

## Report from Italy

### News from the Italian Bioregional Movement

Etain Addey<sup>1</sup>

"Then all the creatures that are not human will begin to scrape,  
chew, gnaw, peck, scratch, into the mud, bark, stone, tar roads,  
the flanks of telephone poles, the same words the leaves can  
only urge through wind.

And the light of the moon will fill these etchings, just one  
refrain, worked into earth, and left everywhere for us...

*You are not alone here*

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L.R. Berger

"*È un lungo lavoro di consapevolezza.*" In other words, it's a long, slow job of raising consciousness. This is the reply I have had many times from Giuseppe Moretti, who is the lodestone of the Italian bioregional movement. At times when panic overcomes us because global consumer society seems to have taken some great leap forward, this is his calming response.

Giuseppe is a farmer, his family land lying close to the great Po River and he knows the ways of the river's regime as if it flowed through his heart. Indeed, a quiet little book of his called *Watersheds of the Mind* (Coyote Books, 2006) tells how he returned from a journey through the north of America in the seventies and decided to follow Gary Snyder's advice – "the most revolutionary thing you can do is stay home".

Now his small farm, which lies south of Mantova in the great plain of Padania, near the very land Virgil sang of, lies like a jewel amongst the neighbouring industrial farms. In the summer nights, little tree frogs by their hundreds sing in the high white poplars which he planted himself thirty years ago around the pond and in the spring his postbox is a nest for coal tits. The web of life for which his place is the matrix nurtures fox, weasel, buzzard, hare, hedgehog, grey heron and many other relations and Giuseppe's pond, which in modern thinking is merely a waste of valuable arable land, is a hymn to the bioregional awareness that - *we are not alone here*. Giuseppe Moretti raised a family here whilst respecting the limits imposed by the fact that many other life-forms were doing just the same.

Giuseppe has also published a beautiful, sober journal at the equinoxes called *Lato Selvatico* (Wild Side) with writing and thinking on wilderness and right livelihood since 1992 and he has gradually gathered about himself a group of people who recognise some

of the same ideal forebears and contemporaries – writers like Thoreau, Muir, Stan Rowe, Gary Snyder, Wendell Berry, Kate Barnes, Mary Oliver, Gary Lawless, Jim Koller as well as our local poets, Felice Colacci, Cosetta Lomele, Alessandro Spinazzi: the present group is called **Sentiero Bioregionale**.<sup>1</sup>

The fact that bioregional thinking has been articulated above all by poets I think tells us something very subtle. In the modern world, ecological thought has often been spoken of in the language of science but actually behind the idea that we should take a more humble place in the scheme of things is the idea that human beings are not the primary entity – the primary entity, the container of all life, is *place* and to *speak* seriously of the *inner* nature of place, perceived I know by many people in the movement, is something almost taboo in our culture. Poets, on the other hand, have “poetic license” and thus get away with expressing the selves of other parts of the Creation without being accused of woolly thinking. It has been an adventure for the Sentiero Bioregionale group to study Freya Mathew’s work because, perhaps for the first time in our experience, she offers *rational* and experimentally open thinking about the physical world - the cosmos in its entirety - in its deep, inner aspect. This is very exciting.

Giuseppe has been working on a new Italian collection of Gary Snyder’s essays and the book is due out in September: *Nel mondo poroso* (Into the porous world) (Mimesis Edizioni, 2013). The bioregional movement has a considerable outreach for the distribution of works like this: we use the old “word of mouth” method to surprising effect!

Italy has numerous small bioregions: the Mediterranean Sea and the Alps surround a peninsula which has so many diverse geological, climatic and biological settings as well as many islands. Thus there are strongly diverse local cultures, shaped and honed over many millennia in response to the land. Sicilia and Sardegna have their own languages, cuisine, agricultural techniques, stories, lifestyle and atmosphere but so have many circumscribed places here.

Massimo Angelini, another founding member of Sentiero Bioregionale has just published a small book called *Minima ruralia* (Pentagora, 2013) in which he tells some of the stories he heard whilst he was researching the Genovese potato, the *Quarantina Bianca*. Massimo spent months talking to small farmers in the mountains behind Genova and realised that he had to go slowly, take time to talk and after a good long chat, these people, having quietly summed up the person who approached them, would start to reveal their secret stores of old seeds. “Yes, I still have a few of those old potatoes – and look, here are the original Genovese parsley seeds my wife bought with her dowry sixty years ago.” Massimo organised a consortium of small farmers<sup>2</sup> and together they revived the forgotten local potato and found small restaurants who would buy from them: an unusually practical piece of work for a professor of Urban and Rural History. It was a way for these mountain farmers to sell small quantities of their various produce, to overcome their sense of the worthlessness of “the old ways” and to opt out of the global seed market in which five varieties of seed potato from Holland are sold all over Europe and many, many local potatoes have been completely lost.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.sentierobioregionale.org](http://www.sentierobioregionale.org)

<sup>2</sup> [www.quarantina.it](http://www.quarantina.it)

The very specific, local knowledge is beautiful. Here is advice in *Minima ruralia* about the right kind of cattle to keep on that mountain land: “Remember, our local cows do very well on the terraces and they are more frugal and hardier than other breeds: the *Cabanina* is good for milk (look for them in the d’Avento valley); the red *Montagnina* is good for meat (you find her at Mount Porale and in the valleys of Borbera and Staffora); the *Bruna* does well on these mountains and is good for both milk and meat.” The men and women who talked to Massimo are mostly elderly and this knowledge urgently needs young reinhabitants.

This last weekend, the people belonging to Sentiero Bioregionale who took part in the translation of Freya Mathews’ *Reinhabiting Reality* met at our small hill farm, Pratale, in the central Appennines to celebrate the publication of the Italian version (*Riabitare la realtà*, FioriGialli 2013.) My friend Dave asked, “So what decisions are you making at this meeting?” Me: “None, Dave, we are just going to swim in the river Chiascio, watch the dragonflies, eat a leisurely picnic, drink Martin’s wine and tell ourselves what a great job we did!”

On the Sunday morning, we sat under a mulberry tree in our courtyard and I thought how good it was to see gathered together some of the people who are working away in their own places. The group meets rarely and its purpose really is to offer each other support in the various projects going on at a local level.

Here is Silvana Mariniello, who is an actress: her partner Egidio was one of the translators and Silvana came to celebrate with him and to claim some applause for those who *put up* with the translators! She has recently done a play in Rome called *Immigrati* in which the local interaction between recent immigrants to the capital gradually brings them together and makes them part of their new place. This is an echo of Gary Snyder’s strong claim that, *if you live within the physical limits of your place and take care of it*, it matters not at all where you were born: you are *thereby* made “native”. This is a very important and sane correction to the whole first-world controversy over immigration issues. Often it is the people who were born in Milan who behave as if the whole world were their oyster while the poor immigrants live frugally “within the confines” of Milanese resources.

Also under the mulberry tree today are Clara and Yann-Vaï who live in an anarchist community, Il Popolo Elfico, near Pistoia, where the reinhabitants live by farming and crafts. Those in the mountainous part of the community have chestnut flour as their staple and the people in Avalon have a thousand olive trees. Both chestnuts and olives require the concentrated manual work of many people for short periods of gathering/pruning/manuring/transforming and the community has what the old farming population once had and has now lost – a large number of willing workers. The Elves’ children are homeschooled and they are pioneers in this area in Italy. Clara’s book on the birth process just came out: *Accanto alla Madre*, (Terra Nuova, 2012) and she is on the editorial committee of the alternative magazine *Terra Nuova* which has just published an article on the history of bioregionalism in Italy and will shortly publish an article by Clara on Freya Mathew’s book.

Yann-Vaï talked about the local farmers’ market which they are just starting in their area and Martin and I feel good about this because one of our efforts here in the Gubbio

area in the last 12 years has been to organise a local exchange market so that farmers with small amounts of produce can meet and barter and have a party. The atmosphere of these monthly meetings is always festive and warm – plenty to eat and drink and usually good music too. As you pass by a stall, you overhear people doing just the opposite of what the global market does – offering always *more* instead of less than what they know is fair! We have felt privileged to see our market flourish and know that it has encouraged other people all over the country to organise similar gatherings. One of the parallel movements here is *Genuino Clandestino*, “genuine and clandestine” which holds markets in cities and offers produce which is illegal in the sense that European law forbids the sale of any food which is not produced industrially. It is illegal to be a small farmer in Europe!

But despite this, in all the bioregions young people are going back to the old ways. Last winter, Daniel Tarozzi, who publishes an online alternative newspaper called *Il Cambiamento* (Change)<sup>3</sup>, went on a long road trip to visit all the people he felt were working towards a more local-based lifestyle. Now he is on the island of Lipari, off Sicily, writing a book on his experiences with the reinhabitants he met.

He visited Felice Colacci, a country poet who also organises the local farmers’ market in the Marche, across the central Appennines from here, and who has an extensive knowledge of wild food. We at Pratale learnt our fruit-drying techniques from Felice and we distribute the local Marche journal, *Seminasogni*, which he has published over the last 13 years.

Daniel also visited three of the young founding members of Sentiero Bioregionale, Valerio Di Fonzo, who farms in Molise and is transforming his father’s farm by experimenting with sustainable practices such as sowing cereals without ploughing and who is a volcano of new ideas and old stories<sup>4</sup>; and Stefano Perolari and Laura Viviani, who live in Tuscany with their three young children, home-schooling and down-scaling by producing a lot of their own food. One of our Sardinian donkey offspring found a new home with them at Pietrasanta last year. On the other side of the Pratale valley here in Umbria, two other young members have just bought a farm: now Andrea and Laura Tiberi have years of work ahead of them clearing the old fields and mending the stone house and barn. They have both been involved in upholding the local market and in the work on the Mathews translation.

Two missing translators at the celebration were Francesca Mengoni, whose women’s collective in Maremma, *Amazzoni dell’Arcobaleno*<sup>5</sup>, were holding a seminar that weekend, and Carlo Salmoiraghi, who teaches high school in Saronno.

Francesca lives with her companion Momo and a complement of goats, hens and horses and the rather large wild boar whom they found dying as a small piglet and who has just had her first little boarlet. She is a writer and the editor of the next issue of the *Sentiero Bioregionale* journal for Winter Solstice.

Carlo has initiated a project for creating a set of bioregional maps and at school he has spent time taking his pupils along their local river, the Olona, helping them make maps

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<sup>3</sup> [www.ilcambiamento.it](http://www.ilcambiamento.it)

<sup>4</sup> [www.roverella.net](http://www.roverella.net)

<sup>5</sup> [www.women.it/amazzoniarc](http://www.women.it/amazzoniarc)

which do not take account of human presence only, but include the vegetation and animal life in an attempt to encourage the kids to think ecocentrically. Carlo also has a brilliant technique for spreading news: he gave up using his car and travels by bus. There he has a ready public and when the nuclear referendum was coming up, he would talk confidentially into his (switched off) mobile phone. His theatrical monologue would go along these lines “No! Whatever are you telling me? But nobody *knows* about this! Who told *you*? Oh, you have a cousin in the ministry! But this is outrageous!” At this point the whole bus would be listening in, waiting to hear the terrible secret and Carlo would proceed to outline the worrying issues around nuclear power. He even used this method to promote the Italian version of *Reinhabiting Reality* when it was published, talking about it enthusiastically to an invisible friend!

On Sunday July 21st, as we sat in the shade of a field maple to close our gathering, one of the important friends in the movement, Renato Pontiroli, unbeknown to all of us was dying. We heard about his death in the following week and there has been a great outpouring of grief and remembering. Renato and his companion lived in a small abandoned village, Borgo Cerri, up in the mountains of Liguria where they lived frugally and took care of their terraced gardens and geese. Over the last six years, Renato had also set up two websites where the bioregional news converged: a blog called Selvatici and the Bionieri rural network. When we held an annual meeting of the previous bioregional group, the Rete Bioregionale, there in 2008, we realised that Renato and Manu were a reference point for many young people who are trying to find ways to reinhabit their places and this work is certainly one of the fertile seeds for the future. Renato is a true forebear for the new generation.

Meanwhile, today, what is going on here at the farm? Lucy and Joy have been barrowing sheep manure down to the lower olive grove, Martino has been scything thistles from the pastures and teaching the new colt to walk with a halter and lead, our son Beniamino is working on the water-recycling system in his new house, I have been in the garden picking a bucket of little green beans and now Eugenio is sitting under the mulberry tree playing the pipe and Val the accordion. The sheep are eating on the pasture next to the farmhouse, the baby chicks are arguing over half a water-melon and Nello, the male donkey we have borrowed from a neighbour, is off with his three ladies on the lower field where we hope he is doing his stuff!

Scattered over the peninsula, many similar scenes are surely being played out in this hot July evening, with the usual weave of delight and disaster. We are building on the old traditions but with beginner’s mind and remembering that it is a “long, slow job”.

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## Back already

On the freshly  
mown lawn  
two blackbirds

not noticing  
each other  
or me

all three of us  
here together  
sharing this  
green and luminous space  
right now

I was on my way  
to go shopping  
for things I don't  
really need  
I think  
I'll just turn round  
and go quietly  
home.

Alessandro Spinazzi  
(translated by Etain Addey)

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**Author Note**

Etain Addey has spent the last thirty years living on a small farm in the foothills of the Italian Apennines where she and her family share the place with horses, donkeys, milk sheep and wildlife. She is a member of the Italian bioregional group, Sentiero Bioregionale, and has published two books of stories and reflections on day to day life, one of which, *A Silent Joy* (Eyebright Books, 2010), is translated into English.