The empirical and rational teaching of geography

One day I asked a friend of mine, who had written a large volume on a considerable part of the Earth, to summarise his work in just a few words. With great pleasure, he began by saying: first of all I gave a general look at the region; I then went on to describe it in its single orographic, hydrographical and climatic elements… – But sorry, I replied, I don’t think that I have explained myself properly; I didn’t ask you for a summary, I asked you for a brief synthesis, or, in other words, the results you have achieved with your work, which was also favourably received by the critics, and lastly what you managed to demonstrate.

- The results, he added, lie in the correction of many wrong names and facts, for the most part in the orographic, hydrographical and climatic elements examined...
- But what did you manage to demonstrate with all this?
- To demonstrate! I did not intend to demonstrate anything, almost worriedly, taking the words from my mouth.

I gathered the information as carefully as I could; I examined it critically and in detail and then I expounded the results of this as exactly as possible with regard to the orography, hydrography, climatology… and many other things ending in -ia, I interrupted him. That’s enough, that’s enough; I see the kind of work you do; it’s not worth me reading it. It seems to be the usual old account of geographical phenomena detached from one another, listed together, numbered, under various headings, one after the other, but the reality, the surface of the Earth, the subject of our studies, the landscape hitting the visitor, the physical environment that so influences the formation of our ideas, the tendencies of our spirit, the vibrations, so as to say, of our feelings, are not made up of detached or detachable facts, listed and listable, of numbered and enumerable facts.

While at a certain elementary level of education, due to pedagogical reasons, enumeration and lists can be justified, they are not instead from then on if one wants to avoid staying at the rudimental stage forever, if one wants to rise and see in the totality what before had been divided for reasons of expediency. It is necessary to reach the reproduction of everything in one single word, with one phrase or, at the most, with one period, as for example Petrarch did in his famous verse:

...il bel paese

Ch’Appennin parte, e ’l mar circonda e l’Alpe.

Every place, every region, every river basin, every mountain chain, every sea, every ocean, in a geography at higher levels, must be expressed in one single phrase that must as such be linked and blended with its own name that recalling one, must at once bring the other to the memory or imagination. Each phenomenon, I repeat, natural as well as historical, that is, a valley just as a city, a mountain just as a road network, an island just as a plantation, passing through our pages, our descriptions, our analyses, in short, must not lose its own physiognomy, must not break up into a heap of shapeless ruins in which nobody can recognise the primitive architecture of the building. In this way we destroy what nature and man had

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built for one reason or another; we reduce everything that we had seen before going and listening to the utterly boring geography lessons to ugly knick-knacks, and which during our lives we will continue to see as greater, more harmonious, more imposing and more wonderful.

The lack of any correspondence between scholastic knowledge and everyday experience, (I shall have many more occasions to demonstrate this), is, and will be, if no remedy is found, the true and basic reason for the geographic ignorance that is autocratically dominant in Italy.

Not for this reason are our geography teachers, one will maintain, all to blame. If they teach empirically, the teachers of other subjects behave in the same way too, as far as I know for the most part; if they do not achieve the objectives contemplated by the legislators and the tax-payers, they must not be too sorry about this as they have many colleagues at all levels of education from primary school to secondary school, having in their memory what those who came before them did, and before their eyes what they continue and will continue to do, if those who follow them do not change direction. No special scolding can be directed at the geography teachers any more than at others; no special responsibility weighs upon them rather than upon others. On this we are in total agreement; but from establishing that more or less this has always been done, according to me, we must not draw the baleful conclusion that this must always be done, that it is useless to get worked up, rack one’s brains to change; society is apathetic, thinking about anything but our geography, and our school issues. Unfortunately it is true; it is furthermore equally true that society, which we are now accusing in this way, came out of our schools; it was manufactured in these little sympathetic workshops, or rather, it was fed with the miserable debris of our analyses, with the tiny scraps of a body that we were never able to show the pupils in its entirety, in its well sculpted outlines, in its original and complete physiognomy. This is how I spoke to the friend who, when saying goodbye was more overwhelmed by my words than convinced by them, shaking his head and repeating over and over:

– Attempts; generous attempts, if you like; but nothing but attempts.

Could that be true?