A river is not a place. We can give it a name, draw its course on maps, yet we cannot catch its unconcerned nature, unstable and sinuous. The river passes through, watches, signs the territories running in front of it, but then it goes, called somewhere else by the incessant motion dictated by its own nature. The river cannot be circumscribed, it does not belong to any place; rather, the places through which it flows belong to it, take its name, and exist according to its eternal wandering. The river is a symbol of transforming. Its immutability is only apparent, its flow being interminable and continuous.

At the same time, the river is a systemic entity. Its definition encompasses all its aspects, since the time when playing among the rocks by the spring, until when – wide and solemn – cutting the plain. As if childhood and adulthood coexisted in the same moment.
Lombardy’s total river basin is the largest in all of Italy. Most rivers descend from Alps and flow through the plain before discharging into the Po. Typically, the Lombard rivers form a high number of lakes along their course. They have always been a vital element of the economy. The human settlements and activities developed on their banks today constitute an important touristic resource. Similarly prominent is the high nature and landscape value of these watercourses, both in the upper and steeper and in the lower sector of each river.
The land of Lombardy wrote its history and founded its prosperity on its connection with water. An intricate web of rivers descends from its mountains, determining a link between different worlds, between nature and culture, between past and present. It is under the sign of nature that rivers rise, moisten their own banks to host and nourish the green treed spaces, the slender reeds, the singing birds. On the other hand, culture, inventiveness and human creations give rivers a connotation which makes them unique and recognizable. Learning to use the water of rivers and its strength to irrigate fields and run machines, similarly to controlling fire, was a major breakthrough by which man moved from a state of nature to a civilized one. Therefore, along the river nature and culture complement each other without interruption.
The locality of Bienno, on River Oglio, probably owes its name to a late Latin word. In fact, the term *biennum* was referred to a water conveying system (originally built of wood, and then of stone or brick) bringing the water to the mill wheels. Since the Middle Ages, Bienno had many mills, powering forge hammers for iron working. Some of these mills remained open until a few years ago. Now it is possible to visit the Forge Museum; the forge placed in the inside still operates by water power.
Leonardo da Vinci conducted many studies about the motion of water, accompanied by marvelous drawings, which collected in the famous “Codexes”. Just on River Adda, near Imbersago, Leonardo da Vinci designed and had built a special “crosswise flowing ferry-boat”, powered by the current of the river thanks to an ingenious mechanism. By applying a minimum amount of strength, people and even heavy weights (today, cars) can pass from a bank to the other. The Ferry-boat of Imbersago is the only invention of Leonardo’s that one can “live” directly, and the only functioning on a regular basis.
The spectacular and imposing Castle of Cassano d'Adda is situated on a high rock, overlooking a strategic point. (Not by chance, in fact, many battles took place in this plain). It seems that the original structure, dating back before the 9th century, gave hospitality to Charles the Great. In the 15th century the Sforza family enlarged it and improved the defensive features, with the main intent of protecting Gera territory. In the same period they built the ricetto, a place enclosed by fortifications, projected to shelter troops (and occasionally civilians) in case of enemy threat.
How not to be intrigued by the fascination of industrial archaeology, the futurist beauty of gigantic gears, the dams containing the energy of the river to transmit it to man? The stately and imposing Taccani hydroelectric plant of Trezzo sees mitigated its original industrial goal by fashions resembling Art Nouveau, with an interesting effort of conjugating functionality and aesthetics. At a short distance is located Crespi d’Adda, outstanding example of "company town" risen from nothing thanks to the enlightened will of an industrialist. Art Nouveau themes are typical of Crespi, too. This model town symbolizes and makes tangible an ambitious social program. Created by the industrial paternalism, Crespi constitutes an entirely Lombard utopia, postulating a human-faced industrialization, able to safeguard values of solidarity endangered by the new reasons of economy.

Taccani hydroelectric plant is a splendid example of architectural integration. The industrialist Benigno Crespi had built this Art Nouveau building in 1906, with the aim of powering his textile plant in Capriate San Gervasio. In the facility, the turbine room is horizontally connected to a room housing an emergency steam-generator. The design appears to reflect both the external rock walls and the architectural style of the near castle. The combination between the innovative technology and the care for environmental compatibility makes the plant a really unique example of its type.
With regard to the environmental and urban impact, there is no possible comparison between the “company town” of Crespi and the modern peripheral city areas. Founded in 1878 by the industrialist Beniamino Crespi, the town is the most significant result of the late 19th century’s Lombard “enlightened” capitalism. Next to the factory, whose forms resemble a church, the workers’ houses were built. These are small semi-detached house with a fenced garden, framed by tree-lined streets. The settlement was also a means by which the company controlled its employees and attested their detachment from the original rural areas.
Whereas hydroelectric plants demarcate like a border between the past and present relationships river-man, the millenary presence of mill evokes a long pre-modern era, in which watercourses were fundamental to the economy. The cultural development of a society is said to be depending directly upon the amount of energy that the society itself may govern and control, thus exempting people from exhausting labours and letting them turn their energies to observation, experimentation, art, and culture. In this sense, a region in-

The Cinque Mulini (Five Mills), perhaps the most famous cross-country race, takes place in the surroundings of San Vittore Olona. Not even the Second World War interrupted this “classic” event, created in 1933 by Giovanni Malerba. Outstanding athletes – ranging from the Kenyan Kipchoge Keino (1969), to the American Frank Shorter (1973), to the Italian Alberto Cova (1986) – have added to their victories the Cinque Mulini. Only one mill survives today, but the race keeps on attracting the best international runners.
tersected by many perennial rivers is destined to host flourishing river settlements, where mills become a dominant of the landscape. Still today, every river houses many of the torn wooden wheels of buildings standing on its banks, providing visitors with emotions from the past, from an industrious world still tied up with the nature and the river, with the droughts, the floods, and the frosts, with the serene rhythm of the stream, as showed by the beautiful portion of the River Lambro between Lambro e Inverigo.

River Lambro creates areas of significant landscape value. Its waters give rise to Segrino and Pusiano lakes, where mountains are the background for reeds rich with birds. Then the river proceeds to Brianza region, where a natural park has been established to preserve an environment immersed in the countryside and greenery. Here, Inverigo’s gorge and numerous nobles’ palaces are interesting touristic attractions. After reaching the plain, the Lambro enters Villa Reale’s park in Monza. This large green area, once a hunting ground, is the largest fenced park all over Europe.
Cities, villages, countryside: the whole landscape was modified by mills. Artificial channels, sluice gates, and weirs were added to the natural watercourses. Every river shows some traces of the interventions made to adapt it to the mill. On the other hand, all the economic activities on which Lombardy has built its wealth derive from wheels and mechanisms run by water. Whether they involve fabric milling, or metallurgy, paper milling or sawing, everything started with the union of the river and the mill.

The itinerary following Adda downstream from Lake Como is very interesting, especially with respect to nature, history, and art. At Brivio, the river plunges into a deep wooded gorge. At Imbersago, the crosswise flowing ferry-boat designed by Leonardo is certainly worth seeing. At Paderno, the metal bridge’s arch crosses the river in a turbulent section, characterized by beautiful ravines. Further downstream, hydroelectric plants and factories provide a fascinating industrial archaeology setting, whose prominent feature is the company town of Crespi d’Adda. During this rapid yet intense excursion, the castles located in Trezzo and Cassano are well worth stopping for, too.
Through the train window I saw the Adda passing by. The Adda, the great river of Lombardy, brother to the Ticino, both of them sharing the adventure of flowing through a lake to later come out car Lecco. This being fraught with consequences for Manzoni’s literature, both in the Lecco region and down in the valley, near to Trezzo, when the Adda shines under the moon and Renzo sees it from the height of a bank, choosing to cross it the morning after, helped by the cautious ferryman, who will save him from the gallows by carrying him in San Marco’s land.

Piero Chiara, *Tutto si accomoda, volendo*
Valli del Mincio natural reserve is crossed by a 32 km cycle track. The itinerary follows the Mantova-Peschiera cycle track, which runs parallel for a certain distance to the Parcarello canal and touches on the Bosco della Fontana natural reserve. At Casale di Goito the track encounters the River Mincio and follows it until the natural reserve is reached. Here, the river forms a tangle of channels and wetlands abundant with vegetation and avifauna. At Rivalta are located the Park Museum and the Sanctuary, offered as an ex voto by Francesco I Gonzaga. From here, the track goes down to the river, where a swamp excursion lead by Mincio boatmen is highly recommended. The return trip passes through Curtatone.

As if being in an immense drama complex, everything takes place on the banks: history, life-styles, projects, work, power, exchanges. River Mincio laps at the feet of ancient castled villages such as Castellano Lagusello, of small towns watching over it from the hills, such as characteristic Volta Mantovana. It flows away from the inhabited areas, runs through the marsh vegetation, widens to embrace Mantua, whose noble profile stands out clearly on the waters dotted with blossoming lotuses. It was the river itself that made impregnable the splendid capital of the Gonzaga dukes. Similarly, Mantua owes much of its fate to boatmen, millers, and fishermen, who dedicated their efforts to the river.
A stimulating 63 km cycle tour extends along Po’s embankments. The tour starts at Busatello marsh. This is a natural park, dense with flora and rich with avifauna, located at the confluence of Tartaro and Tione rivers with the Canal Bianco. After Ostiglia, the path climbs on Po’s embankment, from where visitors can see Isola Boschina, a river island that constitutes a natural boundary. Carrying on along the embankment, the tour follows the many river loops preceding Castelmassa. After that, crossed the Po via the bridge, there is Felonica Po, with its 10th century Pieve dell’Assunta church. Not much after Carbonara Po is situated Isola Boscone, another protected isle, characterized by willow woods and several oxbows. At Revere, the Palazzo Ducale hosts the Po Museum and the Young Museum of modern art.
The “Viscontea”, a boat driven by an electric solar cell motor, sails the waters of the Naviglio Grande, from Milano to Gaggiano. The trip, lasting about two hours, gives the opportunity of seeing from an unusual perspective the most ancient houses of Milan, built on the waterway with their own small docks. Once passed the Darsena (the wet dock), the navigation carries on under the Scodellino bridge and covers he 13 kilometres of the Ticinese quarter. After leaving the city, bridges, nobles’ palaces, and old farmhouses are found along the Naviglio, that flows through the towns of Corsico, Buccinasco, Trezzano sul Naviglio, and Gaggiano. After calling at Gaggiano, the boat returns to Milan.
River Oglio separates the two 13th century bastions of Soncino and Orzinuovi, guarding against each other. These were built by Cremona and Brescia people, respectively. Especially elegant is Soncino’s profile, with its fortress wall and the corner towers. The edifice was finely restored in the 19th century.

Very fascinating are the remains of Castelseprio Castrum, formidable defense system caught by fraud and destroyed by Ottone Visconti in the 12th century. The ruins of the fortress wall, towers and the two basilicas give evidence of its original splendour.

Rivers never fail to show their defensive purpose. The fortresses of Soncino and Orzinuovi face each other from the opposite banks of the River Oglio, each defending its own territory against the rival until after the unification of Italy. At Marne the agitated and deeply embanked River Brembo is dominated by a castle, still conveying the memories of the epic and fairy-like Middle Ages.
When turning your steps towards the trail of light, everything starts telling about the kinship with the river. In the morning, the labyrinthine and quiet magic of ruled waters, divided lands, and rows of trees got apparent. In the evening, the countryside turned into narrow valleys, scrub, lowlands, and finally swamps, embanked by paths and tracks bordered by willows, when not nearly disappearing in the woods of oaks, chestnuts, Turkey oaks, and marvellously flowered young “solvette”. Whether they flow along ingenious channels or bed formed by spring grass or antique pebbles, whether they gush out from fountains or disappear into ditches, waters obey uniquely the capricious rule of the river, which attracts, rejects, and dominates all of them.

At a closer look you may discern two different levels in this magnificent variety, hence understanding you have reached the beautiful Ticino, meandering and turbulent river.

Riccardo Bacchelli, *Gite d’autunno*, 1934
River people tend to build a mutual and symbiotic relationship with the watercourse. Any time-related event, either ordinary or special, rises from the river, by means of a natural link rooted in time. The residents of Ponte San Pietro renew annually their alliance with the river by preparing a great crib scene (*presepe*) on its water, expression of their simple and genuine faith. Day after day, since ancient times, the Lombard rivers passes by farmsteads, country houses, monasteries, and convents. The river-derived waters stream gently through cultivated fields, whose visual limits blur into the horizon. Situations depicting how everyday life is tailored on the slow rhythm of the river can be seen everywhere.
At Ponte San Pietro, where the slow-moving and flat portion of Brembo starts, the tradition of setting up a crib on the river is still kept alive: in Christmas time, a presepe is prepared close to the river. The importance of this tradition is stressed by the local Crib Museum, housing some of the most beautiful Italian models. In Christmas season, the museum is open to public everyday. In other periods, to book a visit you should telephone the museum’s manager Claudio Mattei, who is also one of the best crib maker in Italy.
Where crossing regions unchanged by human activities, rivers reveal their primordial aspect. In these moments they show their sumptuousness, originated from the very same vital humours that they themselves dispense. Every Lombard river hides a treasure of natural preciousness, whether small or great. The blue waters of the River Ticino, in those parts saved from invasive interventions of man, rediscover themselves by exploring secondary branches and plunging into mysterious pools, into parts of the bed by now realm of white water lilies, water ferns, marsh birds’ nests. Thick woods of poplars, oaks, and alders – living heritage of the ancient forest once blanketing the entire plain – still cloak the banks.

Canoeing is the ideal way to explore the portion of the Ticino running from Castelletto di Cuggiono down to Boffalora. The water of the river feeds several tributaries and meanders into oxbows rich with water lilies and water ferns, providing habitat for many species of birds. By canoe, one can easily explore them. Beyond Bernate, the Ticino is remarkably different, due to the presence of big white stones, in the past being collected and sold to ceramic factories. When the river is swollen, these stones cause foaming rapids. Until the 16th century, these banks teemed with gold diggers.
A few kilometres away from Bereguardo village, on the Ticino, there is a particular bridge, made out of boats. Completed in 1913, it is one of the last “barge bridges” built in Italy, and one of the fewest passable by car. Built according to the antique medieval techniques, in the beginning it was conceived as a temporary facility, but, against all forecasts, it survived the two World War, thus becoming a curious touristic attraction. However, the last flooding made necessary to perform a complete restoration of the bridge.

So antique is the graceful flight of grey herons at which we marvel, so antique is the singing of countless birds hiding in the vegetation, so antique is the trail left by ducks on the tranquil surface. The pristine nature of the river emits the feeling of a timeless place, in contrast to the populated banks dense with history.
In hydrographic terms, *fontanili* are subterranean springs mainly located in a narrow strip, just a few kilometres along the left bank of the Po. Their origin is due to Po River Basin’s typical geological conformation. The upstream sector’s permeable ground, in fact, allows the subterranean water to flow; on the contrary, the downstream ground is formed by impermeable layers, forcing out the water itself. However, *fontanili* are not entirely natural springs. The many water supply system created by man have significantly changed their current appearance.
Foreign travellers were surprised with the abundant and rich irrigation waters – organized in a network of pools, channels, ditches – cutting the Lombard countryside since already 1500. Such abundance is not due only to rivers, more water flowing inside subterranean layers. As soon as this water reaches the obstacle formed by clay layers, it is forced out through many fountains that, before feeding the channels, create extraordinary sceneries of pools covered with green duckweed, wooded small islands, reeds, white water crow-feet. The autumn spectacle of the red and yellow leaves dropping on Fontanile Brancalone’s limpid surface generates an unforgettable sensation.

Rivalta sul Mincio is the location where the River Mincio starts widens before creating the lake Maggiore. The town shows its intimacy to the river by way of a historical hand-made production, still continuing today but on a reduced scale: the making of cane mats. The rough material is abundantly available from the reeds growing in the suitable habitat provided by the placid waters of Mincio. Until a few years ago, these mats were largely used as roofing for greenhouses, because they do not only provide shadow, but – given the particular structure of the cane and the vegetal material of which it is composed – they also have excellent isothermal properties. Nowadays the activity in Rivalta focuses on making shelters and gazebos. In addition to the functional qualities, this product has earned a respect for its eco-compatible features. For such activity to flourish, in fact, it is necessary to preserve the integrity of the river environment providing the rough material. Therefore, this represents a unique model of integration between business and nature, consistent with what today is referred to as “sustainability”.
The Mercatone dell’Antiquariato, is held every last Sunday of the month along the first portion of the Naviglio Grande. Over 400 high-level exhibitors display their goods, making this antique market one of the antique industry’s top events. By walking next to the most ancient watercourse of Milan, you can find antique furniture, watches, 1930s jewels, rag dolls, aluminum model cars, bizarre eyeglasses, manual cameras, radios and gramophones, prints, antique ethnic items, trinkets and so forth. On these Sundays, all the local shops and restaurants and coffee bars are open.

Set in the no one’s land between nature and culture, between the strength of the river and the cleverness of the man, the system of Navigli waterways represents the achievement of a great dream, the one of weaving a vast watery web connecting lands and rivers. In the early Middle Ages, carriages loaded with goods would get stuck on the muddy and precarious roads, whereas the waterways were suitable for the transportation of even the marble for the construction of
Lombardia

The small village of Castiglione Olona has many art treasures. On the 15th century main square, the beautiful Cardinal Branda Castiglioni palace (1300-1400). Inside the palace, the Cardinal’s Chapel, frescoed by Vecchietta, and the cardinal’s bedroom and office (with the renowned “landscape of Veszprem”, ascribed to Masolino and Vecchietta). On the other side of the square, the Church of the Holy Body of Christ, built according to Brunelleschi’s model. The Collegiata, designed by Alberto, Giovanni e Pietro Solari, contains the stories of the Virgin (frescoed by Masolino) and the stories of Saints Stephen and Lawrence (frescoed by Vecchietta and Paolo Schiavo).
The Ticino, natural outlet of Lake Maggiore, flows across high-density areas, so a considerable percentage of its water is drained by the many dams, deviations, and channels. In spite of this, it has not lost all of its appeal. It winds through moraine hills and moorlands, among islands of smoothed stones and tree trunks brought down the stream. The Ticino enjoys a characteristic distinctiveness all its own: its waters are among the cleanest in Italy. This really impressive transparency has earned it the name “Blue River”.

Now the queues of freight boats are not present anymore. The advent of the railway deprived the Navigli of their commercial function. Still, if an image containing the history and culture of Lombardy exists, it is to be found in the world recounted by these channels. The river banks tell us stories of strenuous and hard-working life, incised into the lavatoi (public washing areas), the mills, and the typical balconied houses suggesting neighbourhood relationships erased...
by the modern anonymity. Next to these slices of real life, the noble palaces and villas built as country residences for the nobility and the upper class are indicative of a flourishing economy and a way of life.

In this era of new economies, in which human relationships are getting scarcer and scarcer, the Navigli keep their authenticity. Amongst traditional workshops, typical restaurants and taverns, something survives from that past, so recent but already longed for.

A snapshot of the past, a Milan that does not exist anymore. **Vicolo dei Lavandai** (Washerwomen Alley) is one of the last lavatoi (public washing areas) along Alzaia del Naviglio, that has miraculously survived till now. In the past it was frequented by washerwomen, who knelt and scrubbed against the brellin (washboard), under the typical tile covering. Today this is one of the most lively places of the city. Ateliers and art galleries, furniture and antique shops, restaurants, coffee bars, and bistros have turned the Navigli area into a smaller version of Montparnasse, a favourite for people of all ages especially on Summer, when the traffic is blocked and the quarter becomes a busy pedestrian precinct.
We have left it for last because it represents the final destination of all the waters running throughout the region. The great Po absorbs all the local streams and rivers, which lose their names and blend with it, to later pour into the sea.

The river is never a passive entity, nor is it a immobile object entering one’s visual field to build a stable relationship. While generally true, this is particularly evident for the Po. In its lapping waters is hidden an animal nature, a living breath. In
its slow and solemn pace is hidden something regal. In its violent and dreadful floods are hidden the rage and the power of a god. The great river moves the heart of man and speaks in the language of symbols. So we cannot resist the magic of the rows of poplars along its silent embankments, the farms fading into the mist, the bicycles passing by against the light, the boats moored to the banks, swinging on the water, the horizon made indistinct by immense distances.
Traveller’s Notes


