her or his social role, changing from time to time and social context to social context, he indicates that, though he dies, his family and his society will go on. While “Hard Rain” prophesizes a future without salvation, “Lord Randal” warns us about the future, but also reminds us of the resilience that allowed the working classes and their culture to survive.

And though “the new” may be dangerous, can we really give up the future? The ballad tradition is never one-sided, it’s always about possibilities, alternatives. Thus, in “Lord Randal”, the hero is killed by his young lover and finds solace in his mother. In other ballads –*The Maid Freed from the Gallows*, for instance, also of Italian origin, the opposite is true: father and mother refuse to pay the young woman’s ransom, and she is finally saved by her lover. The ballad tradition, in other words, is not about answers but about questions: which way goes history, is the future doom or salvation?

Somehow, however, the same applies to young Bob Dylan. The poisoned waters in which the hero sinks in “Hard Rain” become the rising waters of liberation that “around you have grown” in “The Times they are a-Changin’”. Ultimately, whether we sink as in “Hard Rain” or “start swimmin’” swim as he suggests in “The Times”, is our choice.

6. To conclude. Jajit’s song reveals another link between “Hard Rain,” “Lord Randal,” and the migrant stories of Ventimiglia and Piadena. He sings about his new home in Piadena, but the songs are also about globalization and diaspora: Piadena is his new home but his family is spread across three continents.

According to my notes, I opened my presentation in Jyvaskyla with a story. Environmental photographer Mark Edwards had lost his way in the Sahara desert and was rescued by a Tuareg nomad who took him to his camp, lit a fire by rubbing two sticks, made coffee, and turned on a battered cassette player from which came the voice of Bob Dylan, singing “A Hard Rain’s a-Gonna Fall”. Later, Mark Edwards made a book in which each line of the song is accompanied by an image of environmental disaster; “Hard Rain” became the semi-official song of the Copenhagen world environmental summit.

And another story. In 2017, I visited the town of Shillong, the former capital of Assam, now in the Indian Northeastern state of Meghalaya. Shillong has been a hotbed of insurgency against the central government of India; today, it has been described as a town “obsessed with Bob Dylan.” Its major cultural event is a huge rock festival, held every year on the anniversary of Bob Dylan’s birth (May 24); its most famous venue is the renowned “Bob Dylan café,” studded with Dylan memorabilia, with the words of “Mr. Tambourine Man” on the coke dispenser; and Dylan’s words are literally painted on the town’s walls, his stenciled profile on a wall across from the café, accompanied by the memorable words, “everybody must get stoned.” On YouTube, one can find a somewhat whacky but lively cover of “Hard Rain” by Luc Majaw, the town’s leading musical hero, who recalls that he first heard Dylan’s music when a friend played him a cassette of “Blowin’ in the Wind” in Kolkata in 1967.

The question is: how did Dylan’s music travel to places where he has never been, the deserts of Sahara, the streets and cafés of North East India? We know: it is thanks to the fortunate encounter between the worldwide circulation of the products of cultural industry, and their consonance with the passions of millions of young people around the world (I found verses from Dylan’s songs painted also on the walls of Jadavpur University in Kolkata, signed by the Student Movement of India). It is the result of an internationalist globalization that allowed rebels in the United States, in India (and in Italy) to share the same words and music without necessarily forgetting their own – or, indeed, directed them back to them.

On the other hand, in order to understand how “Il testamento dell’avvelenato”/”Lord Randal” travelled from Verona to Aberdeen to Hazard, Kentucky, we must use our imagination. We must imagine another, less visible but longer kind of globalization, a Europe at the dawn of modernity, in which a story and a song travel, change, evolve, adapt, carried by pilgrims, merchants, soldiers, travelers, street artists, beggars, missionaries, deportees, exiles, all sorts of people often invisible to capital H History but who are the substance of history itself; we must imagine an Atlantic Ocean crossed back and forth by migrants, mariners and castaways, an America that expands and grows and carries the song beyond the Appalachians.

For a long time, the discourse on folklore has been steeped on the idea of “roots” and “authenticity.” Yet, folk song and people’s cultures also have wings and feet, and they travel along with the migrants that risk their lives to cross borders and seas to escape hunger, environmental disaster, wars. We have been talking about diaspora, the ways in which people migrate or are deported from one place and dispersed around the world. We also ought to talk about the reverse process – the way in which people from all over the world converge into the same places – Poles, Rumanians, Malians, Senegalese, all work and die in the tomato fields of Puglia and the orange groves of Calabria. The migrant workers around Rosarno, who rebelled against their exploitation at work and the inhuman conditions in the labor camps in which they are segregated, come from all parts of Africa – they speak different languages, have different religions, they’re not all the same any more than Finns and Italians are the same because they are all “Europeans.” Yet, all these migrants deal with the same racism, the same police, the same exploitation. The migrants who separated from their children at the US border come from very different countries of central and Latin America. What’s native, what’s authentic in the cultures that they are creating under our own eyes, unless it be the process itself of contamination and syncretism and change in the shared experience of migration?

The West, which is to a large extent also responsible for these disasters, girds itself in walls and barbed wire and armed police, attempting in vain to stem this unstoppable movement of peoples, cultures, hopes. The current Italian government is closing our ports to the ships that save brown-eyes migrants from drowning in the Mediterranean; Hungary and Serbia raise miles and miles of barbed wire; the President of the United States insists on building a wall on the Mexican border; and the main reason Britain wants to leave Europe is to keep migrants from coming in. And yet, it can’t be done. As Jajit Raj Mehta sings, they’re already here, and they’re here to stay.

To conclude on a more hopeful note, I played another song excerpt: a traditional Chinese New Year children’s song that I recorded in an elementary school in Rome in which 35% of the children come from at least 25 countries. Most of us don’t know what the words mean, but I bet most of us recognize the tunes (the excerpt I played is sung in Mandarin to a medley of “Clementine” and “Frère Jacques”: an American and a French tune sung to Chinese words in a school in Italy…)

The children of this Chinese lady are born, raised and schooled in Rome; yet, like hundreds of thousands like them, they are not Italian citizens. Our state pretends that they don’t exist and is trying to get rid of them. But they’re here, and they’re not going back.