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Mythical Islands between Reality and Utopia

Perhaps due to the nature of that formless, cool, humid element Thales of Miletus said, in that halting beginning to our thinking, was the ἀρχή of all things;¹ perhaps because of this magical surge, sometimes gentle and smooth, sometimes wild and violent with which the sea embraces the land; perhaps because of the echoes of exile and abandonment, or of refuge and safety, of journeys and adventures, dreams of paradise escaping from the human condition; maybe due to all this and so much more, islands have always had a special place in our imagination. From the most remote image of a mountain rising, as an island, from the

¹ See H. Diels / W. Kranz, *Die Fragmenta der Vorsokratiker* (Berlin: Weidmannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1956) Erster Band, pp. 67-81; Jean Voilquin, *Les penseurs grecs avant Socrate de Thalès de Milet à Prodicos* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1964) pp. 45-48; W. K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967) pp. 39-72; Gerard Legrand, *Pour connaître la pensée des présocratiques* (Paris: Bordas, 1970) pp. 30-41; G. S. Kirk / J. E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers. A critical History with a Selection of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) pp. 76-99. On the symbolism of water, see: Gaston Bachelard, *L'eau et les rêves. Essai sur l'imagination de la matière* (Paris: José Corti, 1942); Jean Chevalier / Alain Gheerbrant, *Dictionnaire des symboles. Mythes, rêves, coutumes, gestes, formes, figures, couleurs, nombres*, (Paris: Ed. Robert Laffont et Ed. Jupiter, 1969), s. u. Eau; Gilbert Durand, *Les Structures Anthropologiques de l'Imaginaire* (Paris: Bordas, 1969); Mircea Eliade, *Traité d'Histoire des Religions* (Paris: Payot, 1970); Jean Rudhardt, *Le thème de l'eau primordiale dans la mythologie grecque* (Berne: Ed. A. Francke, 1971); "Eau (Divinités de l') dans la mythologie grecque" in Yves Bonnefoy (dir.), *Dictionnaire des mythologies et des religions des sociétés traditionnelles et du monde antique*, (Paris: 1981); J. C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982) s. u. Water.

waters, symbolizing the birth of the cosmos (immersion, in contrast, meaning destruction and death), up to the most recent day dreams stirred by the vision of the South Sea Islands as paradise, and the vast tradition of the Fortunate Islands, a plurality of images, anxieties, thoughts and feelings have been created around the representation of the *island*.

In mythical terms, the island can symbolize organised space, the pure peak of a mountain the waters of the great flood could not reach, a place of order surrounded by chaos and darkness. This space, encircled by mythical monsters representing the cosmic threat of dissolution and disorder is not, obviously, any profane space but rather a sacred one, the umbilicus and centre of the creation of the world, a space that the ritual practices of the tribe are constantly organizing and recreating. Just as, from the temporal perspective, rituals, repeating primordial mythical acts occurring at the moment when the world was created have caused the abolition of history and linear time, putting us in a kind of eternal present, in the same way space, coinciding with cosmogony, continually puts us at the heart of created space, the cyclical place and repeated victory of order over disorder, of Light over Darkness.² In myth, sometimes called primitive thought, Man lives constantly at the heart of the Absolute, inhabiting the same time and the same space – the only ones that fit in his mental framework – as the origin of creation. The centrality of the island precisely coincides with the original centrality of the universe, with which it is identified as being one and the same, and draws the horizon where the great cosmic δρᾶμα takes place. In other words, the theatrical liturgy sets the rhythm of the seasons and organizes the group's entire social life. If it is legitimate to note that in such a model of thinking there is no place for novelty,

² On mythical thought and, particularly, on mythical space and mythical time, see: Mircea Eliade, *Images et symboles. Essais sur le symbolisme magico-religieux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952); *Id.*, *Le mythe de l'éternel retour. Archétypes et répétition* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969); *Id.*, *Le sacré et le profane* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972); Georges Gusdorf, *Mythe et métaphysique* (Paris, Flammarion, 1953; *Id.*, *Les sciences humaines et la pensée occidentale*, vol. II «Les origines des sciences humaines (Antiquité, Moyen Age, Renaissance)» (Paris: Payot, 1967); Maurice Leenhardt, *Do Kamo. La personne et le mythe dans le monde mélanésien* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971).

change and progress, or History; it is no less so to note that, in those societies where the word, always the same because archetypal, is the unalterable creative breath of the universe, Man, continually anchored in the Absolute through myth and ritual, does not undergo the fears and insecurity of a historical period open *ad infinitum*.

The advent of Reason, or rational thought, to use current expressions, broke up this harmonious whole, destroying the unity of the real, splintering it into fragmentary plurality. Where previously, Man's home was the centre of the world, where previously there had been complete coincidence with the Absolute, with the truth of myth, the only thing that could be thought or said; there was now a break, an exile out of which emerged surprise, doubt, anguish, but also the epic desire for knowledge and the quest for plenitude, perhaps the most glorious sign of our restless condition, the metaphysical thirst of our words and gestures. The word 'philosophy', better than any other, expresses our condition as exiles, and identifies us as the heirs of Greece. Philosophy, φιλοσοφία, in Greek, does not mean the possession of knowledge, but a tension, a desire for *knowledge*, a *philo-sophy*, a fragile discourse, *logos* desirous to find that which by its absence is noted and which, in a striking paradox, can be obscurely seen.³ It is in this tension, in this extended arch which goes from the finite in which we recognise the infinity we all long for, which is shown in the ontological mutilation that designs us as Men, those admirable, unique beings who, regardless of the beauty of the gesture, await death with a hand stretched to the stars. It is absolutely clear that after the Greeks, Man's home is not simply the earth, in its narrow horizontality, but the long space which goes from the subterranean to the heavens; because it is by looking at the heavens that Man grows and because of his awareness that he will turn to dust.

³ For the characterization and the meaning of the philosophical attitude, see, for example, Martin Heidegger, *Was ist das – das Philosophie?* (Pfullingen: Günther Neske, 1956) (there is a french transl. "Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?" in *Questions II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957)); Karl Jaspers, *Einführung in die Philosophie* (München: R. Piper, 1973); José Ortega y Gasset, "Qué es filosofía", *Obras Completas* (Madrid: Alianza Editorial – Revista de Occidente, 1983), Tomo VII, pp. 273-438.

A space torn by the inquiring eye, this is the horizon which man inhabits most deeply, the broad horizon where love and disappointment are born, death and the dream of immortality, the feeling of abandonment and the nostalgia of the Absolute,⁴ or to use a really Portuguese word, *saudade*,⁵ a great sweeping *saudade*, a *saudade* not so much for the past but for the projected plenitude of the future.

The symbolic value of the island has been transfigured and enriched by this transformation. With the decentring of places, the doubling or multiplying of spaces, the island has been dislocated and, to some extent, marginalised. From the central, closed space, the umbilicus of the world, a place of intersection between Men and Gods radiating order, the island now inhabits the strange, far off world, a space at the very boundaries of time and memory, where look and imagination cross, knowledge and mystery, curiosity and fear, *topos* and *u-topos*, in other words, that which has and hasn't a place. The island can therefore be, like the mythical Atlantis, the representation of a golden past which the decadence of time has come to veil. Or it is a dreamt of place where the days lengthen into sweet sunsets, trees bear fruit and the fields

⁴ On the radical meaning of this “nostalgia”, see George Steiner, *The Nostalgia of the Absolute* (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Co., 1974).

⁵ On “saudade”, see Carolina Michaelis de Vasconcellos, *A saudade portuguesa* (Lisboa: Seara Nova, 1922); Dalila Pereira da Costa/Pinharanda Gomes, *Introdução à saudade* (Porto: Lello, 1976); José Marinho, *Verdade, condição e destino no pensamento português contemporâneo* (Porto: Lello, 1976); *Id.*, *Teixeira de Pascoaes, poeta das origens e da saudade e outros textos* (Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional – Casa da Moeda, 2005); Eduardo Lourenço, *O labirinto da Saudade* (Lisboa: D. Quixote, 1978); *Id.*, *Portugal como Destino* seguido de *Mitologia da Saudade* (Lisboa: Gradiva, 1999); Teixeira de Pascoaes, *Arte de ser português* (Lisboa: Roger Delraux, 1978); Sergio Filippi, *A saudade* (Porto: Lello, 1981); Joaquim de Carvalho, “A alma portuguesa” in *Obras completas* (Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1987) Tomo V, pp. 105-137; Eurico Figueiredo, *Psicanálise da saudade* (Lisboa: O Jornal, 1991); *Actas do I Colóquio Luso-Galaico sobre a Saudade* (Viana do Castelo: Câmara Municipal, 1996); Afonso Botelho, *Saudade, regresso à origem* (Lisboa: Instituto de Filosofia Luso-Brasileira, 1997); Paulo Borges, *Pensamento atlântico: estudos e ensaios de pensamento luso-brasileiro* (Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional – Casa da Moeda, 2002); António Braz Teixeira, *A filosofia da saudade* (Lisboa: Quidnovi, 2006).

produce without needing to be worked in, and the voice of fountains accompanies loving words long into pleasant nights. It might be the habitat of fantastic animals and extraordinary beings; or even a refuge from the advancing evils of civilization. Through the immense force of the image, the symbolism of the island is inexhaustible.

I'd like to illustrate this evocative power of the *island* by quoting a magnificent example of Portuguese literature: I'm referring to *O Marinheiro. Drama estático em um quadro* by Fernando Pessoa.⁶ In the text, three sisters are keeping vigil over a maiden who, dressed in white, lies dead in her coffin. The action takes place in a circular space, a room in a castle perhaps, stripped of all objects: only chairs and four burning torches. In the background, a high and narrow window shows a small stretch of sea between two hills. The austerity of the setting is not only appropriate for the severity of the situation, but also for the power and mystery of the word, the fear of the word now said and worn out, the melancholy of a word which recreates childhood, time and reality. One of the characters says, "Were you happy, my sister?" And she replies, "At this moment, I'm starting to have been that long ago..."⁷ It is the view of that stretch of sea and of a boat, maybe real, maybe imagined, that leads one of the sisters to talk about a dream. "I dreamt of a mariner that was lost on a far off island. On that island there were stiff palm trees, a few, and vague birds passing by."⁸ It is the sea, and through the sea, the island that makes one of the sisters recall (or invent) the dream she had on the shore, the dream of the mariner on the far off island. And in that dream, the mariner lost on the island began dreaming of a homeland and believed it with such intensity that the imagined town soon had people and houses and landscapes more real than real things. And one day, in trying to remember the childhood he'd really had, not the past in the imagined town, but the other that he must have had, he found there

⁶ Fernando Pessoa, *O marinheiro. Poema estático em um acto* (Lisboa: Ática, s/d). We are responsible for the quotations in English. There is, however, an English translation: Fernando Pessoa, *The Selected Prose of Fernando Pessoa*, trans. by Richard Zenith (London: Grove Press, 2001).

⁷ Fernando Pessoa, *op. cit.*, p. 42.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 46.

was no childhood, no youth except those imagined by him and that, after all, “his whole life had been the life he’d dreamt”.⁹

If the action were to finish now, it would already be a great deal, but Pessoa goes further and in this highly subtle reflection on the hesitant distinction between dream and reality, the decisive question from one of the sisters definitively marks the rhythm of reversibility between dream and reality: “Why shouldn’t the only real thing in all this be the mariner, and we and all this be only his dream?”¹⁰

For us, as for the sisters keeping vigil over the dead maiden, aware of death and the invention that comes through words, the island evokes that indomitable dreamt of horizon that, through the strength of the evocation, turns the presumable present reality into a dream.

One of the most famous ancient islands that have come down to our times is certainly Ithaca which, like the island in *O Marinheiro*, lies between reality and utopia. Having a central place in Homer’s *Odyssey*, Ithaca, the homeland of the heroic son of King Laertes, is for Ulysses the *place* of a primordial qualitative memory keeping the indelible remembrance of his wife Penelope, his son Telemachus, and his high-ceilinged house. The memory of Ithaca was the guiding light for Ulysses on his return from the Trojan War. It was through Ithaca, this luminous nostalgia, through the intense desire to see the island again and the *saudade* it awoke in him that Ulysses refused the offer of immortality conceded by Calypso, obviously a seductive offer for any mortal.¹¹ For Ithaca and for what it represented, Ulysses undertook his journey, experiencing countless suffering. But in what sense did reality and utopia cross in Ithaca and why does Ithaca still have such immense symbolic vitality for us today? Firstly, Ithaca is the homeland of Ulysses, it’s where he belongs, the land where he built his vast palace and where

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 50.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 55.

¹¹ Homer, *Od.*, V, 203-224. On this subject, see José Pedro Serra, “Da fidelidade a Penélope ao amor à viagem”, in VV., *Mito e literatura* (Lisboa: Inquérito, 1993), pp. 45-62; *Id.*, “A teia de Penélope”, in Maria Luísa Ribeiro Ferreira (Org.), *As teias que as mulheres tecem* (Lisboa: Colibri, 2002), pp. 17-26.

Penelope and Telemachus live. If Ithaca, however, had only been that, it would have been a place of decay for the hero, a place of melancholy and unhappiness. Limited to that enclosed land, Ithaca would only have been a prison that buried the desire for glory and fame, the prime aspiration of Homeric heroes. At the same time that it is home, a place of roots, of fidelity to the land, Ithaca is also the port of departure, a slightly open dream in which we raise our deepest aspirations, a portico for the matricial journey on the quest for the essential. A land where you are, but also a land from where you depart, a land which holds us, but also lets us go; a horizon of the visible act, but also the horizon of the dreamt act: all this exists and is equally real in Ithaca. Therefore, Ithaca is inseparable from the journey, it *is* the journey, more profoundly, it covers the extent of who we are to what we aspire to be, from what we have to what is missing. And it is only because it includes the *journey*, that Ithaca can become a destination, basically metamorphosing itself into the mythical island of our true identity, an authentic homeland, a decisive reference for our wandering, a final reason for our roving.

In Homer, the journey is, despite all the suffering, successfully accomplished with Ithaca the encountered homeland and Penelope the portrait of the total love that fidelity against all expectations makes bloom. In the *Odyssey*, the journey cannot be separated from the destination reached, the final port which illuminates and justifies the whole route undertaken. The journey has an end and, in its own way, that end is the “promised land”. It is hardly difficult to feel the overflowing joy echoing at the close of the poem. However, the journey does not always finish by safely finding port, with all promises kept. In the disorientation of crossing paths, in the difficulty of thinking and finding a *meaning*, in the absurdity or indifference which is then created, feelings which contemporary Man knows so well, Ithaca, the mythical island, our journey’s end, is lost in the mist of our disbeliefs and afflictions. Even so, Ithaca does not lose the strength of its expressive symbolism.

In a beautiful poem by Cavafy,¹² actually called *Ithaca*, in contrast to Homer, the stress is not on the *end* of the journey, on the arrival port,

¹² *The Complete Poems of Cavafy*, translated by Rae Dalven (Florida: Hartcourt, Brace & Company, 1989), pp. 36-37.

the smooth hands and face of the still beautiful Penelope; the tender embrace of Telemachus; the sweet vision of his palace. Here, the stress is on the journey, on what it will discover and experience, even if the destination is uncertain. Cavafy begins:

When you start on your journey to Ithaca
Then pray that the road is long,
Full of adventure, full of Knowledge.

The meaning of the journey, having it, is not so much on arrival, at some far off reference point, but on the adventures on the way, on the variety of *flavours* that the days offer us. It's important, nonetheless, to prepare for the journey, raising our minds to noble thoughts and to a delicate sensibility, so that no terrible monsters rise up before us to obscure the clarity of our gaze.

You will never meet such as these on your path,
If your thoughts remain lofty, if a fine
Emotion touches your body and your spirit.

Therefore, the journey might be long because the subtle delicacies will be in greater number and the accumulated knowledge immense.

Then pray that the road is long.
That the summer mornings are many,
that you will enter ports seen for the first time
with such pleasure, with such joy!
Stop at Phoenician markets,
And purchase fine merchandise,
mother-of-pearl and corals, amber and ebony,
and pleasurable perfumes of all kinds,
buy as many pleasurable perfumes as you can;
visit hosts of Egyptian cities,
to learn and learn from those who have knowledge.

Even thrown up on the far off shores of a distant world, closer to the mythically possible than the empirically real, the memory of Ithaca cannot be lost, because it is the only grounding for the journey.

Always keep Ithaca fixed in your mind.
To arrive there is your ultimate goal.
But do not hurry the voyage at all.
It is better to let it last for long years;

However, this adventure has a modern taste of smooth bitterness: the journey is everything that Ithaca can offer, not the arrival, not the certainty of an effective encounter, real and full.

Ithaca has given you the beautiful voyage.
Without her you would never have taken the road.
But she has nothing more to give you.
And if you find her poor, Ithaca has not defrauded you.
With the great wisdom you have gained, with so much experience,
you must surely have understood by then what Ithacas mean.

This is the meaning Cavafy found here for the mythical Ithaca: the generous gift of the journey, the interlaced adventure of dreams and experiences; although the island remains, that island where we effectively cure the evils of our finitude, reduced to the truth of illusion that can still stir the soul. If in Homer it is the memory of Penelope's living hand that guides Ulysses; here, on this journey, it is the fleshless hand of Penelope that steers the ship.

Whether it is the Ithaca where Ulysses arrives, or the dreamt Ithaca, or an Ithaca which is real as an exterior thing, or the Ithaca of the inner search, whether it is these or any other Ithacas – and there are as many as the multiple *saudades* draw – the mythic-symbolic force of the island remains and is renewed because, for those who see clearly, there are visible subtle ties in each human act that bind us to the far off islands of our most essential aspirations still to be fulfilled.