

New World Exploration and the Spectre of the Utopia: The Aesthetic of the Unattainable

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Abstract

Pre- and post-Enlightenment travel and exploration activities were conceived in no less than heroic proportions, with the explorer aspiring to elevate himself to the status of an imitable character who inspired further forays into the hitherto-unknown. Such exploratory activities not only helped Europe define itself in terms of hitherto-unmapped territories; the way they were 'performed' and written about also had a substantial purchase on how newly-encountered and partially-mapped spaces like those in the New World would be eventually appropriated and codified.

A performance as intricate, multi-layered and strategic as overseas explorations could not 'happen' in vacuum: along with the obvious colonialist intent of topographic expansion, what needs to be identified as a potent motivator is a nascent aspiration of finding a more perfect, more flawless home than it had so far been possible.

This essay has tried to capture this component of trepidation and unease that are grafted within the vocabulary and performative specifics of how exploratory activities were conducted, despite a facile display of confident, nomothetic approach to the seen/scene.

Such acts of strategic emplacement could not help remaining an essentially unfulfilled promise as despite physical settlement and attendant logistical accomplishments, the chimerical dream of an immaculate, utopian habitation could only entice and haunt.

Keywords: *Exploration, Narrative, Space, Utopia, New World, Empirical.*

Exploratory activities and the way they celebrate individual accomplishment have had to rely upon a heavily-mythicized version of one man or a group of people who can achieve the apparently impossible through human resourcefulness and fortitude. Since the classical times, the idea of the hero-as-the-quintessential-explorer has blurred the mutual status of the explorer and the hero in a narrative, with the hero being projected as an explorer (and vice-versa) whose journey might even involve extra-terrestrial dimensions as long as the explorer/hero faces death (in varying formats) and returns to tell the tale. This narrative architecture is adapted into one in which tropes like a perilous trip to the underworld are widely accepted as the "ultimate proof of a hero's extraordinary nature" (Nortwick 1996: 28). The mist of myth not only renders the stature of the hero abstract and consequently beyond critique; it also invests him with the status of one who is elevated, with accomplishments that can only be appreciated while perceived from afar and not inspected at close quarters.

Traditionally, the resolute yet *dyadic* figure of the heroic explorer/explorer hero is also allowed to assume the pivotally important function of an arbiter who would negotiate the apparently irreconcilable binaries of superior/inferior, modern/primitive, enlightened/medieval and logical-empirical/fanciful-imaginary as such value-added terms pertain to judgmental pronouncements on specific cultures and worldviews. He is the one who not only dictates the terms of engagement with the *seen*, the *explored* and the *encountered*; but also determines the narrative temperament along with varying degrees of subjective participation as well as objective detachment as such critical and strategic engagements take place. It is on the borderlines of such critical sites of engagement that

semantic and conceptual fissures inevitably surface and frantic attempts at configuring an incorporative, inclusive and un-problematizing organizational pattern are thwarted and rendered unachievable when it comes to the formulation of a 'serviceable' aesthetic of an exploration narrative. A curious illustration of the self-defeating nature of such a systemic ordering which, in its methodical neatness aspires to approximate the organizational modality of the taxonomic, is to be found in Borges' famous short essay on the language of John Wilkins (1614–1672) who was an Anglican clergyman, natural philosopher and author, and was one of the founders of the Royal Society (Borges 1993: 3).

The grand desire for systemic patterning is never absent though, and is nowhere as pronounced as in an exploration or expedition narrative. This is because the perfectly organized state of being could only be achieved as actual spaces are reimaged, recreated and reconfigured through methodical planning and strategic execution. An exploration narrative can neither exist nor operate in geographical vacuum and in a way the spaces visited are simultaneously brought into existence, as it were. This is done through and within a special, textually-manufactured spatiotemporal configuration that the narrative consciously structures for its textual topology to make sense. Every exploration or travel narrative, thus, *confers* a sense of geography, that of a 'mappable' sort of concrete and tenable landmass upon a place and that is responsible for an attendant ethno-topographic *signature* as it were; one that remains unique to that particular text. This is what Paul Carter famously observes in his pioneering work on emplacement, onomastics and a narrative which aspires to construct a *figurative geography*:

The spacing of names, their disposition across maps and in the blank gaps of journals, was not an ornamental afterthought...it was a metaphoric equivalent, figuratively bringing distant things into relation with each other. In this sense, travelling was not primarily a physical activity: it was an epistemological strategy, a mode of knowing. (Carter 2013: 69)

Philosophically, Carter's theoretical approach strives to offer distinctive hermeneutics of spatial experience in so far as it seeks to understand the way a hitherto 'unmarked' spatial unit becomes an object of conscious consideration and sequential planning through formal inclusion into a comfortable cartographic schema. That is of crucial significance in cognizing layers of *fabula* that actually manufacture the structured and palimpsestic idea of space-as-experienced. Geography becomes geography: a semi-conscious act of writing the land that is made possible by a mind eager to impose European scheme of making sense of spatio-ethnic alterity in which the physical commute is not that which confers meaning and validation, rather that honour goes to the discursive strategies that corroborate such formulations. Even before a place is formally *inducted* into the known cartographic parameters, it might have a chiefly conceptual but essentially intertextual existence in the mind of the explorer. As Columbus began his voyage from Palos on 3 August 1492, he anticipated a journey through uncharted seas in search of lands whose coastlines were still mainly imagined through speculation, myth, legend, prophecy and faith, notwithstanding the inconsequential amount of physical cartography of questionable provenance that had existed in some form. Ferdinand Columbus recounts the essentially speculative character of his father's enterprise which, despite its undeniably hypothetical character in so far as it was determined through unverifiable 'resources' like nautical lore-s that could be traced back to classical, Arabic and Christian antiquities, could nonetheless inspire his officers to keep faith in the impending success of his enterprise (Zamora 1993: 96-7). The precise nature of the destination notwithstanding, a hypothetical, supposed spatial construct about it remains operative even before the journey begins and as the journey progresses this ideational component is always evaluated, consciously or otherwise, against the constantly-modifying experience of space until the terminus is reached. But the conclusive estimate of the place is always one of compromise as in the account that finally gets recorded the space physically explored is never completely disentangled from the imaginings and spatial fantasies that have accompanied the narrator's unconscious and consequently, have inhered deep within his vocabulary.

As an artefact that is constituted of words, any narrative and an exploration narrative in particular, carries the unavoidable associations of spatial memories, location, temporality, physicality and tangibility. Words written and bodies writing them are not abstract, intangible entities; they mediate and inform each other and, in the process, define each other through investing in specific discursive practices. Language, text, context, discourse, narrating voice and subjectivity being crucial sites of this engagement-framework, spatial engagement remains the one component that lay astride, cutting across as it were, the aforementioned sites. Moving beyond the scope of suggesting mere geographical location, space literally becomes the final frontier as spatial negotiation effectively encapsulates other sites of engagement which become ancillary or consequent upon the rudiments of what transpires in and due to spatial engagement. Hutchinson, while commenting upon exploration as a distinctive epistemological practice in its capacity to effect 'emplacement' through interaction, categorically argues that places are not "inert physical shells, but localities of experience or of being where interaction not only 'takes place' but also 'makes place'" (1992: 84). This elaborate process is materialized through the strategic 'acting out' of an established itinerary which *unpacks* in specific, customary ways. Performance as a set of established practices, therefore, enshrines a manifestation of a multiplicity of emplacement processes. Such processes are devices which bring a place into existence in terms of how that place is supposed to be conceptualized, and the referent 'performance' here connotes dynamic engagements on several fronts.

Now, it is only reasonable to argue, therefore, that as an activity which effectively represents an established set of tasks-to-do, the 'business' of travel or exploration needs to be understood as it is *performed*. This presumes a process of consecution along a tentatively-arranged itinerary following a temporal pattering as experienced and, accordingly, narrativized by a viewer who may or may not proclaim detachment but cannot help participating in the dynamics of spatial interaction. In her oft-cited essay "Travel as Performed Art", Adler approaches the issue of travel and representation from the perspective of narratology and argues that the concept of travel subsumes its 'performance context' which is coterminous with but goes beyond textual representation. Following theoretical precedents in Ricoeur and Eco, Adler too conceives 'travel' to be a discursive tool for "worldmaking and self-fashioning" (1989: 1368) and contends that it can manufacture enduring symbolic structures that not only shape responses, but are also capable of creating possibilities for multiple interpretations. A multiplicity of 'events', ranging from geographical explorations to even war, are accorded visual status, something that demands considerations of aesthetics and politics of performance in the context of travel or concerted, purposive spatial movement. This elaborate *routine*, in turn, manifests itself in distinct stylistic modalities like the "romantic", "picturesque", "philosophical", "curious" and "sentimental" (1372) – all variations of one, single, inclusive, performative framework¹. It is for the certainty of this interactive and iterative framework that Michael de Certeau has categorically classified every story as a travel story as it could just as easily be interpreted as the textual manifestation of an individual/collective- specific spatial practice (Certeau 2011: 115).

This has been so conceptualized because the perception of narratives is conceived as closely tied to the experience of travel. In academic theorizations on narrative, its movement and construction, the travel story oftener than not features as the prototypical narrative or the prototype *for* narrative. In Vladimir Propp's classic study of story grammar, for instance, the narrative functions are structured along a movement schematic that approximates the spatio-temporal span, as it were, between the putative hero's departure and return (Propp 1968: 55-6). Thus, the post-Enlightenment conceptualization of exploration as simply a topographical 'opening-up' is problematized as it goes on to incorporate issues that are "beyond factual, often seeming incredible, essentially marvellous, and perhaps even spiritual" (Warwick 2009: 54).

In a way, therefore, the corporeal materiality of the exploration text and its unambiguous existence as one *physical object* oftentimes conceal the dense assemblages of practices and customs that were presupposed and went into the making of it. Post-Enlightenment conceptions of targeted expedition

and exploration drove a wedge, as it were, between an exploration account *proper* and such texts as Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes* (1721), Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), and Voltaire's *Lettres philosophiques* (1734) which feature 'travelling' but chiefly dabbled on comparative moralizing. What was asserted in a more professionally-conceived enterprise of exploration was the ability of an explorer's journal to function as a 'technology of distance'². This allowed the triad of observation, notation and memorization to emerge as one, single, *intertwined* process as the explorer rediscovers himself as a narrator/author capable of generating a text, à la Foucault, "in a privileged moment of individualization" (1980: 115). Therefore, as opposed to the somewhat simplistic notion of the European traveller who according to Said "...is a watcher, never involved, always detached" (2016: 103), the narrator-explorer engages with the encountered spatiality in a way that *always* transcends comfortable binaries and straightforward hierarchies. One journey is not only to serve as an *experimentum crucis*³ either to fanatically vindicate or passionately reject a particular estimate about a place, rather it is to comprehend a new topographical-anthropological reality from a somewhat different and unavoidably individuated perspective. Especially in the New World exploration narratives, the post-Enlightenment perception of a heroic explorer was naturally divested of such complications and was conceived in a way which had associations of the spatial improbable, of a place that appealed to fantasies about potential greatness. Thus, Matthew Flinders⁴ pays homage to Cook and his exploits in charting the shorelines near Botany Bay in glowing terms and grants this "high spirited and able conductor" an "honourable place in the list of those whose ardour stands most conspicuous for the promotion of useful knowledge (1814: 98).

Such an observation is significant as it bestows the proper sort of honour that a serious and committed explorer deserves, - one who enshrines precisely the kind of virtue of conscientious enterprise which needs to be publicly acknowledged. This needed to be done additionally for the promotion of popular involvement; so that people are encouraged via a carefully-constructed discourse of manly adventures, thereby ensuring steady 'flow' of willing participants in future endeavours⁵. But perhaps more interestingly, such acts of 'instilling' of excitement constituted the fulcrum of conceiving the New World as an imagined space of perfection, of another chance of making it right, in a way.

Thus, every exploration account written during the pre- and post-Enlightenment times, for purposes that are both commercial and political, harbors a fantasy to project places visited as veritable utopias. What such an idea connotes is not necessarily an imagined space that needs to be construed in terms of arcadian perfection- one that symbolizes an articulated fantasy of a specific spatio-temporal vision of human-nature symbiosis in a hypothesized golden age, characterized by rustic simplicity and environmental equilibrium, forever in the process of being reimagined. Rather it's a place that, from a Foucauldian perspective, implies a stable, orderly arrangement and thus 'affords consolidation', but is without a specific locality and hence is more like the psychological projection of an ideal space than a real, 'encountered' one. Foucault has been fairly categorical about the compensatory nature of constitutive fantasies which inform imaginings about such a projected space:

Utopias afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold; they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical. (Foucault 1989: xix)

A space like this does not, *cannot* exist except in fantasies that accompany an interminable haunt for such a perfect *wohnung*, a space that might exist or might not; but the (im) possible corporeal existence of which, rather unsurprisingly, is far less thrilling than searching for it and writing about that search. The search underlay the urgent requirement for a kind of spatial reconstruction that might create the possibility of a 'benevolent utopia', the approximations of which had been attempted through settlements in the USA that was (initially) characterized by a "strong communitarian tradition" and consequently, "home to an enormous number of attempts to create utopian communities" (Levitas 2010: 180). This spatio-communal reimagination incorporated theological

subtexts as well: attempts at such reorganized communities were invested with as it were, an “eschatological sign...to renew the Christian world...return to the earthly paradise or...the beginning again of sacred history” (Eliade 2013: 91). It is this possibility of being able to literally begin from scratch which effectively rendered both Australia and New Zealand “great laboratories of social experiment in the latter part of the nineteenth century” (Powell 1971: 608-09) and in this scheme of ‘reconstructionist utopia’ such ambitious reconfiguration would be attempted through spatial structuring, land reorganization, newer methods of farming and planned demographic distribution. What really mattered was the availability of such a vast territory for these elaborate experimentations at a time, especially now that the required landmass was present. A ‘new’ land bereft of a preexisting discursive architecture of governmental accoutrement promised institutional plasticity which, combined with the temporal coincidence of their development with the height of progressive thinking in the late Victorian era, positioned these places as fertile testing grounds for various forms of social democracy, labour reform, and gender equality initiatives. Unlike the tedious, at-best-incremental reforms that characterized contemporaneous European social movements, these far-off colonies could implement wholesale systematic changes that promised to rectify accumulated inconsistencies within the European model of social hierarchies and vested interests.

As a generic and preconceived set of propositions and presuppositions about the nature of an organized space, utopia is a paradigmatic concept that renders it possible to negotiate a unique duality: to live deductively, through some ‘normative mechanism’ of ‘enforced virtue’ in a spatio-social arrangement which, apparently, was built up inductively (Porter and Lukermann 1976: 204-05). A continental landmass bereft of the tried and tested apparatus and accoutrements of civilization came closer to Wells’ fantasies of planet-sized utopia⁶ like nothing else does. A semantic network of interference between space encountered and space imagined-as-utopia was responsible for moments of unease in the perception of a New World *par excellence* like the Australian landscape which accrued an imaginary component no less potent in constructing an accumulative estimate of space. As texts like Lady Mary Fox’s *Account of an Expedition to the Interior of New Holland*⁷ show, accounts of hypothetical utopia-s or imagined spaces that embodied an ideal sort of inductive organization would continue to feature as a significant imaginary accompaniment of the way Australian interiors would be conceived.

The deliberate narratorial acts of investing an apparently hopeless, derelict landscape with tropes of the wonder and the bizarre were strategies of coming to terms with the conceptual nuisance of a geography characterized by nothingness. It is this aspirational mindset which continued to ‘justify’ the unexceptionable, nondescript nature of the hitherto-unexplored landscape: topographical ‘revelations’ as capable of surprising the prying mind with gifts carefully concealed were tantamount to possibilities which remained hidden within the land that withholds fortune and reserves it for the truly worthy. Such a frame of expectation was particularly reinforced due to previous instances of enormous wealth gleaned through the colonial expeditions into the Latin American version of the New World, though only achievable through the Enlightenment *modus operandi* of strategic planning, concerted effort and collective execution.

The exploration narratives about the New World, hence, feature an indeterminate search for an ideal space that is effectively untraceable except in imagination and that makes every such activity (both physical and textual) as contributing to the construction of multiple units of spatiality and temporality or *heterotopia-s*, and in Foucault’s scheme of things the heterotopic spaces are those that enshrine conflict and problematize uncomplicated imaginings about imposing one specific organizational paradigm onto spaces encountered. In other words, every place visited in its physical, corporeal, topological reality is essentially heterotopic in its inherent resistance against fantasies of systematization. Such a text which *documents* the observational specifics of an expedition has to contend with a sort of narratorial impasse when it comes to textualizing the burden of experience. This is because as opposed to the smooth fantasy of utopia which allows for streamlined fantasies about a place, the reality of heterotopic experience effectively resists such uncomplicated description.

Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to 'hold together'. This is why utopias permit fables and discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the *fabula*; heterotopias (such as those to be found so often in Borges) desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences (Foucault 1989: xix-xx). For Foucault, heterotopic space-as opposed to one that is invested with utopian possibilities and fantasies and fables, are *real* places, a condition which is one of the six fundamental prerequisites or principles of heterotopology, with each space thus conceived performing "a precise and determined function within a society" (1986: 25).

Exploration is nothing short of an elaborate performance especially when it is documented in an established, conventional format and irrespective of the avowed modalities of documentation and engagement that might come across as rigorously empirical in nature, such performances are inescapably private affairs as well. It is due to this contradiction inherent in the construction of this genre that exploration-as-performance, in so far as it contributes to the active and aggressive processes of emplacement, needs to be conceived through the discursive architecture of heterotopology. The horizons keep receding as the 'adventures' undertaken, except on very few occasions of momentous discovery, are only rarely adequate to satisfy the customary construction of the explorer-as-hero. In that case an act of exploration becomes a private journey that creates its own frame of expectation and tries to live up to it. New World exploration is a search for that elusive benchmark, that utopia which is as much conventional as it is personal. Real spaces, once encountered and *emplaced*, inevitably turn into heterotopic, *real* locations of strife, contention, anxieties, confusions and contradictions. For the hero-turned-explorer and more importantly the explorer-turned-hero, those places were initially imagined and *conceived* as his own slice of utopia- the apotheosis of his 'journey' or travails however represented or interpreted; an invaluable opportunity for starting afresh. But that impossible quest could only remain unfulfilled.

Endnotes

¹ From a performative context the idea of 'travel' along with its conceptual baggage has continued to change over time, although basic tropes like travel reimagined as journey through life or narrative (text) or time have been employed every so often. Adler refers to the "cultural epic" that exploration narratives have generated incrementally (1375) and this, she argues, has been treated as an established mode of 'learning' about something or some place. The textual construction of a place or culture thorough travel and its representation is achieved through generic traditions and representational methods that have accrued historical validity through 'travel events' like the Grand Tour. Adler has attributed changes in this representational architecture to socio-economic factors that have a palpable effect on tourism and travel as they are 'performed'.

² For an insight into regulated, manipulated quantification and data organization as a 'technology of distance' which, due to its universality is transportable, see Poter 1995: VII-XII.

³ Richard Burton uses this Latin phrase (which means a decisive experiment with only one, definitive and conclusive outcome) to justify his visit to Al-Hijaz to learn Arabic, and he uses it to imply that this travel would dispel the widespread notions about visit to the Arabian heartlands as potentially fatal to European travellers (1964: 2).

⁴ An avid reader of Crusoe, Matthew Flinders joined the Navy and after initially serving on HMS Alert, he transferred to HMS Scipio, and in July 1790 was made midshipman on HMS Bellerophon under Captain Pasley. By Pasley's recommendation, he joined Captain Bligh's expedition on HMS Providence, as he participated in Bligh's famous project of transporting breadfruit from Tahiti to Jamaica. In January 1801, Flinders was given command of the Investigator, a 334-ton sloop, and promoted to Commander the following month. The Investigator set sail for New Holland on 18 July 1801. Attached to the expedition was the botanist Robert Brown, botanical artist Ferdinand Bauer and landscape artist William Westall. Due to the scientific nature of the expedition, Flinders was issued with a French passport, despite England and France then being at war.

⁵The idea of the empire was a 'sellable commodity' in many ways and narratives of personal adventure and/or precarious expeditions into dangerous areas or difficult terrains acted as stimulants that allowed a British commoner to vicariously participate in the expansionist and more importantly, triumphalist narrative of the empire. For more than two centuries an immense corpus of texts of different sorts, including but not necessarily restricted within logbooks, journals, pictures, paintings, portraits, inventories, sketches, military reports, travelogues and semi-fictional narratives of different types had bolstered a common Englishman's faith in the effectiveness and 'justifiability' of the empire. For an informative discussion on personal adventure narratives and their influence on the narrative of empire, see Springhall 49-72.

⁶"No less than a planet will serve the purpose of a modern utopia. Time was when a mountain valley or an island seemed to promise sufficient isolation for a polity to maintain itself intact from outward force... A state powerful enough to keep isolated under modern conditions would be powerful enough to rule the world, would be, indeed, if not actively ruling, yet passively acquiescent in all other human organizations, and so responsible for them altogether." (Wells 2017: 19-20)

⁷Published in 1837, *Account of...* was a unique text as Fox never went to Australia. The protagonists of her text, the Australian explorers cross the Blue Mountains and discover on the Bathurst Plains (Bathurst aka Bathurst Plain in New South Wales is located on the western edge of the Great Dividing Range in the Macquarie River plain) the utopian cities of a civilization previously unknown, founded by English and German refugees who fled from their homelands due to religious persecution during the Reformation movement.

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