AN IMAGINARY LIFE

Our imaginary geography is infinitely vaster than that of the material world. This observation, however trite, allows us to sense the immense generosity implied in this vital human function: that of bringing to life that which cannot claim a presence in the world of volume and weight. Like the angelic inhabitants whose hierarchies our ancestors debated, like the unicorn and the manticore, like the notions of perfect democracy and good will to all men, the imaginary places of our mind need no materiality to exist in our consciousness. Utopia and Wonderland, Kafka's Castle and the Kingdom of Eldorado are always present, though no official atlas will show their true location. "It is not down in any map. True places never are," wrote Herman Melville after seeing so much of the world we call real.

Tourist guides offer excursions along the arduous paths of Odysseus and Don Quixote. Crumbling buildings are said be the true Casa o Ramalhete and Juliet's house in Verona. A Colombian village assures us that it is the Macondo of Aureliano Buendía, and for many years now, the British Postal Service has busied itself with correspondence addressed to Mr. Sherlock Holmes, Esq. at 221B Baker Street in London. Biology tells us that we descend from creatures of flesh and blood, but intimately we know that we are the sons and daughters of ghosts of ink and paper. Ages ago, Luis de Góngora defined them with these words:

> *El sueño, autor de representaciones,*
> *En su teatro, sobre el viento armado,*
> *Sombras suele vestir de bulto bello.*

Our world is not constrained to border walls and tax havens. On the contrary. It is by following our imaginary geographies that we have mapped our world: the rest is only confirmation. Before seeing the creatures of the New World, Christopher Columbus already knew what he would find, because he had read Aristotle and Pliny, so that when, on his third voyage, he saw, off the coast of Venezuela, the seal-like manatees, he noted in his diary with a touch of disappointment: "Today I saw three mermaids approach the side of the ship -- but they are not as beautiful as they are made out to be." Before seeing the New World, Columbus already had a vocabulary with which to name its wonders.

As is the case for any language, an imaginary construct such as Atlantis always precedes, for better or for worse, our geographical and architectural vocabularies. Perhaps we carry within an ancient desire for migration and settlement, of painted caves and sheltered tree-tops, from which we draw our cartographical blueprints. And whether those blueprints become solid edifices or not, they demand, before the first step is taken or the first skyline perceived, a preconception of space, of time and travel.

The difference between Eldorado and the anguished locations of Kafka is that historians decided that the former corresponded to the tangible bricks of Lima or Potosí, while the latter were not allowed to cross the borders of the printed page, though both realms were born as dreams. Kafka's Castle did not need to be built in wood and stone to be fully grounded in our universe; others, like the Venetian palaces that sit on water, required masons of flesh and blood. In either case, existence in the imagination must precede existence in the world. Unimagined things

lack existence, like those Turkish mounds visible but not seen until Schliemann imagined them to be –and proved them to be-- the ruins of Troy, or those derelict walls that come into being only after they've been covered in graffiti. Imagination rescues reality from the ineffable realm of real-life ghosts.

As in the case of Wonderland or the Città dell Sole, not every imaginary realm solidifies into reality. The Floating Island of Laputa, the distant community of Utopia, the Emerald City of Oz, are places that we visit in the mind but not the body, necessary though they are to what we call the human condition. These places, which depend on what St Paul called "the evidence of things not seen," are the foundations of our belief in the tangibility of the world. Faith, religious or poetic, needs places of residence, lodgings in the Pays de Cocagne or the Beyond. And to reach these realms, however inexistent, we must travel. Even if there was no known road to the Garden of Eden, the author of Genesis found it necessary to specify that guardian cherubim were placed in the east, and that eastwards of Eden lay the Land of Nod to which Cain would later be banished. Maps, however rudimentary, implicitly suggest a voyage.

The need to make up countries and then tell of how the author came upon them, is very ancient. Written in the mid-third millennium B.C., the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is the chronicle of a king's travel down to the Kingdom of the Dead. The *Odyssey*, composed sometime in the eighth century B.C., is the account of an obstacle race that reaches, after many years, the longed-for finishing line of Ithaka. Lucian of Samosata' *True History*, from the first century B.C., is entertaining but less convincing as a travel-log; describing his trip to the Moon and to the Island of the Blessed, Lucian's purpose is not to chronicle anything but

to mock his own society in a distorting mirror. The travels of Sinbad, first set down in the fourteenth century but certainly much older, take the hero to magical lands of incalculable riches and prodigious dangers. In the sixteenth century, the scholar Wu Ch'eng En told the story of how the Monkey King travelled West with his brave companions to serve the Buddha in an India made up of magical dreams.

Many of the earliest travels are quests for the impossible. In the third century B.C. the sorcerer Xu Fu was sent by the Ming Emperor Qin Shi Huang to find the elixir of immortality, this time for himself. Xu Fu travelled to the mythical Penglai Mountain and on his return explained that on its slopes grew the herbs from which the elixir was made, but a dragon guarded the crop with sleepless determination. Nevertheless, the elixir could be obtained if the Emperor sent three thousand virgin boys and girls to Penglai. The Emperor complied, but the expedition was blocked by another giant monster whose abode was the sea. A third expedition was launched, this time taking the precaution of adding a team of archers to the fleet. From that last voyage, Xu Fu never returned.

Perhaps imaginary places are simply born from the desire to see beyond the horizon. Intrepid travellers from Iceland, China and Africa set out long before Columbus to explore the unknown seas; others, equally daring but less keen on the material act itself, stayed at home and tried simply to of dream them. A medieval history tells of a nobleman who was advised by his confessor to undertake a pilgrimage to Jerusalem in order to purge his sins. Loathe to travel the two thousand miles between his home and the holy city, the nobleman calculated the circumference around his castle and, for several years, walked every day

the full circle until he had eventually covered the required purgatorial distance.

Among the various kinds of imaginary travel, that of the armchair traveller is a class in itself. Some, like the Elder Pliny in the first century, wrote entertainingly about faraway places he had never seen with a conviction that made readers centuries later, like Othello, believe that there were "men whose heads/ Do grow beneath their shoulders" -- as were then depicted in the *Nuremberg Chronicles* of 1493. Others, like that consummate liar John de Mandeville, wrote of having visited much of the East, drinking from the Fountain of Youth on the Malabar coast and serving in the army of the fabled Emperor of China. However, "of Paradise," he noted with scrupulous honesty, "I cannot speak because I have not been there." Later travellers embellished their narratives with those of previous explorers, seeing through the eyes of their more adventurous colleagues sights that they then ascribed to their own experience. Even in our time, celebrated travel writers such as Richard Kapuscinski and Bruce Chatwin have been shown to have employed these refined forms of plagiarism.

Imaginary or not, travel must take place on water, over land or in the sky. Of all the geographical features available to the travel writer, islands are perhaps the most sought-after, because they unite all three spaces in one convenient setting. Islands are essential to the geography of imaginary travel. Marooned on desolate rocks or welcomed into an insular kingdom, imaginary voyagers have long sought islands as their ideal terrain, much as detective-story writers seek the closed space of snow-bound manors to commit their murders. Island life imposes upon the observer an upside-down perception of the world. Instead of seeing

the sea as something enclosed by land (for example that *Mare Nostrum* to which so many ancient people staked a claim), islanders perceive their land as cradled by sea. In continental geometry, earth is the circumference framing the aquatic centre; in that of an islander, he and the land occupy the centre together, and are the fixed point of a universe in constant ebb and flow. For the inhabitant of the land, seas and lakes are like gashes or holes in a vast domestic space; for the islander, the sea has something of the sky about it and his island has the quality of a star, a luminous sensory point in the great primordial chaos that surrounds it. It's no accident that islands on a map look like constellations. Jorge Manrique, in the fifteenth century, argued that *"Nuestras vidas son los ríos/ Que van a dar a la mar que es el morir".* Such an inexorable convergence is not inexorable for the islander, who sees our lives as ships travelling mortal waters, finally coming to berth on dry land. "A body of land surrounded by water": that is how the English define an island -- "body", like a human body, being the embodiment of the self, the essence of a singular place. For islanders, the surrounding sea exists only because their island requires its existence.

It shouldn't surprise us then that it was, literally, the inhabitants of an island who populated the sea with non-existent islands, inventing specific geographies and stories for them. A continental people hardly require the recreation of other lands: beyond the mountains of Portugal, or the woods, or the valleys, there live surely other people who are their reflection and whose stories echo their own. On an island, however, there are no "other lands": everything is immediately conceivable, nothing is hidden away. That is why the Anglo-Saxons, in order to conjure up different ways of being, invented unseen islands that lay always beyond the horizon, islands that may or may not be one day discovered, but

which required no physical presence in order to exist. That imaginary cartography has a prehistory in Greece and in the Arab world, but the three fundamental categories to which, without exception, every imaginary island belongs, were dreamt up and defined over barely two short centuries by dreamers from Great Britain: Thomas More's Utopia, Robinson Crusoe's Island of Despair, and the islands visited by Captain Gulliver. These are the models for all our imaginary islands.

Imaginary cartography, unlike the kind found in traditional encyclopaedias and atlases, has no borders. Its places exist in a limitless space and occupy an infinitely abundant landscape. They allow for the creation of perfectly effective and perfectly atrocious societies, places where everything is possible (according to secret and rigid rules) and where we may see ourselves as other people, from our endemic point of view. Luís de Camões, considering our condition as eternal sipwrecked survivors, put it in these words:

> *Onde pode acolher-se um fraco humano,*
> *Onde terá segura a curta vida,*
> *Que não se arme, e se indigne o Céu sereno*
> *Contra um bicho da terra tão pequeno?*

Imaginary geography certainly "pode acolher-nos", these tiny "bichos da terra" that we humans all are. But it also allows us to solve, or at least better consider, complex political problems in the world in which we live. The following story is true. On 4 November 2003, fourteen Kurdish refugees and four Indonesian sailors landed in a small boat on the Island of Melville, in Australian waters, 80 kilometres north of the mainland city of Darwin, intending to claim political asylum. On learning

of this event and unwilling to deal with more asylum seekers, John Howard, Prime Minister of Australia, took a drastic decision: he decided to sever the nation's ties with Melville and, in the name of his government, disowned the island along with nearly 4,000 other small islands belonging to Australia. This gesture, though surprising, wasn't unprecedented. In 2001 the Australian government had already excised Christmas Island from its migration zone, in order to be able to export to its inhospitable shores several hundred illegal immigrants.

If our world's map can be modified by the imaginations of Thomas More, Defoe or Jonathan Swift in order to be populated with places rich in fantastic possibilities, why not take the reverse approach and get rid of some others which are inconvenient, dangerous or inefficient? The Australians acted out of inhumanity, injustice and self-interest; we can act out of humanity, ecology and intelligence. The Canadian writer Anne Lafontaine suggested the following: to wait until our political leaders gather for one of their frequent summit meetings on some small island and, quickly and boldly rub that island off our maps. Let us then imagine in the place of that island an empty dot, a smudge, no bigger than an earthworm's bite, an invisible part of the oblivious sea.

One last point.

Every map has its journey, and every journey, imaginary or real, is in a sense sequential, and we can read his collection as a series of interconnected chapters, Atlantis leading to Narnia, Narnia to Ultima Thule, Ultima Thule to the Garden of Eden. The Argentinian poet Alejandra Pizarnik, well versed in imaginary travels, once wrote:

"Y es siempre el jardín de lilas del otro lado del río. Si el alma pregunta si queda lejos se le responderá: del otro lado del río, no éste sino aquél."

As Pizarnik understood, no journey permits the explorer to return to his point of departure. No sooner have we weighed anchor than the port changes behind us: new buildings spring up on re-drawn streets and new people come to live in them, surrounded by a landscape that has changed too. Even in our memory nostalgia reconfigures the world that is left behind, transforming huts into palaces and banalities into marvels. The explorer --traveller, immigrant, exile, outcast, refugee-- is doomed to remember a place that no longer exists. In this sense, all our geography is imaginary. My own certainly is.

Because my father was a diplomat, my childhood was largely spent traveling from place to place.The bedrooms in which I slept, the words spoken outside the door, the landscapes around me constantly changed. Only my small library remained the same, and I remember the intense relief I felt when, tucked once again in an unfamiliar bed, I opened my books and there on the expected page was the same old story and the same old illustration. Home was a place in stories, both in the physical object I held in my hands and in the printed words. When Mole, in *The Wind in the Willows,* returns to his little house from the big outside world, and lets his eyes wander round the old room, and sees how plain and simple it all is, and understands how much it means to him, I remember feeling something like pangs of envy, knowing that he had somewhere to come back to, a "place which was all his own, these things which were so glad to see him again and could always be counted upon for the same simple welcome." This was real.

But if the return to the beginning is no longer possible after the first leg of a journey, neither is the return from the one we call last. Captain Ahab tied to his whale, dragged away into the misty sea, or Alonso Quijano on his deathbed after his last excursion as Don Quixote, will not come back to undertake new travels. Hamlet called this land towards which all of us are headed "the undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns." This undiscovered country is the only one that does not have reliable cartography. Perhaps for that reason, all our journeys, real or imaginary, are a preparation for that mapless country that lies "on the other side of the river": the long-awaited, the prestigious one.

The inhabitants of imaginary countries are, and always have been, my constant companions. In the distant childhood of my generation, wrapped in the soft folds of supernatural fancy, our playmates were Narizinho and Pinocchio, Sandokan the Pirate and Mandrake the Magician; those of today's children are presumably Harry Potter and his companions. All these "fabulous monsters" (as the Alice books call them) are so unconditionally faithful that they become untroubled by our weaknesses and failures. Now that my bones barely allow me to reach the lowest shelves, Sandokan calls me once more to arms, and Mandrake compels me to seek vengeance against fools, while Narizinho, with great patience, tells me again and again not to give a hoot about conventions and to follow my own nose, and Pinocchio keeps on asking me why, in spite of what the Blue Fairy has told him, it isn't enough to be honest and good in order to be happy. And I, as in the days far away and long ago, cannot nd the right answer.

The following story appeared in the papers on Sunday October 27, 2019:

For more than 50 years, the Afghan poet Haidari Wujodi sits at his desk in a Kabul library, that has long been a stop for those seeking escape from the violence outside. One Monday last November, a suicide bomber killed a traffic cop at the roundabout just outside. From his library window, Wujodi saw the scene framed in a picture (that later went viral on the Web). The shrapnel from the explosion flew into Wujodi's room, where he had just finished his afternoon prayer. Had he still been standing, he might have been killed. The officer's body, separated from his white cap, lay sprawled under a billboard that read: "The nation that doesn't read books will have to experience the whole of history."