

Xylella Fastidiosa and the Non-Landscape of Southern Italy: a European Crisis

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Abstract

A bacterium called *xylella fastidiosa* started to desertify olive trees in Southern Italy, and to date no remedy has been found to stop the contagion. The European Union has imposed the eradication of every tree that is positive for the bacterium effectively proposing a desertification of the infected territory without addressing the issue of landscape protection. Here, an attempt will be made to explain the irrational gesture of many young rebels and peasants not to apply European decisions by highlighting the essential role that the olive tree plays in the landscape of south Italy, understood both as a *landscape horizon* and as a *psychic horizon* within which the citizen forms and recognises himself. The paper provide a critical comparison between the literary image handed down by travellers of the past and the present-day image of a landscape that seems to have lost its identity due to building speculation, the plundering of the land and a bacterium that has destroyed entire areas.

Keywords: Olive trees; Landscape; Crisis; Desertification.

1. Introduction

Andrea Zanzotto, one of the most important Italian poets of the 20th century, wrote that “saving the landscape of one’s land is like saving its soul and that of its inhabitants” (Zanzotto, 1995, p. 130). In the fight against *xylella fastidiosa*, the bacterium responsible for the drying out of olive trees in Salento (the most peripheral part of Apulia, the easternmost region in southern Italy), little attention has been paid to the impact of this epidemic on the landscape or, to put it better, on the *no-longer-landscape* generated by the destruction of the trees: a condition that Zanzotto himself would have defined as *landscape*, i.e. a place where visually glimpsing the “landscape” is impossible (Jakob, 2023).¹

Here an attempt will be made to provide an explanation for the “irrational” gesture of many young Salento farmers who, united in associations and committees, have chosen not to eradicate the dying trees, opposing EU decisions.² (figure 1)

The olive tree is the pivot around which the Salento landscape unravels, understood both as a *landscape horizon* and as a *psychic horizon* within which the individual forms and recognises himself and from which it cannot be eradicated (Alpi, Nanni, Vincenzini, 2021).



Figure 1. A young woman from Salento (South Italy) protests against the felling of an olive tree affected by *xylella fastidiosa* (2016)

¹ The deleted word, inaugurated in Coleridge’s *Notebooks*, was then skilfully taken up by Zanzotto in his poetic compositions. Deleting the word is a speaking and poetic act, in which visually something appears, but not as expected; it is a place in the text where the word is an impossibility. On landscape and garden policies see also Uwajeh, Ezennia, 2018;

² See, for an overview: <https://ilmanifesto.it/la-grande-coalizione-per-salvare-gli-ulivi-pugliesi-vola-in-europa> (Accessed 15/05/2024).

2. Olive trees on the horizon between garden and landscape

An early 19th-century French erudite wrote that “Europe ends in Naples and very badly too” (Creuzè de Lesser 1997, pp. 7-8). The annotations of travellers who, between the 18th and 20th centuries, ventured into Apulia constitute a valuable source as they provide an insight into the ways in which the landscape was perceived and described over time by “foreigners” (Canali, Galati, 2018-19; Cazzato, 2003). Reading their descriptions, the recurring *topos* is that of crossing a particularly fertile plain, dotted on the seaward side with ancient ports in which it is possible to perceive echoes of Greekness and mythical links with the past. The landscape is determined by looking at the territory from above and with a distant gaze, placing the perceptive parameter (the landscape as *panorama*) alongside the productive-economic one (design of the territory). In the category of the *picturesque*, repeatedly evoked to describe the Salento landscape, garden and landscape are two notions that interpenetrate, without precise demarcations. If on the one hand the landscape appears to be “an uninterrupted garden” (Fiorino, 1989, p. 25), on the other, it is possible to identify real gardens created in the most disparate places: in the moats of castles, in the enclosures of farms, on city walls (Cazzato, Mantovano, 2010).³ What holds the threads of this *overflowing nature* together is the ubiquitous olive tree. The olive tree is the glue between city, garden and landscape, a key element in that sort of descending climax that, in the stories of foreigners, allows one to break down and decipher what one sees. The olive tree has its own identity, it is the undisputed “ruler” (Ceva Grimaldi, 1821, p. 160), creating woods and forests so well shaped that they appear as “sacred groves” or “shady islets” (Placci, 1911, p. 610) that capture the traveller's attention. At times one almost has the feeling that the other trees, starting with the fruit trees, are like intruders in the midst of the dense foliage of the olive groves.⁴ In this horizon of green⁵ in which the mingling of tones gives the sensation of being in front of an “emerald cloth” (De Giorgi, 1882, I, pp. 4-7) or a “mantle of vegetables” (De Giorgi, 1882, I, pp. 322-323), it is not possible to perceive how far those “continuous olive groves” go that provoke a “monotony of lines”⁶ and a hint of *melancholy* (Tomasini 1828, p. 20; Canali, Galati, 2018-19, pp. 61-62; De Salis-Marschlins, 1973, p. 200; Von Stolberg, 1795, p. 330). One thus comes to perceive the olive grove as an immense sea. In fact, it is enough to look at the small leaves (green above, whitish below) on a windy day to realise that at bottom its “matronly” green is a true *green sea*.⁷ *Apulia felix* is thus configured as an *ocean of green* that, amid “flashes of light and shadow” (Meyer Graz, 1915, pp. 37-38), sets no boundaries with the *ocean of sunshine* and the blue sea. In this context the villas seem to “float like white sails on dark waves” and “the land, the sea, the sky, the towns, the hills, the cottages, the vegetation form together a magnificent landscape” (De Giorgi, 1882, I, pp. 175-178).

3. The olive tree from admirable to cultivable

Odeporic literature is fundamental in stimulating an awareness of the landscape of Terra d'Otranto to which the eye of the Salento inhabitants is habituated and unaccustomed, so much so that local scholars would have spoken of a real *debt of gratitude* to foreign travellers. That the Salento had the ideal characteristics for olive cultivation seemed clear to them, noting how this plant grew spontaneously in the most disparate places. One only has to look at the branches, “so heavy that they are supported by tufa pillars” (Placci, 1911, p. 255), to realise that it is precisely the oil extracted from the olive forests that drives the local economy. “Merchant of oil, merchant of gold!” (Columella Onorati, 1828, p. 214): *Green gold* was the fruit of divine abundance, a blessing bestowed by the local patron, a saint who “has gold imprinted in his name” (Da Palagiano, 1660, p. 5), Oronzio, depicted by the community as a heavenly farmer (Del Sole, 2021). After all, Oronzio is first and foremost an olive farmer, because it is oil that is his nectar of sanctity, the most precious product the area could offer. (figure 2)

³ In this regard, it is emblematic that Vincenzo Cazzato's study of Apulian Gardens opens precisely with a chapter dedicated to the landscape in its thousands of variations, and then unravels with curiosity, by topics, by points of view, by visions. Nowhere in the book is there a precise definition of what an Apulian garden is, but one can grasp the various souls that, together, make that territory a garden of the South.

⁴ “It is a beautiful oasis where olive trees grow luxuriantly, then orange trees and orchards” (De Giorgi, 1882, I, pp. 322-323); “Giant oaks and garrubs mingle with olive trees (...). Everywhere, where the vegetation develops in the folds of the ground, there are gardens of orange, cedar and almond trees” (Lenormant, 1881).

⁵ “Well-pruned myrtle bushes led to well-covered porticoes of vines, countless palm trees (...) stood on a horizon of green” (Keppel Craven, 1821, p. 145).

⁶ “The lines are a bit monotonous but the whole is beautiful” (De Giorgi, 1882, I, pp. 41-43).

⁷ “Its green [of the olive tree] is not a gaudy and brazen green, but a sombre and, so to speak, matronly green (...). Because its foliage is green above and whitish below, then it happens that, wiggling and swaying in the wind, they make a mixture that imitates sea-green” (Presta, 1794, p. 22).

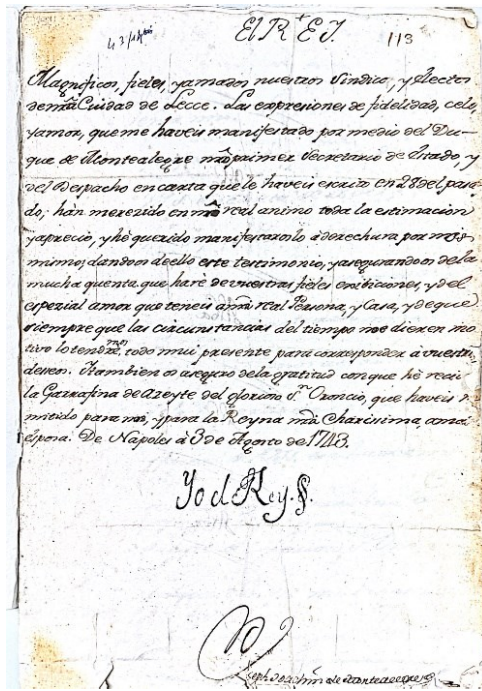


Figure 2. Letter from Charles III of Bourbon to the mayor of Lecce thanking him for the oil of Sant'Oronzo sent on the occasion of the pestiferous disease over the Kingdom (1743) - Source: Lecce State Archive - Scrittura Università e Feudi, Atti diversi, Lecce, b. 17, 43/14

The absence of an iron discipline on good cultivation practices has over time reinforced erroneous customs⁸ that have only reduced the merits of the oil itself, which is mostly used industrially (wool, soap, lighting): the so-called *lampante oil*.

In the last years of the 18th century, the circulation of new scientific achievements and the revival of old knowledge favoured the birth in Apulia of a school of thought oriented towards the study of rustic things.⁹ In order to spread good practices for the care of the olive tree among the peasant population (which was almost completely unschooled), authors such as Nicola Columella Onorati, Vincenzo Corrado, Giovan Battista Gagliardo, Giuseppe Maria Giovene, Giovanni Presta (and others) produced numerous studies on agricultural economics with a didactic slant, flanking them with initiatives of an associative and scholastic nature.¹⁰

The aim is to educate the farmer and to see in him a sort of *guardian of the landscape* (Pollice, Rinella, Epifani 2021), a professional who has a clear understanding of how to make the olive tree truly cultivable so that this plant is not only the emblem of a landscape to be protected, but also the heart of the Salento garden.

“Almost all our ancient olive groves are so thick, and without any order, that they look like woods, rather than plantations of fruit trees. Hence the result is that when they are laid out together, the product is not always happy” (Columella Onorati, 1828, pp. 193-194)

No longer olive woods, therefore, but olive groves, plantations of fruit trees. To achieve this goal, scholars dust off old cornerstones of the discipline, such as Piero Vettori's 1569 *Trattato delle lodi et della coltivazione de gli ulivi* (Treatise on the praise and cultivation of olive trees), widely quoted in its fundamental passages. Above all, Vettori dwells on explaining to the reader how to transform the olive tree from a wild tree into a fruit tree, mastering its potential, foreseeing its development, planning its reproduction: skills that, according to the author, have been handed down from the ancients and are specular to those of an architect about to construct a building. Just as the architect pays attention to the site, to the characteristics of the land on which to build, to the building materials, so the olive grower must take into account the field in which to plant the olive trees, understand whether “the country is cold or dry (...), whether it looks south or north” (Vettori, 1762, p. 83); not to mention the

⁸ These include the choice to harvest the olives only when the fruit falls spontaneously from the tree or the belief that the warmer the olives are kept the more oil they produce.

⁹ The establishment of various agricultural professorships inaugurated an approach to the discipline aimed at optimising cultivation and tackling the many problems associated with olive growing. Emblematic is the speech made in 1810 on the occasion of the founding of the Società Agraria in Lecce by Giuseppe Maria Giovene, who recalled that “the olive tree is the tree of peace, it is the tree of wisdom with which God has endowed this province, and it will be fortunate if it knows the value of this plant, if it knows how to love and caress it”.

¹⁰ The books taken into consideration from which all subsequent quotations will be taken are: Columella Onorati, 1790-95; Columella Onorati, 1828; Corrado, 1787; Corrado, 1824; Corrado, 1804; Gagliardo, 1791; Gagliardo, 1793; Gagliardo, 1804; Giovene, 1839; Giovene, 1841; Presta, 1794.

proportions, the right distances, the concordance between the compositional elements, architectural principles that an olive grower cannot do without in his work.¹¹

Only with strict rules of rationalisation of space will it be possible to abandon *seminaria* (or *plantaria*) and use open spaces as *semenzajos* to grow small plants (*caelo libero*) (Vettori, 1762, p. 56). From Vettori to Gagliardi, all writers spend entire pages describing how to compose an efficient and productive olive grove. If Presta recommends arranging olive trees in several separate beds to experiment with various types of grafting, Gagliardi proposes precise and symmetrical arrangements that, according to the author, were first tested in the ancient Royal Gardens of Persia and allow light and wind to pass between the trees. Following such arrangements, for Columella Onorati, olive trees should take the shape of a glass in order to bear abundant fruit. (figures 3-4)

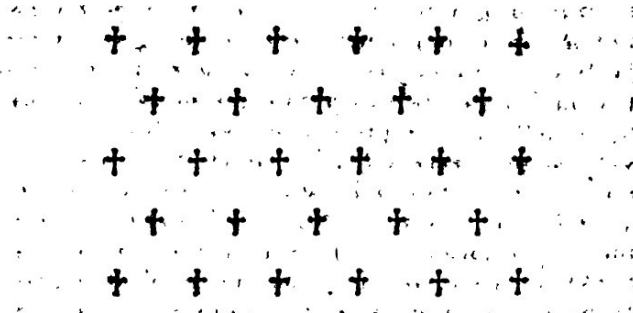


Figure 3. Explanatory drawing on the creation of a semenzajo **Figure 4.** Explanatory drawing on how to plant olive trees in a field

In cultivating olive-grown fields architecturally, the farmer could therefore enjoy numerous advantages, as he would not only be taking care of a plantation of fruit trees, but also a true garden to be contemplated in its beauty. The authors do not fail to emphasise how the olive tree is the “best of all trees”¹² not only for the fruit it produces, but for the gracefulness that “is therefore called *speciosa*, that is, that has a playful aspect (...), it delights marvellously” (Vettori, 1762, p. 43) so much so that it is capable of adorning a farm without the addition of other trees.¹³

The writings of these illuminists, even if they did not succeed in imprinting that ‘new course’ desired for the Naples Kingdom’s agrarian economy, do however have the merit of outlining a true *architecture of landscape perception*. The land is no longer described, as in the accounts of foreign travellers, as a hybrid of garden and landscape, but aspires to take the form of a *worked landscape* (or *diffuse garden*) tending towards greater productivity and, at the same time, better care of the wooded space.

4. Olive Baroque

Writings on agriculture between the 18th and 19th centuries never forget to remind us that the olive grower, as well as going about his profession according to architectural principles, must also be a good philosopher in order to connect intimately with the complex soul of the land. According to Giovanni Presta, “agriculture and philosophy are consanguineous with each other” (Presta, 1794, p. 1) and the olive tree itself, according to Giuseppe Tavanti, “shines with its pure light the face of philosophy, and of knowledge” (Tavanti, 1819, I, p. 42). If ancient myths already indissolubly linked the Apulian landscape to this tree (as confirmed by the story of Apulus, narrated by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*), in order to fully understand the ancestral significance of the olive tree for the land of Salento, it is necessary to change the point of view from which we look at the landscape.

¹¹ “This is observed in the walls, and in large buildings; and the architects are known to all as a precept; there is no one today so clumsy a master, who does not make the parts respond to each other, and one column and pillar is in line with the other (...) Although in the ancient churches and in the temples, still large and sumptuous because in those times (...) the good arts were lost, one finds great errors. The same occurred then in the placing of fruit-bearing trees and the cultivation of the land; which they commonly placed at random and without any good rule” (Vettori, 1762, pp. 81-82).

¹² “Of all the trees ever known on earth (...) it can be said without fail that the olive tree is the best of them all” (Presta, 1794, pp. 21-22).

¹³ Such is the delight one feels in admiring the beauty of the olive tree that, in the words of the author, the philosopher Simone Porzio, on a visit to Florence, was prompted to confess that he wished the Duke had chosen to plant a single large field of olive trees for the Boboli Gardens: ‘I remember that when M. Simone Porzio was staying at the Pitti, for a holiday (...) he told me, on visiting him, that he wished the Duke had chosen to plant nothing but olive trees in that garden; because he saw that they were doing wonderfully well; and he thought that this plant was more beautiful than any other’ (Vettori, 1762, pp. 44-45).

“To our gaze is presented a spectacle at once horrid and picturesque, wild and majestic, varied and monotonous; and dominating our soul with the law of contrasts, it drags it from the real to the realm of fantasy” (De Giorgi, 1882, I, pp. 319-320).

It is too easy to settle for an overall view, staring at that generic distant horizon that transpires from travellers' tales. If one looks closely, *poetically*, at the vegetation “grown without a drop of water”, one can realise that the immense sky so extolled in the pages of foreign travellers is nothing more than an *architectural void* of the heart, a lid that makes the horizon heavy and crushes the verticality of the elements that make up the landscape. This suffocation causes the *natural baroque* (Bodini, 2020, p. 74) of those olive trees which, for Vittorio Bodini, “seem to crawl on the ground like snails” (Bodini, 2020, p. 108).

The idea of Baroque, according to Deleuze's metaphysical analysis, cannot exist without the intersection of two elements: the *folds of matter* and the *folds of the soul*. For the philosopher, it is the veins of marble that best represent the folds that envelop living beings (Deleuze, 2004). If, following in the footsteps of some Salento poets, we were to juxtapose the inclinations of the Salento soul with the folds of matter, we could say that in this peripheral land, where marble arrived with difficulty, the folds to which Baroque architects looked are undoubtedly those of the olive tree.

This tree has for Vittorio Bodini “the human heart”.¹⁴ It is a friend to whom one can entrust one's most hidden secrets (“Love was a letter found/in the trunk of an olive tree”).¹⁵ In it “groans a fatigue of existence that has no equal” (Valli, 1999, p. 215), like that of the entire population of Salento that dreams of “detaching itself from the roots that tie it to the ground” (D'Annunzio, 1966, p. 31). For these reasons, on several occasions the poet himself comes to identify with the tree (“I become an olive tree and the wheel of a slow wagon”) (Bodini, 2020, p. 75). This profound sense of the Salento soul's *alberità*, combined with anger at a sky that generates daily blood-red dramas (the sunsets), is at the heart of the scattering of the landscape reflected in the consciousness of the community, still anchored “in the bowels of the seventeenth century” (Bodini, 2020, p. 75) in a perpetual baroque season. (figures 5-6)



Figures 5-6. Folds of olive trees

To search for this one great syntax that binds the landscape to the soul of its inhabitants, we need only use the method that Deleuze calls architecture of vision. If we carefully admire the grammar of “that absurd miracle of Lecce Baroque” that permeates the territory (Bodini, 2020, p. 74), we see references to “a breath of ancient sentiment of form that has never been extinguished” (Gregorovius, 1998, p. 357) and that indissolubly binds the twisted olive tree, “in an attitude of pain” (D'Annunzio, 1966, p. 31), to the soul of every inhabitant of Salento made up of “surly grumpiness” (Bodini, 2020, p. 108). (figures 7-10)

¹⁴ VITTORIO BODINI, *Le mani del Sud*, in *La luna dei Borboni*, v. 17.

¹⁵ VITTORIO BODINI, *Nella penisola salentina*, vv. 1-2, in “Dopo la luna” (1956).



Figures 7-10. Comparison of some elements of Lecce Baroque grammar with the natural forms of the olive tree

5. Conclusions

We should look at the Salento landscape from the sea. In this way, one would be prepared to grasp the essence of an area that has made olive-grown fields not only its *green carpet*, but a veritable glue with the *liquid plain*¹⁶ of the Mediterranean. At the same time, the olive tree (with its genesis, history and botanical characteristics) is the perfect reflection of the stubbornness of the people of Salento, who over the centuries have turned their folds into potential.¹⁷ The *xylella bacterium* has not hit a simple fruit tree that can be replaced at any time; it has literally taken the earth from under the feet of an entire community that, in order not to have its roots torn out, irrationally defends its dying trees, inaugurating a season of denied landscape, of *non-landscape*.

Only by understanding the landscape and cultural value of the olive tree can one fully understand the stance taken by some inhabitants of Salento not to cut down infected trees, not to be reduced to economic motivations alone. One is faced with a profound act of beauty, the act of taking care of one's own territory, a primordial sentiment that does not aim at healing, but at the dignified acceptance of suffering in the hope that the disease may one day become a *disease of change*. One relies on the teachings of Giovanni Presta, who writes that, plague after plague, the olive tree seems to weaken and wither but always manages to find a way to green up in the end.

"If this same trunk of his in various parts is pitted, cavernous, split: if from the pith to almost the last outer layers it is empty, and naked, and deprived even of bark; yet it does not perish, but from the extreme upper edge, if a thread of green remains, from there it vegetates again, it dresses, it tends to the best of its ability, and produces (...) and sees the children, the grandchildren, the posterity of he who believed it so many years ago already imminent to perish" (Presta, 1794, p. 23).

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Conflict of Interests

The Author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest.

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¹⁶ The French historian Fernand Braudel called the Mediterranean "a great, boundless, liquid plain".

¹⁷ The wounds of soul and body that dominated the entire century of famine and epidemic, through ardent and mystical devotion, became increasingly complex folds of matter, with the ultimate aim of "holding the light in check and laying a thousand ambushes for it".

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