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The Medieval Travel Narrative

Paul Zumthor

As early as the tenth century, the Arab world identified (and sometimes taught) travel narratives as an autonomous literary genre related to the novel. Probably the oldest example was authored by Abu Saïd, of Siraf, in 915. The tradition was to last up to the seventeenth century, giving birth along the way to the vast narrative of Ibn Battuta, who from 1325 to 1345 traveled throughout Africa and Asia. In the countries of Christendom, texts more or less comparable to these exerted an enormous influence on those who read or heard them, both for the facts they revealed and for the significance they assumed in the collective mentality. Judging from the manuscript tradition of the most renowned among them, they responded to a need of the educated public: one hundred and forty-three manuscripts of Marco Polo's book; four editions in one year of the *Relation* of Hans Staden (1557); collections of travel narratives, such as MS 1380 in the Bibliothèque Nationale; Ramusio's *Navigationi e Viaggi*, published in Venice in 1547, and the thirteen volumes of Théodore de Bry's *Grands Voyages*, published simultaneously in Latin and German from 1590 to 1640. Beginning with the thirteenth century, the Crusades and the Mongol campaigns sparked curiosity about the Orient; in the fourteenth century, the Turkish threat reawakened this inquisitiveness—a defensive reaction on the part of the West, anxious to know its obscure adversary—and in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with new commercial needs, the political views of some rulers maintained and nourished interest in the Orient.

But after this point, affection for these narratives waned, as if Europe, sated, were crouching on its prey. Humanism drew on the experience; but scholars, geographers, and cosmographers culled little from a literature they undoubtedly considered with disdain. Jaques Cartier, who was to end his life as a good bourgeois of Saint-Malo, hardly provoked any interest among his contemporaries, either with his *Relations* or his *Bref récit*, and fame came to him (as to Christopher Columbus) only in the nineteenth century. The misunderstanding is an old one. Even in the thirteenth century, neither Vincent de Beauvais nor Mathew Paris had usefully exploited the *Relations* of Marco Polo or of John of Plancarpin; Rubroeck's narrative remained practically unknown until

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the sixteenth century; the dissemination of Marco Polo's book is the result of a misunderstanding: the *Devisement* was taken for a fantastic tale. It was perhaps in an effort to correct this misreading that a growing number of authors (or copyists) availed themselves of the vernacular, starting with the thirteenth century in France, 1300 in Italy, and 1325–1330 in Catalonia and Germany.

Up until at least the thirteenth century, those travel narratives whose subject is a pilgrimage constitute a separate grouping. Most of these intend to bear witness to a strange, foreign reality, often overtly proclaiming this intention, which stems from a keen feeling for the pilgrim community: every Christian is called to join it, and those who already belong exhort others to follow the same *path*. It is a question, in fact, of a *path*, important only by virtue of the holy places that mark the route. The narrative focuses almost exclusively on the ultimate goal, Rome or Santiago de Compostela. In testifying to the vision he has had and to the experience he has lived, the author hopes not only to exalt these sites of grace, but to convince his brothers in faith to imitate him, all the while providing them with the information to facilitate the task. The unfortunate ones who cannot make the journey may at least participate in his saintly emotions! He makes them a part of the suffering he endured, enumerates the ceremonies he witnessed, evokes the meditations they inspired. He lays out, perhaps without the express desire to do so, the road to sainthood. Memory places itself in a sacred space, and the discourse by which it does so fulfills an initiatory role.

This role is a major one, in keeping with one of the particular traits of medieval Christianity, a religion of space more than of time. For this reason, the vast majority of pilgrimage narratives concern the Holy Land, the Place par excellence where man meets God, and thus, the privileged object of such a discourse. In many of these texts, the narrative involves the ascension of Mount Sinai, where the will of the sacral organization of space manifests itself with particular clarity: valley and mountain; ascension then descent; desert. The biblical story of Moses, thus mimicked, allegorizes the vocation of the believer.

The tradition goes back to the beginning of the fourth century, and produced such renowned texts as the *Peregrinatio* of the abbess Aetheria, written before A.D. 400. Up until the sixteenth century, more than a hundred narratives of this kind, in all languages, form an uninterrupted line influenced very little even by the Crusades. But after 1350, these narratives change in character: after a forced interruption of two or three decades, the pilgrimage reaches a much-changed Palestine, under the control of the Sultan of Egypt and subject to a meddling administration, often necessitating detours through Cairo. The result is a wholly

profane experience of customs and men, of Islam itself and of its political apparatus. Curiosity, which had hitherto been held in check, now tends to enjoy a free rein; thus testimonies become more personalized and accounts more secularized. By the end of the fifteenth century, there is no longer much to distinguish these texts from other travel narratives; or rather, centered on Jerusalem, they evoke images of absence, of paradise lost, of grace bestowed and squandered. They open the interior way that leads to the sense of exile.

This discourse, as much as the pilgrimage itself, is linked to the deepest and most stable patterns of the medieval mentality. The trait is strongly in evidence from the fourteenth century, as if the shake-up of the Western world, along with the role of hope, accentuated the sense of separation. Literary technique now takes hold of the pilgrim image, as it would a natural phenomenon: this is the case with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, and the same can be said of Langland's *Piers Plowman*. It is also the case with the "pilgrimage of the soul" genre, and with the "journeys to the other world," wherein allegory serves as the language of edifying preaching. Teresa d'Avila's *Camino de perfección* (1570) still falls within this tradition.

We cannot consider travel narratives taken together as a discreet genre. Their extreme diversity forbids it: circumstances of origin, intention, means, as much as the quality of the text itself. Recollections of pilgrimages; missionary narratives such as the 1253–1255 account by the Franciscan William of Rubroeck; reports from ambassadors, especially from the fourteenth century on, like those of Ambrogio Contarini or Gonzales de Clavijo, toward 1400, or those of Thomas Hoby, which encompass the whole of his career, from 1547 to 1564; navigators' ship logs or letters giving an account of a successful mission: Columbus's *Cartas de Relación* are at once a travel/quest narrative and a chronicle of utopia. They combine the religious and the political, prophetic strategy and monarchic propaganda. Merchants' travel books concern themselves principally with costs and distances, the model being the Florentine Pegolotti's *Pratica della mercatura*, in the fourteenth century. Still other texts are merely enumerations of wonders.

None of these classes of narrative has clear limits: is Adorno's *Voyage* to the Holy Land an embassy mission or a pilgrimage? Both one and the other, no doubt. One narrative may be contained in a letter, another may fill a large volume; one (even laden with commonplaces) bears numerous original notations (sometimes difficult to decode, but that is not the issue), another is but a compilation of old sources, even a plagiarism. Some works classify their material according to the route followed, others divide their subject matter into tables juxtaposed

without much coherence. There is no shortage, then, of "travel narratives" wherein the journey is neither the principal concern nor the principal issue. In the sixteenth century the "Travel Journal" appears, made up of daily notes: Montaigne's, written in Italy in 1580–1581, is one of the oldest, but was only published in 1774, at a moment when geographic curiosities as well as discourse infused with personal commentary were in vogue.

Nevertheless, a unity does exist: less conventional than stemming from what Hugo Kuhn, speaking of fifteenth-century German literature, calls a "type of fascination": the fascination, in other words, of a spatial order, the understanding of which is an experience of otherness, for better or for worse.[1] In the most elaborate texts, and in the latest, such as the *Grand Insulaire* by André Thévet, in the middle of the sixteenth century, or certain *Relations* from the seventeenth, there is a striving toward a rhetoric fit to account for displacements of the body and the particular emotions those displacements arouse. A series of *topoi* is constituted ("what I say here is not taught in the schools"; "this is what I witness"); privileged techniques begin to emerge (hyperbole, exclamation, enumeration, and others); little by little, methods of decoupage are delineated: the departure, the duration of the journey, the unknown country, the welcome or rejection. Several of these "moments" seem to come from a treasury of tales.

A discursive space thus unfolds, ready to host the proper names of places, peoples, and persons. As a result, every travel narrative comprises a double account, narrative and descriptive. Sometimes one predominates, sometimes the other, conferring its general tone on the text. Rarely are the two combined and set in a global representation. For the one who narrates his voyage, this narrative (by pen or by mouth) achieves his reintegration into the familiar world from which he set off. But also, the principal aim here is less to analyze the reality of the voyage than to prolong the experience of it. However (because such are the methods of the discourse), description, until the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, proceeds in general by "common-places" (based on the book knowledge we have of the earth) rather than by "naive" notations; description thus remains poor in concrete detail and is often organized along the lines of an actual itinerary; it is cut, and, as it were, distorted by anecdotal digressions.

As for the narrative, it hangs on a sequence of successive places, a series of toponomies mapping out the discourse, as if to signify a symbolic appropriation of territory more than to effect a projection into an expanse. Hence, the often discontinuous character, with gaps, incomplete, all the more disconcerting in our eyes due to the numerous manuscript variants, the plurality of versions conveyed by the same text.[2]

Rare are the authors whose language, by way of some artifice (such as the use of verbs like "je vins" [I came], or "nous arrivâmes" [we arrived], maintains a feeling for space in the expression of movement.

Nevertheless, imperfect though it be, the narrative element of these texts constitutes their very substance: can we not say, in fact, from a very general point of view, that what distinguishes the "voyage," among all imaginable human displacements, is the fact that it culminates, for the traveler, in narration? Again, a particular instance of a more general fact: every claim to territorial possession is made through the slant of a narrative, whether it is a narrative which brings forth or falsifies the evidence of a claim. A tension is admitted between history (the voyage as it was, untellable) and geography; between irretrievable time, and space presented as permanent. Hence, on this deeper level, the impossibility of applying to this subject matter and to this period, the opposition of real and imaginary; hence, the indifference of the author and of his public toward the criterion of credibility. In fact, Marco Polo's text was still being adorned with fantastic illustrations one hundred and twenty years after it had been dictated!

Gradually, during the sixteenth century, a new demand emerges: how to distinguish the true? Johan Eichmann, in publishing the memoirs of the sailor Hans Staden in 1557, and Montaigne in 1588, pose the question explicitly, thus inaugurating a modern approach dominated by a mathematic ("scientific") model of knowledge. In 1577, the Swiss doctor Théodore Zwinger publishes a "Method" (*Methodus apodemica*) for the travel narrative, inspired by the precepts of persuasive rhetoric, and placing stress on the definition of finalities and the description of means.[3] However, not everything can be covered by such a model: reality has its slack zones, not easily integrated; truth is less a natural given than the product of discursive rules, in some measure uncertain and subject to the irregularities of history. The discourse that contains the travel narrative is never—nor can it be—immediately proven: this is its defining trait, its unavoidable kinship with fiction.[4] It is by virtue of this affinity that the eighteenth century will raise the travel narrative to the dignity of a literary genre, a celebrated, symbolic way of exploiting the world.

Until late in the sixteenth century, authors seem to be conscious of relating the barely believable. Hence, in part, the need to lean on the authors, ancient or modern, and the pillaging of book sources, at times in defiance of experience and in contradiction with research and oral testimony gathered from the lips of other travelers or foreigners. Such is the background upon which a thought was elaborated.

Thus, Marco Polo (whose modern glory is in part usurped) would, according to a well-founded hypothesis, have composed first a brief

version of his Voyages, a sort of guidebook intended for Venetian merchants.[5] Then in 1298, during his captivity in Genoa, he dictated the text we know, and completed it in 1307; but throughout the work the mercantile intention that presided over the conception of the book remains clear. Michel Mollat sees it as a sort of "market study," or else as akin to Pegolotti's *Mercatura*.[6] The various copies of the original manuscript carry different titles: *Livre des Voyages*, *Livre des merveilles*, or the one used by today's editors, *Devisement du Monde*. *Devisement* is ordinarily translated as "Description"; I understand it to mean rather "Disposition," that is, "Measure." The text was pronounced such by Marco and so labeled by Rusticiano of Pisa, a famous novelist in Italy at the time whose role could not have been that of just any scribe, though it is difficult to distinguish what in the work belongs to him and what to the narrator. From their collaboration springs the intention to create a true *book*, in the tradition of the scholastic encyclopedias. The dedication, following the rule of this genre, lays claim to the authority of science, its veracity and universality: the intended recipient of such a message is the whole of humanity.

An examination of the oldest manuscript reveals a composite text whose literary marks are superimposed on a double orality: that of Marco dictating his recollections (this operation very likely lasted for months), and, at a second remove, that of the narratives he had gathered long before and now relates. Hence the formulae, the repetitions, a sometimes broken and irregular tone, the apparent lack of interest in people, who are considered solely from the European point of view of their political or economic utility. With great naiveté, from time to time, the narrative remains on the surface. Moreover, Rusticiano writes in French, a prestigious language; but what language did Marco speak? What margin of error did the transposition leave? When this transposition makes Saint Marcan out of Samarcande, the correction is easy; other misunderstandings could have been of greater consequence. For the audience, the name of Rusticiano was connected to the vast chivalric novels he had compiled twenty years earlier under the title *Meliadus*: no doubt it was in order to respond to this clientele's expectations that the last chapters of the *Devisement* were added (a fifth of the work!), a section concerning the battles of the Grand Khan, a perfectly "romanesque" sequence of armed feats.

Marco simultaneously refers to his own story as one would cite an Authority, and to the story of his father and his uncle, whose double voyage he recounts. *I* alternates with *he*, and sometimes *we*, or even *you*: the speaker engages himself, and at the same time engages us all with him—an already modern attitude. One of his narrative's levels of meaning is constituted by the witness he bears of a successful adaptation

to a totally foreign culture—an adaptation which until then had been repugnant to European culture, and of which later periods up until the nineteenth century will furnish only a few isolated examples.

A hybrid work then, an encyclopedia more than a travel narrative as we understand it: a horizontal projection of an experience, in spite of its temporality. But, from this perspective, it is also a mass of detailed information, difficult to evaluate, and, today, generally considered sound. When the choice is between inherited mental schemata and that which commonplace observation provides, Marco Polo's good sense inclines him, in case of a contradiction, to prefer the latter. He is no longer among those who seek nothing in the world but the confirmation of ancient writings. The humanist Pietro d'Abano, an illustrious astronomer, relates that he questioned Marco, and he does not hesitate, in 1310, to invoke his testimony against a proposition of Aristotle's![7]

Every author, every traveler, constructs his object by virtue of his culture, his experience, the circumstances of his life. Usodimare, toward 1450, aims to reassure his believers; Columbus considers himself the successor to Marco Polo, and this idea polarizes his discourse. Others, like Crignon, Parmentier's companion in 1529, are humanists, even poets. The diversity of temperaments is hardly small, nor is the variety of solicitations to patrons. The gravity of Jean de Plancarpin, toward 1250, contrasts with the impressionist levity of Bertrandon de la Broquière, squire to the duke of Burgundy, in 1372. All our authors evidently expected to be read, and the opinion they have of their audience interferes with their aims: thus, the problem of the audience up until the eighteenth century lies in the difficulty that audience had in conceiving otherness as anything but a fiction. The narratives of the Portuguese navigators—addressed to a nation wholly engaged in maritime adventure—are notable in general for their plausibility, their apparent refusal of the marvelous, their concern for the useful detail. Such is the *Journal* of Caminha, secretary of Cabral from 1500 to 1502. The *Relation* of the Normand Gonneville, in 1505, presents the same characteristic. It sank into complete oblivion.

A myopia of description, an absence (without exception) of survey: a void is hollowed out between the generality of the commonplace and such isolated detail reported by the text, a void filled neither by interpretive gloss nor authorial subjectivity. The text yields to its reader toponomies (often undisguised), aspects of foreign customs, remarks about monuments, and data on the respective powers of nations (for many travelers this last is an obsession). Some of these accounts have a certain precision, as with Felix Fabri and his journey to Egypt in 1483. The lack, then, is of a more general perspective that would give an order to the facts. More often, approximation reigns, and often errs when it is

a question of numbers. Here and there, surprising preteritions testify to a lack of curiosity which seems an indifference toward the Other. Or rather, the abundance of accumulated details constitutes an excess of information, perhaps betraying the author's faith in a complete world, pointing up his terror of the void, but conferring on the text a fictive veracity. Fictive in that it inventories signs positioned *in* space, but for lack of an interpretive grid, it says nothing of the signs *of* space. William of Boldenseele's *Liber de quibusdam ultramarinis partibus* (Book of some regions overseas), of which we possess no fewer than twenty-seven manuscripts and which was written in 1336 at the request of a cardinal of the papal court at Avignon, is an exemplary illustration of this type of discourse. The narratives of America's first discoverers, especially those who explored the tropical regions, disturbed by what seemed to them an irreducible alterity, had a tendency to allegorize sights in order to extract a meaning from them—violently, in the same way they would soon demand the extraction of gold. From the abundance of the real, they selected elements suitable to a given moralization; the rest mattered little.

Yet there is nothing forced about the quality of this discourse. Elements were introduced which one day would dissociate it and cause another language to be born: personal remarks by Broquière about the people he meets; the wealth of Boldenseele's geographical, hydrographic, and climatological vocabulary. In this way, at just the time preparations were underway for the great navigations, the general mindset began to evolve from a topical understanding to an understanding based on observation: a progressive change of the epistemological horizon which would permit, not far down the road, the integration of the author's sensibility and his lived knowledge into the narrative.

A criterion of exactitude (of a reliability of perception and discourse) was gradually imposed on the observation of spaces. Reality and credibility coincided. This modernity triumphed in Fynes Moryson's 1618 *Itinerary* through the principle countries of Europe and Italy. But from the middle of the sixteenth century, more than one passage from the books of Thévet (in 1558, then 1571), or Jean de Léry (in 1578) on Brazil, or of Belon du Mans on the Turks, announced our ethnology from afar. Fernão Mendes Pinto, after thirty years of adventures that took him as far as Japan, completed his *Peregrinação* (Journey) in 1569, and it is both the first personal, direct *Relation* concerning the whole of the far East, and the equivalent of a picaresque novel. Published in 1614, the *Peregrinação,* according to Luiz Costa Lima, testifies along with Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1615) and the first part of *Don Quixote* (1605) to the great turn toward modernity.[8]

In the seventeenth century, and even more so in the eighteenth, the

distinction between travel narrative and novel diminished, to the extent that the former was increasingly invested with a theme. Until then, the voyager's discourse was focused rather on the tale, because of its subject matter no less than because of the author's attitude toward the tradition. This slow mutation was preceded and doubtlessly conditioned by another which touches on the privileged mode of perception, and therefore on the mental nature of any declaration: from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century, sight gradually replaces hearing in its function as source of knowledge. The tradition of the high Middle Ages tended to prefer the testimony of the ear to that of the eye: a cultural trait linked to the practices of dominant orality. Hearsay naturally took on the value of authority. Sight, at best, could confirm. Later its sphere extends, and triumphs in the Baroque period. In the fourteenth century, the general mindset hesitates again. At the end of the fifteenth, this modernity is taken up by those most sure of themselves: that which one knew hitherto by hearsay, one now knew by having universally verified it. This is a *topos* that we see appear toward 1450 in the Portuguese Zurara, in 1470 in Adorno, and in Columbus with his letter to Santangel. It is true that, having seen, these authors desire to make themselves understood and to lay claim to complete credibility by their word. Examining Jean de Léry's *Voyage*, Michel de Certeau has studied this play of alternating eye and mouth, of the infinite mirror between orality and writing, under the pen and in the mind of the one who had taken for his motto, "Plus voir qu'avoir" (More to see than to have).[9] The relationship that links experience with knowledge begins to change. The discourse of the voyager rests more and more expressly upon the postulate of the rationality of nature, its reducibility to categories of language. The *Voyages* of Lahontan in New France, toward 1700, would be a philosophical text, as much as, or more than, an itinerary.

Simultaneously, the nature of the illustrations that adorn certain travel narrative manuscripts, from the thirteenth or fourteenth century, changes gradually. The illustrators reproduce figurative types, more emblematic than descriptive: the oriental is identifiable by way of a turban or some other apt detail of clothing. In the absence of an author's sketches, the painter or illustrator has only the text, itself largely "typed," to go by. Not until the fifteenth century do certain travelers (for instance, Jörg von Ehingen in 1454 or Capodilista in 1458) take care to draw memorable places and characters while en route.

Still, it is not the general case. The beautiful manuscript of the Bibliothèque Nationale, created around 1410 and offered by Jean Sans Peur to the duke Jean de Berry, unites Marco Polo's book with that of John Mandeville, illustrating them with numerous miniatures (eighty-four for Marco Polo alone!). John Block Friedman and Philippe Ménard

have analyzed these images, which are made clearer (as far as the *Devisement* is concerned) by a comparison with the slightly earlier miniatures of MS Bodley 264 (Oxford, Bodleian Library).[10] Two opposing tendencies struggle within the artist. On the one hand, he searches for the effect of strangeness, reveals the unexpected in the scenes he creates, and we sense the influence of the teratological traditions based in late antiquity. On the other hand, especially when it is a matter of representing a kind of reality known in the West (a city, a battle, a king on his throne), we can see the will to reconcile daily experience with the figure, which is painted or drawn according to the formulae and stereotypes of the craft.

A. C. Guilhoti recently analyzed some of the oldest figurations of Brazilian realities, a selection of engravings from the middle of the sixteenth century, of which the most interesting, by virtue of its complexity, illustrates the story of a celebration in 1550 Rouen: all the aspects of the Tupinamba Indians' daily life are, theoretically, laid out and exhibited.[11] But, despite the abundance of possible arrangements (three hundred figures!), the authors make the choice to represent only those traits which are likely, by contrast, to comfort the good conscience of the spectators. Nevertheless, theatrical interests demand a concentration on the performance of the "actors," men and women, so that the fairy tale becomes, in some aspects, a source of ethnologic information.

This could not have been mere chance. At this time objects were beginning to be collected from these new lands: plants, shellfish, birds, textiles, divers curiosities. Navigators took on painters or illustrators with their crews. Many drew for themselves, or did watercolors, as if mistrusting the aptitude of language to express the novel. From his 1599 journey through Central America, Champlain would send back a series of very beautiful drawings, in particular of plants and animals: art here assumes and serves a scientific aim.

The use of imagery borrowed from the experiences of far-off journeys is a general and recurring poetic device in these texts, from the Carolingian period until the seventeenth century. The figure of a displacement whose spatial limit is flung outside the realm of the known, if not of the conceivable, constitutes a key metaphor for destiny. Thus, the fantastic *De ignotis gentibus vel insulis septentrionalibus* (Of the unknown peoples of the islands of the Great North), a Carolingian text that presents itself as ancient and translated from the Greek, narrates the navigation of the philosopher Ethicus across the lands of Europe. Again in the fourteenth century, the anonymous Spanish *Libro del conoscimiento de todos los reinos* (The book of the knowledge of all kingdoms) is presented as the recollections of a Franciscan who has traveled the entire world. The author incorporates quite a few verifiable

pieces of information in order to fool modern readers.[12] We know of illustrated versions of the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani* (Voyage of Saint Brendan) and of the Marvelous Voyage of Alexander to India, legacies on the one hand of Celtic antiquity, of Hellenism on the other. The folkloric roots (or offshoots) of this theme were signaled in romanesque literature, haunted, it would seem, by the idea of the "country from which one does not return," and by the initiatory role of the journey which leads there.

Today it is relatively easy for us to distinguish in these fictions the imaginary effects from their conflicting relationships with experience. It was not so in medieval times. Columbus nourished his cosmographic meditations, and even his understanding of geography, with such texts. Their authority weakened only progressively, as it collided harshly with facts.

Among these works' offspring is one of the most astonishing (and most read!) texts of the fourteenth century, the *Voyage d'Outre-mer* (Voyage Overseas), signed by one John Mandeville, an English knight whose name could only have been the pseudonym of the doctor Jean de Bourgogne. Written around 1350, this book relates the story of a journey that was to have begun in 1322, in the Holy Land, and from there to have continued on to China and southern Asia. Long accepted as truth, it held a great prestige and exerted an authority (difficult for us to comprehend) over an ever-increasingly educated or semi-educated audience avid for information pertaining to far-off, little-known regions of the earth. Composed in French, it was translated into ten languages, including Latin; three hundred manuscripts and ninety editions remain, printed from 1475 to 1600! That of 1481 is illustrated with drawings representing monsters that the author indicates in passing, according to what ancient sources or bestiaries have taught him: the mention of these mysterious beings provides a kind of ladder measuring out to the infinitely distant.

"Mandeville" shamelessly plunders his "predecessors," Plancarpin, Odoric de Pordenone, and others. Time and again his work was taken for that of a humanist, or as a popular book. In fact, in the material borrowed from others, much of the information can be trusted.[13] The general design, however, seems to be symbolic rather than geographic description: the author wants to make sense out of the immensity of the world and, by consequence, the fragility of our social condition. A modern reader uncovers here and there in the text fugitive traces of a moral critique which seem to announce, from afar, the eighteenth century: so it is with the nudity of the inhabitants of Sumatra, and by contrast, with our own manner of dressing. What matters to him is less exactitude than the force of the fiction's effect. This is perhaps why,

paradoxically, he was one of Columbus's favorite authors: one passage, among others, struck Columbus: where "Mandeville" reports having heard of a man who had successfully traveled the globe from West to East.

"Mandeville," at any rate, kept the earth in sight, as well as the contrastive relationship that attaches us to it. Veracity matters little: the main thing is the *voyage*, in the sense heavy with philosophical connotations. During this same period, other texts allegorized the content of knowledge: the *Songe du Vieil Pélerin* (Dream of the old pilgrim) by Philippe de Mézières describes the world then known by way of an inspection carried out by Queen Truth and the ladies of her court. Others actually cut the last ties to geography and launch their characters into a universe of parable and metaphor: as in Christine de Pizan's *Livre de mutacion de fortune* (Book of the mutation of fortune) and her *Chemin de long estude* (Path of long study). Here and there the end of an itinerary (be it Hymen's palace or Sybil's den) signifies a redefining of self, an identification of knowledge with personal truth. The voyage teaches us that understanding bestows itself upon him who has first, literally, left himself. A century later, in 1483, *Le chevalier délibéré* (The resolute knight), composed by Olivier de la Marche in his old age, retraces the progression of a man, through Worldly Pleasure, Good Adventure, Love and Memory, to the country of Old Age.

Always lurking beneath metaphor and the commonplace in such texts is an astonishment and even a terror of that space which man would no longer master. All the threads of these traditions become knotted—in a parody of discovery narrative—in Rabelais's *Quart Livre.* (It has been supposed, without doubt mistakenly, that Rabelais knew the Relations of Jacques Cartier.) Meanwhile, the imagery of the journey had passed on to the poets. Jean Parmentier borrowed from his experience as a navigator the metaphors through which he praised the Virgin Mary at Rouen's du Puy concourse; La Ceppède, in 1613, used the same technique in his *Théorèmes.*

In Paris in 1605 a strange, anonymous work, entitled *L'île des Hermaphrodites* (The island of the Hermaphrodites) was published. It was an immediate commercial success, so much so that even the king took an interest in it. A man, wearier of the civil strife rending the kingdom of France, relates that he has left for America. Disappointed, he decides to return, but his vessel comes upon a floating island, and the traveler examines its inhabitants and customs. The harmony that reigns there permits, by comparison, a condemnation of both the decadence of the Old World and the savagery of the New. Under other skies, Campanella worked from 1602 on his *Cité de Soleil* (City of the sun), with which Cyrano de Bergerac would be inspired in his *Etats et empires* (States and

empires), edited by Le Bret in 1657 and again in 1662. In 1726 Swift's *Gulliver* appeared. Throughout the West, the tradition seemed established: the genre of the imaginary voyage, result of the discoveries of the fifteenth century and the conquests of the sixteenth, and henceforth sure of its methods, had fully incorporated the vision and the language of Utopia.

As early as 1516, Thomas More's *Utopia* had presented the formula. But this work holds much more closely than is generally admitted to the Marvellous Voyages of the Middle Ages, such as the *Historia de proeliis,* attributed to Alexander. Here we have the many-layered irony of the humanist, the equivocal alliance of narration and description, the ambiguity of the character of Raphaël, whose very patronym evokes folly! A space opens, then closes again. The circular island is not a given, but is rather created by man, thanks to the great works of Utopus, signifying that no longer is anything admitted which comes from the outside. The coast is scarcely accessible; formidable walls surround the city. We have passed irrevocably from nature to culture: from topography to topic, to use Louis Marin's term.[14] The island of Utopia is an undetermined place; that is, it is not a place. Utopia is perhaps the opposite of Paradise. From the latter flow rivers of living water, while Utopia has only its middling streams. Utopia is organized to defend itself against a universe that is so evil it has been rejected. Toward 1600, while the millenary traditions were exhausting themselves in European society, utopia combines with the alchemical work in Johann Valentin Andreae's *Christianopolis* (1619), a book devoted to the hope for a veritable cosmic transmutation.

More than any other message, the sixteenth-century reader perceived in Thomas More the disarray of the generation that had "discovered" America. Utopia abolished the intolerable reality of this opening onto what seemed to be the void. It closed this space in order to organize it by means of and within the text; or rather, the narrative engenders this space, a space of representation where lived contradictions are evoked and annulled, where nothing from the outside may be admitted any longer, where the vertigo of what remains to be done in a world that has lost all measure is perhaps quelled.

There can be no doubt as to the reason the previous period had not known a utopia, in a strict sense of the term—a narration with political and moral aims proposing an image of the ideal state situated in an imaginary place. At most, starting with the twelfth century, from time to time a few clues betray the existence of a utopic idea in formation, of a movement involving a being striving to exteriorize itself in figures, as if to offer a consolation to those who feel that the space of their lives is more or less threatened. Marie Louise Ollier thus interprets the

conception of an Arthurian kingdom in the Round Table novels as a chivalric utopia; Gioia Zaganelli reads the empire of Prester John, described by the *Letter*, as a clerical utopia; Alain de Libera finds the very concept of the university to be a utopia of knowledge.[15] There is often a nuance of euphoric fiction connected to the romanesque or pictorial description of a city, as with the rebuilt Troy in Benoît de Sainte-More's novel.

But for most westerners, is it not the very idea of a city which, over the centuries, carries a utopic connotation? The Irish of the high Middle Ages, who reawakened the European imagination beginning with the Carolingian period, left us many sketches, indeed whole plans for monasteries conceived as ideal cities, spaces of perfect harmony between man and his creator: this, according to the *Vita Sancti Patricii* (Life of Saint Patrick), was the concept behind the Armagh plan, which included a learned numerology based on the sacred septenary. Jacques Le Goff has shown the tendency toward idealization in a number of twelfth and thirteenth-century texts concerning the city: a kind of exorcism, casting off the fear inspired by this human work.[16] A general process of the urbanization of a society is accompanied, in the imagination of that society, by utopic temptations. The nineteenth century knew such temptations well enough, and imbued them with its mythology of progress. The Middle Ages, only at the beginning of a long itinerary leading to our megalopolis, was no less on the road for having just started out. Soon the thoughts of the learned would concentrate on favorite places, partly phantasmal (the prince's court, or even, ironically, Thélème), the image of an inaccessible and desirable perfection. It is a fundamental movement, a result of the driving dynamics of this "renaissance," and tied to the fierce efforts toward spiritual *renovatio* that accompany the "decline of the Middle Ages."

For Thomas More, the island of Utopia contains fifty-four cities (six times nine, a trinitary number) distributed regularly, all according to the same plan and of identical aspect, significant for this very accumulation which embraces an entire geographic space. It is the fulfillment of a secular dream of the totalization of space, to which the reality of a just recently discovered New World would impart a sudden urgency. An imaginary progression attained its goal. Neither the Asia of Prester John nor the African islands had produced a veritable *utopic effect* in the course of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries. But toward 1500 the slow, groping work to which Western man had devoted himself for generations—the work of clearing away his vital spaces and rearranging his imaginary places—had emerged into this will toward delusion.

This will triumphed in the discourse of educated travelers who, in the sixteenth century, crossed the Atlantic: for Léry, at the time of his first

contacts (later, he would be taken with Calvinistic pessimism); and for Thévet who, having spent ten weeks in Brazil, presented a paradisal description of this land without evil. The "antarctic France" of Villegaignon, in the Bay of Rio around 1550, and the "equinoctial France" of Maranhão in the seventeenth century, were ephemeral attempts at realizing utopia. These efforts shipwrecked, but they also nourished thought and literature for a long time to come. The colonies of the Huguenots, like those of the Puritans farther north, were less the fruit of a missionary plan than of a desire for liberty, for a space to fashion with their own hands.

The Old Word's "American dream" was thus constituted, so that narration was all it took for utopia to be reborn. It awakened from this dream slowly and progressively. The first agitations that announced this awakening coincided with the independence of the United States. From then on, the new country would offer a refuge, a chance—for the many in doubt, an *alibi*, in the original sense of this Latin adverb which means simply "in another place." The nascent industrial society interiorized, to the point of the grotesque swelling of the idea of progress, the modern will toward happiness along with the ancient alchemical dream of metamorphosing nature into energy. Society would require still other stories besides that of a Thomas More: in an apparent return to medieval reflexes, it was through the manipulation of knowledge that society attempted to replace utopia. From the last decade of the eighteenth century to the last decade of the nineteenth, there is a rapid succession of fictional travel narratives to the sun, the moon, the planets, meetings with extraterrestrials, and at times inhuman astral desolation: the tormented beginnings of our science fiction! As for utopia, we no longer have it.[17]

MONTREAL, CANADA

(Translated by Catherine Peebles)

NOTES

1 See Hugo Kuhn, *Zur Typologie mündlicher Sprachdenkmäler* (Munich, 1961), p. 243.

2 See Jean Richard, *Les récits de voyage et de pélerinage* (Tournai, 1981), p. 55.

3 See Leyla Perrone-Moysés, *Vinte luas: Viagem de Paulmier de Gonneville ao Brasil, 1503–1505* (Sao Paulo, 1992), p. 79.

4 See Luiz Costa Lima, *Pensando nos tropicos* (Rio de Janeiro, 1991), pp. 82–88, 97–98.

5 See Jacques Heers and Georgette de Groer, *Itinéraire d'Anselme Adorno en Terre Sainte* (Paris, 1978), p. 11.

6 See Michel Mollat, *Les explorateurs du XIIIe au XVIe siècles* (Paris, 1984), p. 31.

7 See Mollat, *Les explorateurs*, p. 32.

8 See Costa Lima, *Pensando nos tropicos*, pp. 87, 92; also Mollat, pp. 99–102; Richard, *Les récits de voyage*, p. 22.

9 Michel de Certeau, *L'écriture de l'histoire* (Paris, 1975), pp. 215–87.
10 See John Block Friedmann, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), pp. 154–62; also Philippe Ménard, "L'illustration du *Devisement du monde* de Marco Polo," in *Métamorphoses du récit de voyage*, ed. F. Moureau (Paris, 1986).
11 See A. C. Guilhoti, "A imagem visuel," in *Revista USP* (São Paulo, 1992).
12 See Richard, *Les récits de voyage*, p. 35.
13 See Jean Paul Roux, *Les explorateurs au Moyen Age* (Paris, 1985), pp. 225–26.
14 See Louis Marin, *Utopiques, jeux d'espace* (Paris, 1973), pp. 133–54.
15 See Marie Louise Ollier, "Utopie et roman arthurien," *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale*, 27 (1984), 223–32; Gioia Zaganelli, *La lettera di Prete Gianni* (Parma, 1990), pp. 13, 21; and Alain de Libera, *Penser au Moyen Age* (Paris, 1991), p. 239.
16 Jacques Le Goff, *L'imaginaire médiéval* (Paris, 1985), p. 239.
17 While this article was in press, I received Michèle Guéret-Laferté's recently published book *Sur les routes de l'Empire mongol* (Paris, 1994), dealing with rhetorics of medieval travel narratives to Asia. This is an excellent, careful study of some thirty texts of the thirteenth-fourteenth centuries.