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### **From Cartography to Literature: Memory of the Islands and Utopia**

In a world, like the contemporary one, that suppresses distances and dissolves frontiers, apparently replacing the well ordained Old World according to a variety of places, how can man find his way? That is Michel Serres interrogation in the “legend” he uses to introduce his *Atlas*, by way of justifying it, concluding that: “even space changes and makes necessary other mapa-mundi”.<sup>1</sup>

As if time went on shaping new spaces, so much that each epoch corresponded to a different world. Even if there is no change, everything changes, however, when science and knowledge progress, allowing the opening up of new passages to unknown and only imagined or dreamed spaces: presently virtual passages, from the local to the global, in the past real ones, that connected step by step the Old to the New World, as inscribed in the memory of cartography.

Following the trajectory of its representations, we can find successive models of world perception, which are radically altered in the epoch of the Great Discoveries. Related to this change, the cartographic conception also changes. Step by step it sets itself free from the symbolic and religious traditions of medieval maps, as we can see in the so called “T in O”, the model proposed in the *Etymologies* of Saint Isidor of Seville and identified by Peter Whitfield as a theological and literal discourse rather than a geographical one.<sup>2</sup> This can be confirmed by the Hereford map (in 1300), which served as a reference to the Medieval

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Serres, “Légende”, in *Atlas* (Paris: Éditions Julliard, 1994), p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Peter Whitfield, *The Image of the World* (London: The British Library, 1995).

West. As a matter of fact, within the circle of the earth, drawn there by water, we can see the ambiguous configuration of a world centred in the Mediterranean, with the rivers of the Three Continents that were then known in the Western World, Europe, Asia and Africa, flowing into it. Simultaneously, it represents the Biblical World, where Jerusalem, the celestial as well as the terrestrial symbolization, occupies the central place.

By the end of the fifteenth century, a disruption in the history of this specific knowledge is already in progress, as a consequence of three facts: the rediscovery of Ptolemy's *Geography*, the introduction of the latitude representation in the maps and the invention of printing and engraving, opening up the possibility of the diffusion of a new image of the world projected in secular maps, more scientific, geometrically based and descriptive. Accordingly, and quite understandable, the figure of Christ in the Final Judgement, which presided over the Hereford map, or with the Globe in his hands, the Christ Pantokrator, Master of the Universe, in the Byzantine tradition, also presiding over the Psalter Map of 1250, were replaced by the portraits of Ptolemy and Amerigo Vespucci in the Waldseemüller map, already printed at the beginning of the sixteenth century (1507). There, the *Mundus Novus* is drawn for the first time, yet through a deformed vision of America, shaped as a long floating island, separated from Asia, as Cristóvão Colombo imagined it to be, and cut off by the ocean in two pieces.

The following year, the Francesco Rosselli map, which, in conjunction with the one above mentioned, shapes the new cartographical vision of the beginning of the sixteenth century, although it still configures a hesitant image of the world, it already represents the Antarctic.

Between the known and the unknown, the separation cannot avoid constant disturbance. In the expression of Christine Buci-Glucksmann, the world that is searched becomes, at the time, a “concept, an artefact, an existential and knowledgeable experience with its heroes and marchands.”<sup>3</sup> Besides the navigators, we must keep in mind great men of culture, namely Gérard Mercator who invested his entire life in the

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<sup>3</sup> Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *L'Oeil cartographique de l'art* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1996), p. 134.

production of an Atlas perfecting a Ptolomaic, geometric vision of the world, offered as a model for other future maps, a real sixteenth century encyclopaedia. There, Ortelius will find the necessary references for his *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (in 1570), the geographic compendium of the century, another landmark in the history of Western Cartography, accomplishing the image of the New World discovered by the Europeans through the total representation of America with all its territories specifically designated, as well as of the Pacific Ocean, which the voyage of Ferdinand Magellan revealed. In this Atlas, one can see the map of Portugal, drawn by Álvaro Seco, whose oldest known edition dates from 1560. Today, we think that Álvaro Seco was probably the first cartographer to produce a map of a State which was also, amongst the first in Europe, to define its frontiers, only marginally altered from the thirteenth century to the present day.<sup>4</sup> Making them visual in the territorial design will add to its informative value the reinforcement of a national conscience, all along this period of formation of modern states.

Maps of Old World regions, had already been printed accompanying the new editions of Ptolomeus *Geography*, to which the *Tabulae Novae* made corrections, although often inadequate, due to the lack of knowledge relative to both the proper representation of the meridians and the projections of the Globe on a flat surface. However, those were well known regions, such as those of the Mediterranean Basin represented in Portulano maps which were solely nautical instruments, commonly used in the XV century, and whose configurations and functions diverged from the ptolomaic and medieval images of the world. Essentially, they were practical tools founded on navigation experience. Going beyond this peripheral space of a sea already known into the open, large and unknown Ocean space, into “the seafaring

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<sup>4</sup> According to the opinion of Maria Fernanda Alegria e João Carlos Garcia, “Imagens de Portugal na Cartografia dos Séculos XVI e XVII: Leituras de uma Exposição”, in Comissão Municipal Infante 94 e Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimentos Portugueses (org.), *Cartografia Impressa dos Séculos XVI e XVII. Imagens de Portugal e Ilhas Atlânticas – Comemorações do 6º Centenário do Nascimento do Infante D. Henrique* (Porto: CNCDP, 1994), p. 18.

ways never navigated before”, by the various Iberian attempts through the Atlantic discovery voyages, posed the problem of the creation of much better reference systems. This was done through the replacement of medieval cosmology by astronomical navigation, as well as the introduction of latitude references in the maps, already accomplished in the cartographic representation of the recently discovered African Coast and Atlantic Islands.

Nevertheless, maps in the European Renaissance, more than simple nautical tools, were privileged instruments in the diffusion of new images of the world. It can be said that the fundamental contribution offered by these maps, then more accessible and amenable to rapid diffusion thanks to the printing revolution, was that of convincing mankind of the existence of new horizons by means of a logic and creditworthy cartographic image supported by documentary evidence, resting on the direct experience of navigation. Thus the German Geographer Laurentius Frisius will use the travel journal of Luis de Cadamosto, an Italian navigator at the service of the King of Portugal, to proclaim before the world the inaugural steps of the Portuguese maritime enterprise, by drawing the itinerary of the first voyages in the Atlantic, at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Visible in the plan of his *Cartha Marina* is the inscription of the action line through the iconographic reference to a Portuguese Caravela standing off Cape Saint Vincent, pointing to the almost inaccessible far distance, and navigating South East in search of new islands, in the *Oceanus Occidentalis*. In fact, desert islands as described in the legend, where Portuguese navigators only found birds and wild animals, to which they gave the name of Madeira and Porto Santo.<sup>5</sup>

Madeira, even before it was discovered by João Gonçalves Zarco and Tristão Vaz Teixeira, in 1419 (or 1420 as also mentioned), was already referred in a portulano, dated from 1351, that is kept in Florence. However, it is only several years after the first settlement, around 1425, that the Island of Madeira is thus referred to in a cartographic

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Marília dos Santos Lopes, *Coisas Maravilhosas e até agora nunca vistas – Para uma Iconografia dos Descobrimentos* (Lisboa: Quetzal, 1998), pp. 17-19.

document. Up until the Renaissance, the islands were represented in a very imprecise way, allowing them “great mobility” not only for technical reasons but mostly for aesthetic and political ones.

Regardless of the evolution experienced in the cartography field, this practice was still observed in the seventeenth century, as seen in the Coronelli map, produced in a Pre-Reform context, integrating the archipelago of Madeira into that of the Canary Islands. In this way, the Cartographic universe is ruled by a visual and political commanding vantage point. Here, as in the Renaissance representations evoked by Buci-Glucksmann, the ruling power maps the world and its territories into cognitive, documental, aesthetical and political sets.

In one of the levels of the map, the town of Funchal is drawn halfway between a plan and a panoramic view, according to the tendencies of the time, summoning all the interests invested in Urban Cartography in the seventeenth century, and thus calling attention to the harbour that positions Madeira in one of the main centre lines of the Atlantic seaways, in conjunction with the Canary Islands, Cape Verde, S. Tomé, St. Helen and Azores. Although the islands occupied a remarkable place in the discovery and colonization of the New World, they are part of a tradition rooted in a much larger historical process that goes back to Antiquity. Existing research confirms that in the old time there was already some notion of the Eastern Atlantic Islands, an idea somewhere between knowledge and imagination as exalted by classical mythology. Consider the Hespérides, where the nymphs guarded, with the help of a dragon, the golden apples Hermes would bring to Euristeu; or the Gorgades Islands, where the three monstrous Gorgons lived.

Some Islands are more or less fantastic, others are closer to reality, such as the Fortunate, identified with those of the Canary Archipelago. And the “fortune of the Fortunate”, following Alberto Vieira expression,<sup>6</sup> confuses them with Paradise. Consider also that many of the gods that inhabited classical mythology were born in islands (Zeus in Crete, Aphrodite in Citera, Apolo and Latona in Delos). The islands offered also a favoured scenario for the epic adventures displayed in the *Odyssey*

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<sup>6</sup> Alberto Vieira, “A Fortuna das Afortunadas”, in *Oceanos – Ilhas Fantásticas*, nº 46 (Lisboa: INCM, 2005).

and the *Eneide* joining gods and heroes alike; as well as mythical foundation of so many ideal constructions: the Atlantis and the Island of Hiperborean, to Plato and Hecateu of Abdera, or the Island of the Sun and Pancaia, in the conception of Iambulo and Evemero.

Covering the real and the imaginary, the religious and the secular, the mythic and the legendary, the islands are mandatory references in the mapping of History and Culture. The literary and cartographic memories record islands under permanent search, some found and also lost, blurring the real and the illusion. In this respect, note the paradigmatic case of *Insule Solis*, designation attributed to the Azores in several maps, following the narrative of *St. Brandão's Navigation*, as a descriptive process of the search for terrestrial paradise, supposedly located in that other *Insula Solistitionis*, to the West of the Iberian Peninsula, equally represented in medieval maps. Boccaccio also admitted in a Island from India, the *Ostia Solis*, a door opening into the Land of Happiness, which, according to Marco Polo's vision, could be found in the fabulous Island of Cipango, introducing in literature an idealization of Japan.<sup>7</sup>

Islands, those small worlds isolated from the rest of the world, as apparently suggested by the etymology of the word, offer their difference to the imagination of what is possible, arousing a special interest through out time, which will increase from the beginning of the Great Discoveries until the end of the seventeenth century. This explains the multiplicity of peculiar books, the so called "Books of Islands", or Isolarios, exclusively based in their cartographic representation mirrored in the corresponding introductory narrative. A double incidence of attention in the Island-Land, assuming the conscience of the continental territory, which underlies its alterity, peripheral, decentred.

However, the Sea is its supporting figure, defining the frontier between the Same and the Other, which is separated by its rupture. As Romero de Magalhães remarked, "more important than the bounded land is the surrounding waters that cut off the islanders life from the

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Juan Gil, "As Ilhas Imaginárias", in *Oceanos – Ilhas Fantásticas*, nº 46, *op. cit.*.

outside world.”<sup>8</sup> It is this maritime break that is responsible for their isolation that opens up the insular imaginary to the construction of utopia. According to Paul Ricoeur, what defines it, is “not its incapacity to be updated but its will of disruption”.<sup>9</sup> It is its ability in opening up a gap in the thickness of reality that originates the utopias genre, as we know initiated by Thomas More in the Renaissance, precisely at the moment when the world breaks into multiple possible worlds. This memory of Utopia, which runs through out the history of literature, also emerges in contemporary fiction, although deformed and problematized by its new interpretation. As Umberto Eco notes, “a book is a machine that produces interpretations rather than a freezing memory. Thus, it is a machine that produces interiority, and in that way it also produces memory. Books form a memory at their own because they dialogue among themselves. As Harold Bloom keeps saying, although at the frontiers of paradox, books are no more than a late treason of a preceding book.”<sup>10</sup>

In that way, an intertextual memory will be conformed, moulding the postmodern literature, namely Le Clézio’s novel *La Quarantaine*,<sup>11</sup> where it crosses the memory of Utopia. The voyage used by Thomas More to shape the matricial form of this literary genre, is also in that work the subject matter that structures fictional discourse, although the title of the book remits the expectation of the reading towards immobility and fixidity imposed upon a place. Nevertheless, the *Quarantaine* announced will only acquire full meaning in its relation with the voyage, unfolded using the boat motif. However, a special boat, a “bateau ivre”, doubly represented on the basis of Rimbaud’s archetype: by the adventure of the stormy voyage that will lend it to the unknown world of the “quarantine”, as well as by staging the other face of the poet’s boat, the metaphoric adventure of a self separated from himself in the forms used by the narrative to decline the re-affirmation

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<sup>8</sup> Joaquim Romero Magalhães, “Ilhas, Isolamento, Solidão”, in *Oceanos – Ilhas Fantásticas*, n° 46, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *L’Idéologie et l’utopie* (Paris: Éd du Seuil, 1997), p. 405.

<sup>10</sup> Umberto Eco, “Réflexions sur l’imprimé”, in *Magazine Littéraire*, n° 262, 1989, p. 35.

<sup>11</sup> J.M.G. Le Clézio, *La Quarantaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1995).

“Je est un autre”. In this dynamics, the echos of an intertextual dialogue are unfolded. In them is invested the attempt to reconstruct a lost unity by means of the voyage through writing, as a postmodern interpretation of a symbolist programme, supporting the problematics of Utopia. In this sense we can evoke Pierre Jourde’s understanding of Utopia as a kind of terrestrial eschatology where linear time comes to an end and wraps itself in a perpetual happiness, in an eternal return, reflecting the image of a circle, that is that of the island, as a representation of unity, perfection, homogeneity.<sup>12</sup>

Searching for the rhizomatic lines that weave the text, we can find several voyages incised into the narrator’s travels, going through the circular trajectory of the textual discourse. It is in this context that Rimbaud has his place as a mythical actor, not only performing in fiction as a character and thus linking it with the historical reality of the nineteenth century, but also metamorphosing himself in other fictional entities, including the narrator. All of them are Great Voyagers, representing the voyage of the Other, as well as the situation of the self in search of Otherness.

Although at the time of the narration, which is at the end of the twentieth century, the two characters constructed by analeptic process, the poet and the narrator’s uncle, called Léon like himself, had already disappeared, their alleged travelling narratives still remain as “légende”. That is, what was enlarged by the imagination and should be read in the text-palimpsest, thus remitting us to the model reader and writer. The text itself is a “légende”, due to the fact that it follows an image and lends it meaning: the map of the islands which limit the “quarantine” space, similar to the process used by Thomas More who presented in his first edition of Utopia, an imaginary map of the island that shapes it, the one the text will describe and explain.

In Le Clézio’s novel, we are dealing with a space restricted to the time of Lent, leading to the Resurrection, to Easter, thus leading also to the passage towards a neighbouring Eden, the island in front, its twin and yet always blessed and distanced, on the other side. The voyage that

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Pierre Jourde, *Géographies imaginaires* (Paris: Lib. José Corti, 1991), pp. 122, 123.



sets the rupture with the civilized and rundown “Old World” of Parisian society somehow reflects the image of that break through the imposed “quarantine”, signalling the spatial-temporal apprenticeship which would allow the fulfilment of the desire to accede to the Other place, also to the Other time, of Utopia. Nevertheless, the voyage subverts the genre of the utopian narratives by following postmodern trends crafted by the rhetoric of irony and parody. In that way, it is possible the functioning of the island of Quarantine simultaneously as utopia and dystopia, as well as of the other island, reproducing its amplified image: the Mauritian Island where the origin of the author lies, and whose existence the text will establish on the basis of the problematic configuration of the self.

In conclusion, I can say that the theme of alterity is fully manifested through the explosion of the narrative discourse by allowing it to go beyond the frontier between life and fiction, and between this and the other genres, poetry and history, utopia and autobiography, as well as between texts or literary tendencies and modes of representation approaching the visuality of the map and the legibility of the text, in a way of equating the utopian search for an absolute Book, enclosing the memory of all others. Quoting Pierre Jourde,

la césure frontalière peut devenir articulation de l’imaginaire, quête de l’Être; la frontière qui sépare et met en contact deux entités, c’est la cassure qui peut générer le texte; la ligne frontière est aussi ligne de l’écriture, se déroulant dans la zone de l’ambiguïté.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 100, 101.