

The Sea, “that Great Utopian Substance”: For an Ideal-Maritime History in Portuguese Literature

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One of the possible and productive theoretical approaches to the spirit/concept of Utopia as it is embodied in classic literary texts that represent alternative forms of society compared to those that are experimented within the immanence of historical record is the one that conjugates utopia and maritime voyages. In his insatiable quest to probe the secrets of nature, to invent technical devices, to discover new worlds, European man, in the extremely favourable circumstances of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth-centuries, would modernise his propensity to dream of utopia and renew the forces of nostalgic and prospective imagery sanctioned in the words of the Bible. The geographical discoveries made by sea, especially the one that led to the discovery of a new continent, would be the great historical event and motif for the reformulated continuation of that dream (as the English narratives of Thomas More and Francis Bacon literarily prove), the most archaic avatar of which is related to the belief in the effective existence on the face of the earth of a heavenly place created by God. During the fifteenth and sixteenth-centuries Atlantic discoveries, the mythical and the real became entwined and nurtured each other to give shape to the undying hope that new and better worlds existed, ideal places that were actually being marked both on fantastic and on accurate maps. In the centuries that followed the discovery of the new world in 1492, many Europeans saw this new vast and quasi-virgin land as an opportunity to carry out new and more experiments of social organisation, inspired as much by the

reading of Thomas More as through the desires of social evangelisation promoted by Christian millenarian ideals.

In fact, there are many testimonies in medieval European literature – incorporated in ideological codes permeated with fables and myths – of the conviction that a terrestrial paradise did indeed exist somewhere to the east. This is not only found in works of a moral and ascetic nature, but also in those of a more profane character. An example of this is one of the most popular travel narratives, *Mandeville's Travels*, originally written in Anglo-Norman in the middle of the fourteenth century. But, as the Portuguese historian Vitorino Magalhães Godinho wrote when referring to the plurality of senses associated to the enterprise of maritime voyages, “from myth one reaches Utopia by the true path” (Godinho, 1990: 149). And the true path, which inspired Thomas More to write *Utopia* and was seen to be essential in creating the syntax of the literary genre that described ideal societies – and had already led the vessels of Columbus in search of mythical islands and even paradise – that path was made of the routes ploughed across different seas. It was the sea, “that great utopian substance” (Lapouge, 1979: 109), but so concretely great for the Portuguese pioneers of Atlantic navigation in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Mention, therefore, must be made of some texts written in Portuguese which, in our opinion, illustrate the origin of the Utopia/maritime voyages thematic dyad or narrative device. They can be integrated in the three following possible categorizations: (i) documentary-historical categorization, defining texts which were used as sources of inspiration of the Renaissance, Utopian imaginary prompted by geographic distances, by the lack of knowledge of other continents and by the cultural exoticism of eastern Indian tribes and western Indian societies (examples that may be included in this category are *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa* [*The Book of Duarte Barbosa*] and the *Carta de Pêro Vaz de Caminha* [*The*

Letter of Pêro Vaz de Caminha]; (ii) documentary-imagined categorization (e.g. the episode of the “Island of Love” in Camoens’ *Os Lusíadas* [*The Lusíads*]); (iii) the documentary-historical-imagined categorization, which can be illustrated by texts containing a Utopian design, a social representation idealised by the observation of an exotic society by a European foreigner (e.g. *Peregrinação* [*The Travels*] of Fernão Mendes Pinto).

The *Livro do Oriente de Duarte Barbosa* [*The Book of Duarte Barbosa*], written between 1516 and 1519, is a composite work that contains a wide range of different sources of information of a geographic, ethnographic, economic and political nature about many kingdoms and places in the Far East. This example of travel literature associated to maritime expansion can be seen as a good narrative demonstration of the knowledge gained from the experience of the Portuguese seafarers who were the European pioneers in navigating the Indian and Pacific Oceans. They were also pioneers in redefining cartography and in drawing accurate maps both of those oceans and the Asian coastline. This may be confirmed in the evolution of the accuracy of the world charts drawn by Portuguese cartographers in the first third of the sixteenth century: the Cantino map of 1502, by an anonymous Portuguese author, considered as the first modern world chart, Lopo Homem’s map of 1519 and Diogo Ribeiro’s world map of 1529 (Godinho, 1990: 77).¹ The descriptions of many kingdoms and the peoples that inhabited them, in books like the one of Duarte Barbosa or *Suma Oriental* by Tomé Pires (1465?-1540?), are associated with this accurate mapping redefining the Asian coastline.

Although it is not possible to trace any direct influence of Barbosa’s book on More’s *Utopia*, it must be stressed that the voyages and narratives about eccentric lands and people, like the one cited, favoured the transformation and re-utilisation of literary

mythical material concerning both the representation of fantastic topography and the idea of a better-other place. Under the overpowering effect of the new geographic, ethnographic and institutional discoveries, the representation of marvellous, purely imagined societies, and the spatial speculation about a biblical paradise and other mythical islands gave way to the composition of a (re)founding narrative of a specific literary sub-genre – utopia, thematically conceived according to a more lay and rationalist conception of the world.

Like the mythical societies-islands imagined by Mandeville as models of social prosperity and ethical-spiritual conduct, the rich and beautiful cities of the Orient are presented to us by Duarte Barbosa as ideal regarding both the temperate climate and the customs of the people. With the difference, however, that this presentation is absorbed in an overall report stripped of improbable wonders. Thus, for instance, the description of the mythical isle of Taprobana in Mandeville gives way in Duarte Barbosa to the description of the real island of Ceylon, the concrete homologue of that diaphanous designation (Taprobana), defined by Barbosa as the “land of delights” (Barbosa, 1813: 353), but now without the fantastic story of being inhabited by giant ants that guarded mountains of refined gold.

Ceylon is also mentioned in Thomas More’s book, but as a spatial reference conceived to give credit to the likelihood of the report of the narrator Hitloday, the fictionalized Portuguese seafarer, discoverer and describer of the island of Utopia. According to his narration, it was by pure chance that he may have reached Ceylon with five of his six companions after having visited many kingdoms and communities in the new world. According to a report given by Peter Gilles to Thomas More in Book I of *Utopia*, Hitloday had sailed from Ceylon to Calicut, from where he returned to Portugal. Among his indelible recollections of his journey, he brought the information about the

“excellent Republic”, the model of the ideal society, which should be taken as a worthy example to inspire a reformation in sixteenth-century European societies. Hitloday’s voyage, however, had started from a fortress on the east coast of Brazil, a place where, at his own request, he had remained with twenty four other companions after having abandoned Amerigo Vespucci’s crew. This is the main reason whereby different academic studies on the sources for More’s *Utopia* (e.g. Randles, 1955: 13; Matos, 1991: 386) usually refer to the *Quattuor Navigationes* (1503) of Amerigo Vespucci – explorer of the new continent that was named after him – as the work that inspired the English humanist to fictionalise the voyage of the Portuguese seafaring discoverer and reporter of the island of Utopia.²

But before Vespucci sailed into All Saints’ Bay in the South Atlantic, Pedro Álvares Cabral, the Portuguese discoverer of Brazil, had dropped anchor in a bay he named Porto Seguro (Safe Port) on 24 April 1500. He had found this part of the American continent, the Land of Vera Cruz, two days before, on the 22nd, and had sighted its first physical bulge, a hill he called Pascoal (from the Portuguese *Páscoa*, meaning Easter) since it was seen three days after Easter. The report of this event and the impressions caused by the natural beauty and by the innocence of the people that inhabited this new world are narrated in a letter written by the fleet’s scribe, Pêro Vaz de Caminha. This “official record of the birth of Brazil and the New World”, as Jaime Cortesão defined it (Cortesão, 1994: 80), shows significant textual segments that express a certain idealised fascination in the face of the geographic and ethnographic novelty. From the informative-literary point of view, and recognising the obvious stylistic differences, the *Carta de Pêro Vaz de Caminha a El-rei D. Manuel* [*Letter of Pêro Vaz de Caminha to his Majesty D. Manuel*] seems to impart the same expressive tone and the same thematic orientation as the *The Book of Duarte Barbosa*, i.e., the

same hybrid semantic quality made up of objective intentionality and spontaneous fascination, this being imparted with involuntary idealisation. Both are historical-literary documents about new worlds situated in different longitudes. Their content, announcing new geographical data, played an important role in renewing sixteenth-century Utopian hope as this was materialised in the “golden book” of Thomas More. Not so much because they were used as (hypothetical) direct sources of More’s narrative but because they illustrated new anthropological realities and other geographical spaces, the divulgation of which fitted European Renaissance man’s ideals by giving him the chance to transform his mythical dreams into real dreams of utopia.

Pêro Vaz de Caminha’s *Carta* did not follow the example of Christopher Columbus’s logbook, which was written eight years before, and did not rush headlong into idolatrous formulations on an earthly paradise. He did, however, make notes on the beauties of the natural environment and on the natives’ innocent and free *modus vivendi*, the dazzling tone of which evoke a sort of paradisiacal representation of the newly discovered land. The Portuguese, after having established an initial contact with the natives on board of their vessels, set about strengthening it on land. In notes made by Caminha during the seven following days – from 21st of April to the 1st of May 1500 – the autochthones’ paradisiacal primitivism, living as gatherers in a community and in empathy with the prodigality of nature, stands out. The content of this idealisation in the *Carta* is eminently pastoral, different from that of the *Livro do Oriente*, which exhibits a predominantly cosmopolitan tone. What stands out in the notes taken by Caminha in the seven days following the newly discovered land is the isotopy of the paradisiacal primitivism of the natives, who lived socially in a state of pristine communism and harmonious interaction with the abundant gifts of nature. Tinged by an undisguisable tone of enchantment for those people and for that land, both in a state closed to

innocence and purity, Caminha's narrative evolves on a tension between two polar meanings: between the joyous inter-ethnic conviviality and the mutual mistrust before the signs of the otherness, between the flow of attraction and the ebb of withdrawal.

And from the island of Vera Cruz we move on to another island, known in Portuguese literature as the "Island of Love". The latter is completely imaginary, and it operates as a dynamic symbol with different levels of meanings in Canto IX (stanzas 51-88) of the literary-epic narrative *Os Lusíadas* [*The Lusiads*] (1572) of Luís de Camoens, the central theme of which draws its inspiration from the historical event of the first maritime voyage, led by Vasco da Gama, that linked Europe and Asia by sea (1497-1499). It is obviously not an island that can be considered as utopian, confined in its genre sense to the designation of the narrative type that describes the organic-institutional workings of a society that is exemplary and rationally perfect. It is neither a merely fanciful tale adapted to the marvellous-mythological level of the plot, nor an exalted rhetorical recreation of a real example of insular life (e.g. the island of Zanzibar or of Mozambique in the Indian Ocean or that of St Helena in the South Atlantic). It is, above all, an island of leisure and pleasure, of comfort and reward, an observatory of the working of the world, a prophetic oracle of the future, a place of sensual fruition and of the revelation of the labour and of the cosmic plan of God (of which the Portuguese, according to the Roman-Christian and patriotic-imperialist spirit that permeates the conception of the poem, were exactly the elected ministers). A scenario of physical love between sea goddesses and mariners, the "divine island" is also described to suggest a feminine body in a seductive, erotic pose. And, as is usual with symbolic logic, there is a codified meaning conjured up by the image of the shape of the island, that of a woman subject/object of pleasure, and, at a more subtle level, that of a sexual intercourse represented by the image of Vasco da Gama's vessel entering the bay. Therefore, it is

only as a nominator of a dreamed-of and desired (non-)place of harmony and delight that it is acceptable to define “the divine island” of *Os Lusíadas* as Utopian in the amplest and most common sense of the word. “The Island of Love” partakes of the spirit of utopia in so far as its description places it in the literary tradition of idyllic places that represent the consummation of happiness (in this case associated with sensual love, which Camoens seems to regard as the former and crudest manifestation of the idea of love for mankind), as a eutopia of a pastoral content, or even, in accordance with the complex thematic architecture of the poem, as an allegoric device at the service of a Christian teleological worldview. In this sense, and in so far as the epic poem *Os Lusíadas* elicits a Judaic-Christian messianic ideal, one can conclude, at a further moment of the narration of the episode of the “Island of Love” related with the prophetic account of the future heroic deeds of the Portuguese in the Far East, that its meaning composes an extremely subtle symbol of the Celestial Jerusalem. Instead of signifying a utopian place, the “Island of Love” becomes the representation of the dimension of prophetic time. In other words, the ideal place becomes an allegory of the ideal time. This seems to be the indeterminable time that reveals the full and benign consummation of the being in the world, that is the same quality of time that the millenarianist and Portuguese Jesuit priest António Vieira, in the seventeenth century, compared to an immense sea beyond the “fearful Bojador of the future” (Vieira, 1993: 108) and that, according to his prophetic nationalist spirit, was about to be inaugurated by the Portuguese nation. Resorting to the same type of symbolic language to designate an ultimate ontological ideal – a teleological utopia – Fernando Pessoa, in the twentieth century, dubbed this time/sea the “Portuguese Sea”.

But let us return to the literature generated by the transoceanic voyages and recall the textual categorization that we designated as “documentary-historical-

imagined". To explain the articulation between the invention of utopia and the maritime geographical discoveries, the narrative of Fernão Mendes Pinto provides a good example. Published in Lisbon in 1614, *Peregrinação* (known, in the modern English translation by Rebecca D. Catz, as *The Travels of Fernão Mendes Pinto*) is not restricted, as occurs with Caminha's *Carta* or the *Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, to true facts and the recording of novelties and differences tinged with a discreet touch of stylistic subjectivity. In *A Peregrinação* the facts go hand in hand with fable, the chronicle is concurrent with the novel, the real is impregnated with fiction. Counting on physical-geographic distance, the author/narrator sets out to explain human and social realities, which are marked by their eccentric differences towards European and Portuguese cultures. They are either shown in their primitive coarseness and violence, through a negative, dystopian prism (e.g. the Gigauhos cannibals-pygmyes – Chapter LXXIII), or are represented with an approving and utopian consideration (mainly focused on Chinese society, and more precisely in Chapters CV, CVII, CXI and CXII relative to the description of Peking). Associated as it is to the history of the Discoveries and to the revelation of the exotic Oriental world, Fernão Mendes Pinto's *Peregrinação* appears as an emblematic example of the importance that travel chronicles had in the foundation of utopia as a literary genre, not because it influenced – as far as is known – the composition of any famous utopian narrative (despite having been translated into the main European cultural languages in the eighteenth century) but due to the fact that its literary content showed itself to be a catalyser of how the Europeans' travel narratives influenced the making up of ideal-utopian confabulations.

One of the interesting narrative aspects of *Peregrinação* is that it displays both mythical and utopian discreet imaginary traits. The mythical in *Peregrinação*, however, is not manifest in the updating of a medieval belief in an earthly paradise, i.e. of a place

deduced in the literal and pragmatic reading of the Book of God and marked as being real on maps, in apologetic books, theological treatises and travel narratives. The times in which the text of *Mandeville's Travels* was contextualized had gone and geographic and symbolic cartography had long been transformed and rectified through the experience of the maritime discoveries. This does not mean that vestiges of medieval myth associated to the lack of knowledge or limited by the insufficient knowledge of the world are absent from Fernão Mendes Pinto's *Peregrinação*. Myth is present in the narrative, for example, in the representation of an (almost) inaccessible, extraordinary insular space, enveloped in an atmosphere of enchantment and redolent of the promise of hidden wealth. The island of Calemply, which is described in Chapter LXXV as being a fluvial island, functions, in our opinion, as a good example of the myth of the sacred, forbidden island that conceals riches and fabulous secrets. Its only inhabitants are holy men-hermits who seem to be in penitence and atonement for their sins and for the sins of the monarchs and noblemen that have been buried there together with their wealth. It must be pointed out that both the indeterminate geographical reference and the narrative function of the description of the island of Calemply in *Peregrinação* have no structural affinity either with the purely symbolic reference or the narrative function of the description of the "Island of Love" in *Os Lusíadas*. While the latter is a eutopia, a happy place, a scenario for a kind of hedonist *sabbat*, the home of prophecy and revelation, Calemply emerges as an island of atonement, of retreat and prayer, a site for the renunciation of the world. It is like a monastery, a necropolis with no signs of feminine presence except in the form of iron idols. The morphology of the two islands could not be more disparate: besides the indication that the Island of Love came from the heavens and is situated in the sea while that of "the hermitages" is situated in the middle of the river, the former is described in accordance with the canons of "the

eternal pastoral” and therefore is represented as being covered with luscious, abundant flora, while the latter is defined by the regular order of the vegetal world. But there are more contrasts that must be mentioned: while the architectonic site referred to in the former (the palace where the nuptials of the goddess Thetis and Gama were celebrated and where the banquet for mariners and nymphs was held) is no more than a synecdoche of the hedonistic and prophetic-redemptive qualities that the island itself represents as a whole, the architectonic site described in the latter, although erected on precious stone, presents the dense form of an opaque, defensive bulwark; while the former island throbs with life, and laughter, sighs, loving words and harmonious music can be heard, in the latter the geometry of empty space reigns supreme, everything is static, the silence of penitence and retreat hovers in the air.

We want then to emphasise the following idea and clarify it: in the wake of a medieval literary tradition, that of travel narrative with its projections of fantastic societies-islands, and which has *Mandeville's Travels* as a paradigmatic example, the description of the island of Calemply in *Peregrinação* conjoins disparate elements related to both the belief in the existence of strange hermit communities in the east and in fantastic treasures and incredible riches in the world beyond the Levant (the kingdom of Prester John being the most suggestive stereotype), elements that are part of a mythical representation of Asian geography and of the human and social mysteries associated with it.

As to the emergence of the utopian traits in *Peregrinação*, one has to demonstrate how, within the fictional logic of this long narrative, and paraphrasing again Vitorino Magalhães Godinho, “from myth one reaches Utopia by the true path” (Godinho, 1990: 149); in other words, how the imaginary/real (maritime and fluvial) travels of Fernão Mendes Pinto led him first to China and then to the ideal

representation of the Chinese city of Peking. In fact, this city is characterised overall, just as the cities of Nanking and Funkinilau had been (Chapters LXXXVIII and XCVII-XCIX respectively), with features that proclaim their virtual affiliation within utopianism, i.e., according to that propensity of conscious human will, as Joyce Oramel Hertzler wrote, in suggesting an alignment of society in “conformity with some positive ideal” (Hertzler, 1927: 268). But in the *Travels of Fernão Mendes Pinto* this ideal is projected upon the given reality, the utopian imagination being determined by the effect of geographic discovery.

Order, prosperity, justice and compassion seem to reign supreme in Peking and the rest of China. In line with the spatial definition of ideal societies, Peking is represented as having an insular type of topography, the city occupying the geometric centre of a bigger island, which is the empire itself, and surrounded by a wall (the real wall of China). The settling and the planning of urban spaces are described as reproducing geometric, reticular configurations built to house many “Chinesees”. Orthogonal regularity, symmetry and geometry define the order of static utopias of Platonic-Morean inspiration. These are the characteristics reproduced in the drawing of Peking and, as a metonym, in the representation of China in *Peregrinação*. This rigorous use of space is the architectonic manifestation of a no less rigorous social order, not exactly egalitarian and communist, like the one that prevails on the island of Utopia, but functionally stratified in line with the image of Confucius’ political philosophy and, in a certain way, with Plato’s ideal Republic. In both philosophies, each citizen was supposed to entirely fulfil his duties as a social being in such a way that the essential nature of his being would coincide and be part of each one of the three classes (magistrates, warriors, workers). This social interdependence would promote the harmony of the city.

It is also in this episode of *Peregrinação* that it is possible to discern an analogy with one of the functional categories that determine the syntax of utopian-type narratives: the category of subject-founder of the ideal society. According to earlier information consulted by Pinto – precisely that of *the first of the eighty chronicles of the kings of China, chapter thirteen* – Peking was founded by a prince of the same name. We would like then to stress the following analogy: as there is a certain onomastic contiguity between Utopia and Utopus, Peking was also the name of a person before it became the name of a city; on the other hand, and similarly to the ideal society visited by Raphael Hythloday, in which the knowledge and description of just one city (in this case Amaurot) set the pattern for all the cities of the island, the city of Peking, supposedly visited by Fernão Mendes Pinto, is taken as an exemplary model for the rest of Chinese urban spaces.

In his proposal to classify and in his exegesis on different types of utopia (social, technical-scientific, architectural, medical, etc.), the German philosopher Ernst Bloch characterises the “geographical utopias” (another dwelling place desired by the imagination, sustained by hope, motivated by and motivator of the travelling-quest) as that which is insinuated in the (mythical) search for Eden, for an Eldorado, and which fosters the (real) undertaking of world discovery – nowadays continued in infinite interplanetary space (Bloch, 1986: 746-794). Maritime voyage / utopia / geographic discovery are, therefore, terms that are reversibly and mutually decisive in the preservation and renovation of the “principle of hope” for a better world. According to Bloch, their association seems to emphasise the phenomenology of what he calls “concrete utopia”. The generic intention of any utopia to pre-announce and bring to light “not-yet” known realities – human and social situations and conditions which are latent in the form of objective and real possibilities that may be entirely fulfilled in the

future – find their best illustration in the undertaking of the geographic discoveries themselves. The revealing of new spaces has as its condition that one must live in the hope that the voyage will bring him to a distant, still-unknown place that is better than the one already known. Associated as they are with the opening of knowledge of the new worlds both east and west, the texts of Duarte Barbosa, Pêro Vaz de Caminha, Camoens and Fernão Mendes Pinto demonstrate, in their relative thematic specificity and with different intensity, that the maritime geographic discoveries are a “centrally utopian venture” (Bloch, 1986: 752).

Notes

¹ For a description and visualization of the Cantino and Diogo Ribeiro’s maps, see Edwin Raisz’s *Time Chart Renaissance Cartography, 1470-1700*, in <http://www.henrydavis.com/MAPS/Ren/Ren1/Reno.html>. As for Lopo Homem’s map, see the brief article of IMSS - Multimedia Catalogue - Biographies - Lopo Homem, in <http://brunelleschi.imss.fi.it>.

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