Chapter 4

Other Shores: Insularity, Materiality and the Making (and Unmaking) of ‘Europe’

Stuart McLean

Prologue: A Different Today

Today is . . . 1926. A precarious peace ratified seven years previously at Versailles. A newly ascendant United States. A not-yet-rearming Germany. Black Tuesday and the ensuing Great Depression still three years in the future. A distinguished poet and essayist (what used to be called a ‘man of letters’), newly elected to the Académie Française, representative of his country on cultural matters to the League of Nations, sits down to reflect upon the state of his native Europe after more than a decade of geopolitical upheaval. Surveying what he sees as the stagnation of contemporary European politics, he asks his readers: ‘What are you going to do today?’ (Valéry 1962c: 228)

Today is . . . 1992. A fallen wall. A dismembered onetime superpower. The End of History and/or the inauguration of a New World Order. Ethnic and free market fundamentalisms. A hundred thousand-plus corpses in waiting in the former Yugoslavia. A Midwestern American university press publishes, in English translation, a short book by an eminent, if sometimes controversial, French philosopher. Originally presented in 1990 in Turin to a colloquium (‘European Cultural Identity’) of fellow European intellectuals, it was subsequently published (October 1990) in what aspired to be a ‘European’ newspaper – Liber – inserted as a supplement into a number of ‘national’ European newspapers. The philosopher begins by observing that ‘something unique is afoot in Europe’ – if, indeed, there remains an entity to which the name ‘Europe’ can plausibly be applied – and reiterates the question posed by his predecessor: ‘What are you going to do today?’ (Derrida 1992: 3)

the streets of Lisbon, Madrid, Paris, London, Brussels, Berlin, Rome, Athens . . . A much-criticised Nobel Peace Prize for an enlarged but ever more precarious-seeming European Union. A mid-career anthropologist, a native of a small island off continental Europe’s western shore, currently a resident of the United States but still the holder of an EU passport, sits down to write about the philosopher’s reflections twenty years after their first publication. Leafing through the pages of *The Other Heading* and scanning his own, recent field notes, he asks himself: ‘What are you going to do today?’

**From My Notebooks**

Leaving behind the settlements of Haroldswick and (further to the northeast) Shaw, the road climbs towards the headland, narrowing as it ascends. To the right is Burrafirth Beach and, further inland, the Loch of Cliff, separated from the incoming sea by a narrow strip of land. On the far side of the inlet is Hermaness National Nature Reserve, the seasonal nesting ground of gannets, puffins, great skuas and red-throated divers. To the right, looking out to sea on a clear day, you can see to the north the lighthouse on the small, rocky island of Muckle Flugga, once the most northerly inhabited outpost of Britain, but ceding that status to Unst itself when the lighthouse was automated in 1995. Further to the north is the still smaller islet of Out Stack (or ‘Ooster’), commonly referred to in guidebooks as ‘the full stop at the end of Britain’.

As the road gets steeper and narrower you begin to make out the dome and masts and the single-storey concrete huts in the distance and, as you move closer, the wire perimeter fence that surrounds them. A sign to the left, now faded, rusted and weather-beaten, announces:

**RRS SAXA VORD**

*THIS IS A PROHIBITED PLACE WITHIN THE MEANING OF THE OFFICIAL SECRETS ACT – UNAUTHORISED PERSONS ENTERING MAY BE ARRESTED AND PROSECUTED.*

Opened in 1957, Saxa Vord Royal Air Force Radar Station (to give it its full name) was an integral part of Britain’s Cold War air defence network. Its motto – ‘Praemoneo de Peliculis’ (‘I forewarn of danger’) – encapsulated its function: a cliff top outpost more than 200 metres above the North Sea sending out pulses of radio waves to give advanced warning of hostile incursions into Britain’s northerly airspace. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the break-up of the Soviet Union, the
station continued to operate until 2006, when it was closed with the loss of more than 100 jobs. Today the quarters at the foot of Saxa Vord hill that once housed the military personnel associated with the station are in the process of being converted into tourist accommodation, consisting of a hostel, self-catering holiday homes and a restaurant-bar. The station itself remains fenced off, but the headland is accessible by foot to those willing to brave the winds, grazing livestock from neighbouring farms and the often aggressive gulls who nest there. Adjacent to the approach road stand two further signs. One, dating from the time of the site’s operational use and now barely legible, warns of the potential danger of radiation. Below it another, newer sign alerts walkers and motorists that a cattle grid lies ahead.

For almost half a century, the station’s role was to mark and guard territory, including not only the terrestrial limits of the United Kingdom, but also their offshore extension into territorial waters and airspace. Today, visitors to Unst are invited to explore this northern extremity of Britain – ‘the island above all others’ in the words of the Saxa Vord Resort’s tourist brochure, which has the following to say about the onetime defensive site: ‘Quite simply, on the hill of Saxa Vord you are on the edge of the world – on the Ultima Thule of the Ancients’ (Saxa Vord 2007–13).

In a sense, this could be anywhere – any randomly chosen fragment of the elusive and contested entity called ‘Europe’ that forms the subject of Derrida’s reflections. But it isn’t. It’s a particular somewhere with a particular presence and history. Is it then an ‘example’, a term to which Derrida’s text makes repeated reference? Certainly this island outpost of an island outpost, battered by the winds and waves of the North Sea, seems to resist the exemplary status often assigned to Europe’s great urban centres, its contenders for the title of ‘capital’. If the latter, as Derrida notes, have frequently been invoked as exemplifications not only of a ‘European’ history and identity but, more expansively, of ‘civilisation’, ‘spirit’, ‘modernity’, the ‘West,’ then perhaps Unst can be understood as a different kind, exemplary of that which disrupts such a smooth passage from the particular to the purported universal, a somewhere that remains stubbornly and recalcitrantly a somewhere, for all its wider implications in history and geopolitics. Perhaps Unst manifests a certain inescapable non-coincidence of any version of ‘Europe’ with itself.
Once upon a Time . . .

In a time before Europe, before Europeans (whoever they are) . . . According to the version of the story of the earth narrated by modern geological science, the islands of Shetland and its southerly neighbour, Orkney (my current field site), are the remnants of a mountain chain formed around 400 to 600 million years ago by a collision of continents – the great southern continent of Gondwanaland and the great northern one of Laurasia, both of which came to form part of the ‘supercontinent’ of Pangaea, the ongoing decomposition of which forms the basis of the current global deposition of continents and which was itself the product of the formation and break-up of a succession of earlier supercontinents, among them Nuna, Rodnia and, most recently, Pannotia (Auton et al. 1996: 4; Nance et al. 1988).

Stresses and fractures in the earth’s crust following the collision created depressions that filled with drainage water, forming a giant freshwater lake – Lake Orcadie – that teemed with a variety of life forms whose sediment-trapped remains, geothermally heated and worked upon by anaerobic bacteria living below the lake floor, were transformed over millennia into the oil and gas now so profitably pumped from fields in the North Sea to BP’s Sullom Voe terminal on Mainland, the largest of the Shetland islands (McKirdy 2010: 40) As the continents were forced apart by magma welling up from the earth’s core – Europe separating from North America and the Atlantic Ocean opening up between them – the mountain ranges were eroded by the sea to form the present-day island chains, a process that continues today and will eventually cause the islands of Orkney and Shetland to disappear beneath the waters from which they first emerged (Auton et al. 1996: 10–15). Eighteen thousand years ago Shetland was entirely covered by ice sheets. More recently (7,900 years ago) it was temporarily submerged by a tsunami, possibly caused by an undersea earthquake off the coast of Norway, as a result of which marine fossils and other debris from the ocean floor continue to be found on cliff tops to a height of 9 metres above the present-day high-water mark.¹ The earliest evidence of a human presence in Shetland dates from 4320–4030 BCE and takes the form of a Mesolithic midden (domestic waste site) on the south coast of Mainland (Melton 2008; Melton and Nicholson 2004). Successive waves of incomers followed, including the builders of the settlement of Jarlshof, close to the southern tip of Mainland, which contains remains dating from 2500 BCE to the seventeenth century CE (Nicholson 1972: 33–5; Turner 1998). Norse settlers (some of whom would later make their way northward and
westward to the Faroe Islands and Iceland) first appeared on the islands from the eighth century, becoming the dominant presence in Shetland and Orkney, and leading to the islands’ annexation to the kingdom of Norway in 875. The Earldom of Orkney, comprising Orkney and Shetland, was transferred to the Crown of Scotland in 1468 as part of a marriage settlement and became, in turn, part of the British nation state with the Acts of Union of 1707, and of the then European Economic Community when Britain joined in 1973 (Thomson 2008). Today Shetland is home to 22,500 people, variously employed in (among other things) fishing, aquaculture and agriculture, the petroleum industry and tourism (National Records of Scotland 2012).

**Mediterranean Spirits and Westward Voyagers**

The geographical focus of Derrida’s essay, however, is not the islands of the North Atlantic, but the region surrounding the Mediterranean – Europe’s ‘inland sea.’ For Derrida, as for his principal interlocutor, Paul Valéry, the Mediterranean furnishes an indispensable reference point for any reflection upon the question of Europe, past, present or future. Indeed, Valéry, the son of an Italian mother and a Corsican father, is described by Derrida as a ‘Mediterranean spirit’ (Derrida 1992: 35). If Europe was, for Valéry, ‘a kind of cape of the old continent, a western appendix of Asia’ (as he described it in his essay of 1919, ‘The Crisis of Spirit’) the expansionist ambitions of which had been predominantly westward in orientation, it was nonetheless bordered to the south by a ‘famous sea’ that had been ‘wonderfully effective in the development of that European spirit with which we have been concerned’ (Valéry 1962a: 311–12, quoted Derrida 1992: 21). Elsewhere he would describe the Mediterranean as ‘a veritable machine for making civilization’ – an enterprise involving the conjoint mobilisation of ‘spirit’, ‘culture’ and ‘trade’ through multiple and overlapping forms of exchange (Valéry 1962b: 196, quoted Derrida 1992: 64). The same sense of Mediterranean distinctiveness would later be echoed by Fernand Braudel, who, in his magisterial three-volume history of 1949, describes the region as the ‘radiant center of the globe’ (Braudel 1972, quoted Pagden 2002: 37).

Derrida too identifies himself as a product of the Mediterranean region, albeit its ‘other shore’, referencing his childhood spent in what was then still French Algiers. He describes himself as an ‘old’ European who has nonetheless sought to retain something of the ‘impetuous youth’ of that other shore and who can be classed, therefore, as ‘a sort of over-acculturated, over-colonised European hybrid’. The Europe of the early
1990s is also, Derrida suggests, simultaneously old and young—poised on the brink of a new beginning that is also, in the view of some commentators (notably the then President of France, François Mitterrand), a return to itself and its history, a ‘reunion’, a ‘homecoming’ (Derrida 1992: 7–8). Derrida noted too that the colloquium that furnished the occasion for the initial delivery of his reflections on Europe took place in Turin, ‘a Latin place of the northern Mediterranean’ and that the European Union of his own day was ‘predominantly Mediterranean’—a claim that, twenty years later, may require some revision following the accession of new EU member states from eastern and central Europe (Derrida 1992: 35, 23).

Recent scholarship has often followed Derrida in portraying the Mediterranean less as the wellspring of a quintessentially European history and identity than as a cultural ecumene—a zone of exchange where ‘Europe’ has opened itself to influences emanating from outside its self-designated borders. The historian and cultural theorist Iain Chambers has written of the Mediterranean and its environs as a space characterised by fluid interchanges and hybridisations involving a variety of Graeco-Latin, Arab, Jewish and Turkish currents. He writes:

> It is in this arduous combination of communication and difference, of shared encounters and marked distinctions, of resonance and dissonance, that the Mediterranean proposes a multiplicity that simultaneously interrupts and interrogates the facile evaluations of a simple mapping disciplined by the landlocked desires of a narrow-minded progress and a homogeneous modernity. (Chambers 2008: 25)

The Mediterranean, for Chambers, is a ‘postcolonial sea’—a site, moreover, where the postcolonial can be encountered not ‘out there’ in extra-European spaces of alterity, but ‘in here’ as integral to and constitutive of who ‘we’ are, what ‘Europe’ is— a vision that he finds prefigured in the writings of ‘a brilliant Jewish Algerian philosopher from the African shore of the Mediterranean’ (Chambers 2008: 29, 10). For Chambers, as for Derrida, the Mediterranean stands in relation to Europe less as a unitary scene of origin than as one of plurality and cross-fertilisation, marked by the indelible presence of the various ‘others’ (Islamic, Jewish, African, Asian) that latter-day visions of European identity have often sought to exclude.

Derrida’s writings provide a point of reference too for the Italian sociologist Franco Cassano in his elaboration of a counter-tradition of ‘southern thought’ defined in opposition to northern European-identified discourses of modernity and emphasising instead exchange, relationality
Cassano links the Greek ‘invention’ of philosophy to the physical topography of the Mediterranean, suggesting that there exists a ‘structural homology’ between the geographical configuration of the region (and of Greece in particular) and the emergence of an intellectual ethos of open-ended questioning and inquiry, founded upon the recognition that truth is always plural, that it can never be definitively and exhaustively defined. Such recognition, according to Cassano, finds its geographical counterpart in the interplay between land and sea, water and solid ground. If the Mediterranean itself is a body of water that has simultaneously conjoined and divided multiple populations, languages and traditions, enabling relationship and contact across distance and difference, so Greece is a land that has always been defined by its relation to the sea:

Thus, from the beginning Greece exists on the borderland and internalises it, a place of meetings and clashes, where war, commerce, voyage and exploration alternate and overlap to the point of becoming indistinguishable. A land incapable of closing itself off, a society open and of borders, a ‘fluid city’, doomed to experience and contain within itself relationship and conflict; a great land precisely because it is a minor, coastal land, far away from the solipsism of continents. (Cassano 2012: 17)

The Greek example serves to counter not only the ‘solipsism of continents’ – seen as issuing in the fetishisms of fatherland, territoriality and exclusive and originary belonging – but also the contrasting valorisation of the sea as a zone of unconstrained freedom and becoming, a view that Cassano sees as underwriting both Europe’s imperial expansion and the global diffusion of capitalism, along with the technological developments that have accompanied them. Unwitting support for these, Cassano suggests, is to be found in the writings of thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche (with his exhortation to philosophers to ‘send your ships into uncharted seas!’) and, later, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, whose invocation of nomadism is read, somewhat perplexingly, as an endorsement of ‘people without land-based income’ (Cassano 2012: 30–3). In contrast, according to Cassano, ‘Mediterranean man instead lives always between land and sea’, restraining one through the other (Cassano 2012: 34).

Cassano seeks explicitly to distance the Mediterranean and its cultures from the universalising aspirations seen as emanating from Europe’s western seaboard. It is the shores of the Atlantic – an ‘ocean’ rather than a terrestrially bounded ‘sea’ – that are understood as the launching ground for Europe’s imperial expansion. Indeed, Italy’s embrace of
capitalism and modernity in the years following the Second World War is understood as a repudiation of its Mediterranean heritage, a trend that Cassano sees being challenged in recent years as Mediterranean Italy rediscovers a sense of its own history and cultural distinctiveness (Cassano 2012: 131–41). Derrida too cites Valéry’s claim that Europe ‘looks naturally toward the west’. This westward orientation, for Valéry, derived from Europe’s status as something less than a continent as geographers are accustomed to define one. Europe was, rather, more akin to a headland, ‘a kind of cape of the old continent, a western appendix to Asia’ (Valéry 1962a: 311–12, quoted Derrida 1992: 21). If this little promontory or headland (the cape that supplies the French title of Derrida’s reflections, L’Autre cap) could appear (again in Valéry’s words) as ‘the elect portion of the terrestrial globe’ it was, precisely, as a result of its westward drive towards self-universalisation, initially through the forcible acquisition of overseas territories and, later, through the global diffusion of its institutions, languages and traditions. By this means, Derrida suggests, Europe has been able to affirm itself as ‘the avant-garde of geography and history’, the manifestation of what is, or will be, the universal essence of humanity. For Derrida, as for Chambers and Cassano, the Mediterranean, in contrast, provides a potential alternative to Europe’s frequently violent imposition of itself upon the rest of the globe by offering an image of Europe as open to and rendered non-coincident with itself by its others, by what is not and never will be Europe (Derrida 1992: 76–8).

Both Derrida and Cassano find one of the most emphatic formulations of Europe’s westward orientation and directionality in the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel, for whom the progression of world history was, precisely, a movement from east to west, from the Persian empire, via Greece and Rome, through the Middle Ages, Reformation and French Revolution, and culminating in the Prussian state of his own day (Hegel 1975). Such an assumed trajectory, as the anthropologist Michael Herzfeld has famously noted, has often led to the latter-day disparagement of Mediterranean societies (in particular Greece) as superseded waystations on the road to Europe’s global historical self-actualisation (Herzfeld 1987: 1–27). For Hegel too the sea played a crucial role in the westward advance that marked ‘Spirit’s’ coming-to-consciousness of its own freedom. Not only did the sea provide European states with an outlet that their despotically inclined Asiatic counterparts were seen to lack, but the very act of maritime voyaging, of venturing forth on the sea, marked a decisive break with the constraints of ‘Nature’ and thus an entry into the agentive freedom of ‘History’, a freedom that carried with
it the assumed right to reshape the non-European world in accordance with Europe’s own dominant self-images:

The European state is truly European only in so far as it has links with the sea. The sea provides that wholly peculiar outlet which Asiatic life lacks, the outlet which enables life to step beyond itself. It is this which has invested European political life with the principle of individual freedom. (Hegel 1975: 196)

For Cassano, the accession to freedom that Hegel associated with setting forth on the sea provides an image rather of the deterritorialising imperatives of capital and modernity as they sought to universalise themselves from their western European origins through a combination of territorial expansion, unrestricted economic growth and an increasing reliance on technology. He finds in the history of the Mediterranean an alternative ethos, one that avoids what he characterises as the ‘fundamentalisms’ of both sea and land, the latter including the sedentary and terrestrial orientation of such avowedly anti-maritime thinkers as Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger, both of whom are cited as examples of the centric, land-based thought of Germany, in contrast to the decentred thought of Greece (Cassano 2012: 28–9). Crucially, in Cassano’s description, the Mediterranean is a sea bounded by its adjacent land masses, a space of journeys and exchanges rather than definitive casting off, never to return.

Yet Cassano’s formulation of a ‘southern’ alternative to the intertwined histories of capital, modernity and European expansion risks succumbing to its own version of European exceptionalism, rooted in an appeal to the geographical uniqueness of the Mediterranean region. In the achieved equilibrium between land and sea for which Cassano applauds classical Greece, the sea’s role is to disrupt and undermine the uncritical certitudes of an exclusively land-based territority, while the land’s role is precisely to contain and limit the deterritorialising power of the sea. Elsewhere in his writings, Cassano displays a multifaceted, indeed poetic appreciation of the sea as an ecosystem, a material presence, a source of livelihood and of wonder. In his discussion of Greece, however, the sea risks being reduced to the subordinate term of a binary contrast, the envisioned relationship between land and sea being, ultimately, weighted in favour of the land. The Mediterranean is applauded for being literally (and etymologically) an inland sea, that is, a sea surrounded by land. Indeed, it is precisely this boundedness that distinguishes the Mediterranean as a sea from the uncontained expansiveness of the Atlantic Ocean, on which generations of imperialist and capitalist voyagers have set sail.
But for all its importance as a physical barrier and a means of communication, there is little suggestion that the sea or ocean itself might play a productive rather than a merely dissipative role. In this respect, Cassano comes close to echoing the sentiments attributed to many of the writers he criticises, for example Schmitt, for whom ‘the sea is only a principle of eradication: it represents diabolic temptation, the seducer that pushes us toward the fiercest bewilderment and toward the idolatry of technology’ (Cassano 2012: 26). Is Cassano’s view really so very different, given that the Mediterranean is understood to differ from the Atlantic principally because of its enframing land masses? If, however, we are to consider land and sea not only as metaphors or symbols but as material presences, we are bound to acknowledge that both have played an active role in shaping and transforming the geographical, political and cultural entity known as ‘Europe’. Cassano himself cites the observation of the French historian Michel Mollat du Jourdin that Europe has an exceptionally long coastline relative to its total land mass – the ratio of coast to continental area being 4.0 kilometres per thousand square kilometres, compared with 1.7 kilometres in the case of Asia (Mollat du Jourdin 1993: 4). The involuted coastline of Europe (what has sometimes been called its ‘fractal’ character) is a feature to which many commentators have called attention (e.g. Cunliffe 2008).

It is worth remembering, however, that Europe’s many bays and inlets, along with its natural harbours and places of shelter, are themselves in large measure a creation of its seas, of their action over millennia in sculpting their adjacent land masses, not only through marine erosion but also through the laying down of sediments that would later become the basis of rock formations, sandbanks and beaches. The sea’s role has, therefore, been not merely destructive or dissipative but also productive, helping to establish not only the physical contours of terrestrial Europe but also the conditions and possibilities of human access to maritime environments.

Might then the interplay between land and sea have assumed very different, if no less generative, forms outside the Mediterranean context? One striking contrast to Cassano’s portrait of Greece and the Mediterranean is afforded by Europe’s Atlantic islands. Here it is the ocean, the open sea, that surrounds the land. The history of human settlement is, therefore, not one of traversing an enclosed (or largely enclosed) sea, but of inter-island oceanic voyaging. Yet this history is one in which the relationship between land and sea has played no less conspicuous a part. Certainly, attempts have been made before to consider the Atlantic as a space of cultural exchange and hybridisation –
notably by Paul Gilroy. Yet Gilroy’s explorations of the ‘Black Atlantic’ are concerned predominantly with specific circuits of cultural exchange linking Europe to west Africa, the Caribbean and North America (Gilroy 1993). In terms of such a vision, the Atlantic’s northerly islands are apt to appear as belonging to a bygone historical moment, much as the Mediterranean and its lands appeared to Hegel and many of his northern European successors. Perhaps it’s time to take another look.

Places Apart?

Surveying the Europe of the early 1990s, Derrida warns that the rejection of imperialistic and universalising visions of Europe and of the centralising authorities through which they are promulgated must not result in the countervailing embrace of wilful parochialism. European identity, he writes,

cannot and must not be dispersed into a myriad of provinces, into a multiplicity of self-enclosed idioms or petty little nationalisms, each one jealous and untranslatable. It cannot and must not renounce places of great circulation or heavy traffic, the great avenues and thoroughfares of translation and communication, and thus of mediatization. (Derrida 1992: 39)

Do islands, particularly perhaps those of Europe’s westwardly exposed Atlantic seaboard, represent precisely this danger? W. H. Auden, on a sea voyage to Iceland in 1936, in company with his fellow poet Louis MacNeice, wrote that ‘islands are places apart where Europe is absent’ (Auden and MacNeice 1937: 25) But perhaps islands – all islands – have a more complicated relationship to questions of territoriality, identity and belonging. At first glance, islands seem so obvious: clearly delineated land masses neatly circumscribed by sea – places where territorial boundaries and physical geography ought to coincide in the most straightforward and unambiguous way. It’s curious to remind ourselves then that the status of islands has often been anything but unambiguous. Think of territorially divided islands, split between the jurisdictions of different nation states – Ireland, Cyprus, Hispaniola, New Guinea, Borneo, Timor, Usedom, Saint Martin, Isla Grande de Tierra del Fuego – or of the Faroe Islands, a self-governing part of Denmark but not part of the European Union, of which Denmark is a member. Think too of the frequency with which islands have been the subject of competing claims to sovereignty – the Falklands/Malvinas Islands, the Kuril Islands, the conflicts attendant upon the divided
sovereignty of Ireland and Cyprus. Nor is it just a matter of definitional and jurisdictional elusiveness. Islands have a habit of appearing and disappearing too. Today they include some of the most recently formed and some of the soonest-to-vanish land masses on the globe. Auden and MacNeice’s destination, Iceland, the most geologically recent land mass to be considered part of ‘Europe’ (at least culturally and linguistically), was formed between sixteen and eighteen million years ago by a series of volcanic eruptions along the rift separating the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates, a rift that continues to widen to the present, pushing the two continents gradually farther apart (Scherman 1976: 129–30). Conversely, the low-lying Pacific island nations of Tuvalu and Kiribati are currently faced with the prospect of becoming uninhabitable as the result of rising sea levels – a similar, although more protracted, fate awaits Britain’s northernmost outposts, Orkney and Shetland, the combined result of anthropogenic climate change and ongoing marine erosion (Clark 2011: 107–8). Perhaps islands are not as straightforward as they seem.

More from My Notebooks

Standing on the hill of Saxa Vord, are we in the presence then of one of those western extremities from which ‘Europe’ has sought to universalise itself, one of the launch sites for its world historical project? Certainly Shetland and its southerly neighbour, Orkney, were crucial waystations in the westward diffusion of Norse settlers to Britain and Ireland, the Faroe Islands, Iceland, Greenland and, more fleetingly, North America. They would later participate in a burgeoning capitalist global economy through their involvement in fishing and whaling, in the trading activities of the Hudson Bay Company and, more recently, the drilling and distribution of North Sea oil (Thomson 2008). During its Cold War days of active service, the Saxa Vord radar station too played a conspicuous geopolitical role as a defensive frontline of the ‘West’ (which then included only part of Europe) – this time against the Eastern-identified threat of communism.

But was it ever that simple? To stand on the summit of Saxa Vord hill, with the waves crashing below and gulls circling above, is not, in fact, to stand at the edge of either Britain or Europe. Offshore there’s Muckle Flugga, with its now automated, unmanned lighthouse and, further out still, Out Stack, ‘the full stop at the end of Britain’. Perhaps what Unst reminds us is that neither nation states nor the entity called Europe, elusive yet of global historical consequence, ever come punctually to a
stop, a full stop. Indeed, the present-day physical geography of Unst’s northwest coast is more akin to an unfinished sentence, trailing off into an ellipsis, a series of dots . . . testifying too to the ongoing and perennially unfinished resculpting of Britain’s and Europe’s coastline by the action of the sea. Similarly, the efficacy of Saxa Vord as a onetime front line of Britain’s air defence was never simply a matter of keeping watch over an already established territory. It was, equally, dependent upon a technologically assisted prosthetic seeing beyond territorial boundaries – radar pulses being sent out across the North Sea to give pre-emptive warning of impending incursions by Soviet aircraft or, in the worst case scenario, missiles. Here, at the once fortified edge of Britain, Europe and the West, physical borders appear to take on a curiously fragmentary and porous character.

Later that night, in the resort bar, I overhear an elderly local resident telling a group of English visitors – in English – that Shetland should rightfully be part of Norway.

**Before and after Humankind**

If Derrida chose to identify himself as a product (at least in part) of the terrestrially bounded waters of the Mediterranean, it was islands that fascinated his near contemporary Gilles Deleuze. In his early essay ‘Desert Islands’ (1953), Deleuze identified two kinds of islands: ‘continental’ ones – broken-off shards of existing land masses – and ‘oceanic’ ones – the result of the petrification of coral reefs or of magmatic upwellings from beneath the ocean floor, rising, cooling and solidifying to create new formations. Both kinds of island, he claimed, attested to the ongoing, elemental ‘strife’ between land and sea. As such, they affirmed that the forms of the actual, existing world were not and never would be definitively fixed. Islands, for Deleuze, were pre-eminently a source of creativity, of new beginnings. The creativity exemplified by islands was, however, always a matter of re-creation, of beginning again rather than beginning from scratch. The second creation, the act of re-creation, affirmed creativity itself as an ongoing and endlessly open-ended process, a capacity not to create *ex nihilo*, nor simply to repeat what had gone before, but to repeat and differ (to echo the title of one of Deleuze’s later and best-known philosophical works). The beginning anew associated with desert islands usurped the privilege of any single, unique and self-identical origin, appealing instead to a principle of originary difference that remained inassimilable to chronologically marked time:
In the ideal of beginning anew there is something that precedes the beginning itself, that takes it up to deepen and delay it in the passage of time. The desert island is the material of this something immemorial, this something most profound. (Deleuze 2004: 13–14)

Human engagement with the creativity, the *élian*, associated with islands required, therefore, a studied alignment with material processes and potentialities that were always in excess of human projects and understandings and evocative of a time-span vastly more expansive than that of humans’ fleeting presence on earth: ‘Islands are either from before or for after humankind’ (Deleuze 2004: 9).

It is instructive to juxtapose Deleuze’s conjuration of the pre- and posthistorical time of islands with Derrida’s claim that to be European in the present (his and ours) is to be simultaneously old and young. The rocks of Unst are old – older than any humanly conceivable vision of Europe, older than humanity itself. Some of them, indeed, are among the oldest rocks on the planet – Lewisian gneisses, formed between 3,000 and 1,500 million years ago and once forming part of the original crust of the continent of Laurentia, of which present-day Scotland was also once a part. The time-span evoked by Unst’s rocks is one that encompasses and outstrips the much briefer history of human settlement indexed by the archaeological record and the more recent history in which Saxa Vord played its part. The vistas of prehuman time opened by the geology of Orkney and Shetland suggest too the possibility of a posthuman future in which neither the political landscape of Europe nor its physical contours will be recognisable. Fifty million years from now, for example, Africa will have collided with Europe, the Mediterranean will have disappeared and a mountain range will have been forced up in its place (Press et al. 2001). In 250 million years’ time, according to one possible scenario, further continental collisions will produce a single supercontinent circling what remains of the Indian Ocean (Scotese 2012). Even this, though, cannot be regarded as a definitive ending to the earth’s story as seismic upheavals and currents within the earth’s mantle will continue to generate further shifts and realignments. The strife of land and sea will continue irrespective of any human presence to witness or document it.

The imperative to envision a world from which humanity is radically absent, a world that demands, therefore, to be grasped as existing radically independently of its being given to a knowing, perceiving human subject, has been asserted in a number of recent philosophical writings (e.g. Brassier 2007; Meillassoux 2008). I have chosen here to engage in this detour via the geological past and future of the North Atlantic.
islands as a reminder that the materiality of the entity known as ‘Europe’ – the physical ‘stuff’ that successive conceptualisations of Europe have taken as their referent – is itself marked by an irreducible heterogeneity that resists encompassment by any single discursive elaboration of what Europe is or might be. It is, I suggest, this all too palpable heterogeneity that is the indispensable counterpart to the definitional openness and receptivity towards an unspecified outside for which Derrida’s essay argues so passionately. It is Europe’s offshore islands that reveal, perhaps more emphatically than its Mediterranean heartlands and continental thoroughfares, that the materiality of Europe will always exceed any possible version of ‘Europe’. Islands are not so much places apart where Europe is absent as places where Europe becomes external to itself, other to itself, where the phallic directionality of its westward expansionist drive fragments and dissipates. Yet they are not isolates but, rather, as both Deleuze’s reflections and the histories (prehuman, human and posthuman) of the North Atlantic islands suggest, scenes of encounter, of engagements across difference, of beginning again, continuously . . . To affirm such heterogeneity is to refuse the proclaimed self-sufficiency both of parochial nationalisms and of universalising visions of historical progress as they continue to hold sway over much of the early 21st-century present.

Derrida’s essay itself raises on a number of occasions the question of Europe’s materiality. He refers, for example, to the upheavals shaking eastern and central Europe in the 1990s as a seismic event – an ‘earthquake’ (Derrida 1992: 19). He questions too the tendency of many self-identified European writers to deploy interchangeably the terms ‘Europe’ and ‘Spirit’, rendering the former exemplary of the latter. If this gesture is subjected to more sustained scrutiny in Derrida’s study of Heidegger (published prior to the ‘earthquake’), it should perhaps prompt us also to re-examine the later volume’s labelling of Valéry as a ‘Mediterranean spirit’ (Derrida 1989; 1992). Is it not, ultimately, the unassailable materiality of Europe, including Mediterranean Europe – its mountains, valleys and plains, its waterways, its built environments, its flora and fauna – that, as a presence subsisting independently of human discourses and designs, perennially disrupts any such attempt to pass seamlessly from the history of Europe to the history of Spirit?

A Conclusion amongst Other Things

Derrida suggests, in bringing his reflections to a close, that he wishes to be considered – and to consider himself – ‘more or less European’
or ‘European amongst other things’ (Derrida 1992: 83). What, then, are the ‘other things’ amongst which one might be European, whether in the 1920s, the 1990s or in our very different but no less seismically disturbed today? Clearly, the constitutive others of the more or less European must include a plurality of human presences and projects that continue to press upon Europe’s internal and external borders, demanding an openness to lives and futures that can never be prescriptively ranged under the rubric of a European history and identity. They must also include a range of other-than-human presences, both ‘animate’ and ‘inanimate’ as conventionally described, in relation to which ‘we’ Europeans are obliged to negotiate our habitation of the earth, the small part of it known as Europe and beyond. Finally, not the least of the other things to be reckoned with is the certainty of our own and Europe’s eventual demise. Such a perspective necessarily cuts down to size the universalising pretentions of Europe and Euro-America, revealing their moment of self-proclaimed global ascendancy to be no more than a transitory one, just as the career of humanity itself forms only a fleeting episode in a vastly more expansive planetary chronology.

Unlike Valéry, or Derrida, or Cassano I am no Mediterranean spirit, being the product, by birth, of an offshore outpost of Europe’s other, Atlantic shore and, by ancestry, of a still smaller offshore outpost (the island of Mull in the Inner Hebrides, off the west coast of Scotland). Doubtless too, my own more or less Europeanness has been further inflected by almost two decades spent studying and teaching in the United States, latterly in a part of it (the ‘Midwest’) more remote from the sea than any location in insular or continental Europe. Perhaps it is these considerations that impel me to reread Derrida’s reflections in the light not only of a different present but of a different geography, a geography of scattered, shifting yet intercommunicating fragments, the material density and opacity of which are, for me, a forceful reminder not only of the elemental strife of land and sea that subtends the making and unmaking of human worlds but also of the impossibility of a Europe definitionally secured against incursions of alterity. Twenty years after its initial publication, surely one of the most powerful and enduring provocations of Derrida’s *The Other Heading* is, precisely, its exhortation to engage unceasingly with such incursions from both within and without, that is, with the transformative impingement of other things. Only amongst other things have we ever been or could we ever be European.
Notes

1. The tsunami, known as the Storegga tsunami, was precipitated by a build-up of sands and muds on the continental shelf offshore from Norway. The earthquake shifted a quantity of sediment equal to the size of present-day Scotland from the continental shelf into the deeper waters of the North Sea, displacing vast quantities of sea water and causing enormous and fast-moving waves. (McKirdy 2010: 32).

2. Although the islands had come increasingly under Scottish influence during preceding centuries, not least through their predominantly Scottish clergy, the transfer of sovereignty was not intended, initially, to be a permanent one. Rather, it amounted to the pawning or impignoration of the islands by Christian I of Norway and Denmark, who lacked the funds to provide an adequate dowry for his daughter on the occasion of her marriage to James III of Scotland. The ostensibly temporary nature of this arrangement has continued to be invoked by local activists. In the 1980s campaigners against the disposal of radioactive material at the Dounreay power station in Caithness drew up a declaration calling on the Danish monarchy to challenge Orkney’s constitutional status as part of the United Kingdom. Around the same time, the Orkney and Shetland Movement, a group seeking devolution for the northern isles, unsuccessfully contested the Orkney and Shetland Parliamentary seat in the 1987 general election, polling just over 3,000 votes (Thomson [1987] 2008: 189–205).

3. Cassano’s *Southern Thought* was first published in Italian in 1996 and in English translation (with four additional essays) in 2012.

4. Despite Deleuze and Guattari’s repeated emphasis on the collective and relational dimensions of becoming, Cassano insists on reading their arguments as a validation of an individualistic conception of freedom: ‘Deleuze’s nomadism is the space of individual freedom, the Dionysian notion of a world dominated, unified and organized by economic principles’ (Cassano 2012: 110).

5. Cassano discusses the relationship of the Mediterranean to northern Italy in the context of the ‘Southern Question’, which first arose following the unification of Italy in 1860 with denunciations of the conditions of the south by writers such as Pasquale Villari, Leopoldo Franchatti and Sydney Sonnino and was famously taken up in the early twentieth century by Antonio Gramsci, a native of the Mediterranean island of Sardinia, in his essay of 1926, ‘Some Aspects of the Southern Question’ (Cassano 2012: 181; Gramsci 1995).

6. Schmitt, for example, writes in his book *Land and Sea* that ‘man is a terrestrial, a grounding. He lives, moves and walks on the firmly grounded earth’ (Schmitt 1997: 1, quoted Cassano 2012: 26). Heidegger, a professed Graecophile, presents a somewhat more complicated case, although, for Cassano, his admiration for Greece is always inflected by a distinctively German partiality for *terra firma*: ‘the Greece described here is heavily Germanized; in it, being has dried out the sea, and water serves only as support for the land’ (Cassano 2012: 28).

7. These earliest rocks were subsequently added to by Dalradian rocks – metamorphic rocks subject to refolding and recrystallisation at high temperatures and pressures and formed between 700 and 600 million years ago from sediments laid down at the edges of an ancient, long-since-vanished ocean (the ‘Lapitus’ ocean). At a later date magma was injected into the metamorphic rocks to form igneous rocks of various types, like the Saw granite that is a conspicuous feature of northeast Unst (McKirdy 2010: 10).
References


