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Concepts of Mediterranean Islandness from Ancient to Early Modern Times: A Philological Approach

Abstract: Islands have shaped literary forms just as those literary forms have structured our access to the specific spatiality of islands. This mediation happens via the figural, the trope; thus, representations of islands in literary texts are first of all to be considered as figures that reconfigure the topological space in a topological way. This reconfiguration depends on historical and geographical conditions. The specificity of the Mediterranean island cannot be a supra-temporal essence, but only a characteristic or a bundle of characteristics that becomes visible through contrasts with other islands or literatures. There is no such thing as a single key concept of literary Mediterranean islandness. This paper does not delineate a literary history of the Mediterranean islands, nor does it claim to develop a finely grained matrix of analysis applicable to any literary example that touches on islands and the Mediterranean. In a necessarily superficial journey through certain parts of the history of literature, focusing on the period from ancient to early modern times, the paper's aim is to detect phenomena that repeat. Departing from these phenomena, more general concepts are approached. In this respect, the contribution is a proposal for reflecting on the island as a category in the literature of and on the Mediterranean.

1 Introduction

The border between land and sea does not correspond to the demarcation of cultural and linguistic realities, and it is often in a conflictual relationship with the drawing of political boundaries. What does this mean for the literary dimension of Mediterranean islandness? This paper does not delineate a literary history of the Mediterranean islands, nor does it claim to develop a finely grained matrix of analysis applicable to any literary example that touches on islands and the Mediterranean. In a necessarily superficial journey through certain parts of the history of literature, focusing on the period from ancient to early modern times, our aim is rather to detect phenomena that repeat. Departing from these phenomena, we seek to approach more general concepts that will be both a starting point for future detailed studies and useful for their critical review, refinement, and further development. We start with some key concepts of island studies which are claimed

to be highly generalizable without being sensitive to the specifics of macroregions such as the Mediterranean. The subsequent journey through literary history, in which these terms are repeatedly confronted with island phenomena found in literature, traces a necessarily narrowing and excluding perspective, as we must limit ourselves to a choice of literary works found within certain languages and epochs – and in so doing we relegate the late-modern period to the outlooks chapter. The most glaring and immediately apparent gap is due to our decidedly European perspective: there are also perspectives ‘from the southern shore’ that future, fully developed Mediterranean literary studies should explore in detail. In this respect, our contribution is first and foremost a proposal for reflecting on the island as a category in the literature of and on the Mediterranean.¹

In a program-defining article, the leading island-studies scholar, Godfrey Baldacchino (2006, 6), asserts that there are two features that “propel islands as sites of innovative conceptualizations.” The first is that “islands suggest themselves as *tabulae rasae*” (5) and the second is that they are very often credited with a certain peripherality. These two debatable features would thus need to be incorporated into the definition of islandness. While an island can be defined simply as “a piece of land completely surrounded by water” (*OED*, cited in Royle and Brinklow 2018, 4), “islandness” is much more difficult to define. According to Baldacchino (2004, 278), “[i]slandness is an intervening variable that does not determine, but contours and conditions physical and social events in distinct, and distinctly relevant, ways.” Pete Hay (2006, 20) denotes a differential aspect key to the definition: “Whatever islandness is, it seems likely to be quite different for islands that are unambiguously small as against those that are not.” In the recent *Handbook of Island Studies*, Royle and Brinklow (2018, 11) opt for a promising, more descriptive approach: “Islandness is meant to embody the essence of island living, the attributes that make an island what it fundamentally is, and which it has by necessity, without which it loses its identity.” From a global perspective, the main characteristic of islandness would thus be the “insider/outsider dynamic” (12).

In his seminal article, Hay avoids specifying single key features. Instead, his phenomenological approach depicts dichotomies that, precisely because of their radical simplification, will serve for us as a useful starting point. The first of these opposing poles is that of vulnerability and resilience, “[p]erhaps *the* most contested faultline within island studies,” as Hay (2006, 21) suggests. Whether island territories are conceived as rather vulnerable or resilient depends directly

¹ We refer to the Mediterranean as a broadly geographical – and imaginary – macro-region and deliberately avoid the term ‘Mediterraninity’, not least because the extensive debates in anthropology and historical studies concerning specifics or uni(formity) of the Mediterranean cannot be retraced here.

on their accessibility. The second opposition consists therefore of whether islands are characterized mostly by connectedness or by isolation.

In the space between connectedness and isolation, resilience, and vulnerability, where might one find the literary dimension? Hay brings this up by way of metaphor, via the “island trope” or “island abstraction”, as he calls it. He distinguishes two different basic tropes: one that links the island to ideological discourses of radical individualism (as in the Robinson Crusoe tradition), while the other is quite the opposite, based on a wholesome relationship between the individual and a community, conceived as organic and linked naturally to the island (such as utopian islands). The specific form of these island tropes consists of “the island as fortress, heroically protecting the pure and the noble” on the one hand and “a symbol for concentrated evil” (Hay 2006, 27) on the other hand – and so basically as “paradise” or “prison” (Royle and Brinklow 2018, 16). Hay intrinsically cultivates a rather critical view of the island metaphor, considering that “[t]he island itself is seen to be a post-colonial trope, one traceable to Eurocentric assumptions of dominance.” His radical conclusion is that:

Island metaphors not only wrongly represent the politics of island identity as conservative, then, they also render irrelevant the realness of island lives. [...] They are continental, as well as colonial, constructions (Hay 2006, 28, 30).

Highlighting the opposition between island and continent, Hay takes a normative position and opines, in our opinion, a poorly differentiated view on the relationship between language and reality. It may be true that “[t]raditional island scholarship tends to discuss islands as tropes for a set of preconceived and fixed meanings (such as isolation, imprisonment, paradise, remoteness, etc.)” (Graziadei et al. 2017, 239). However, our focus here is on precisely how these meanings become fixed, and on the specificity of literary discourse within this process. We do not think that a specificity attributed to the cultural and historical dimension can be refused to non-Mediterranean islands, but it is obvious that the Mediterranean is a particular palimpsestic space and that the various islands and island phenomena can sometimes be seen as metaphors, standing for a more or less fixed signification; sometimes as metonymies, and often as antonomasias woven into the narrative and connected with the geographical space as well as with the intertextual space. In this sense, every Mediterranean island is an “île palimpseste” (Carile 2009, 23).

2 Mediterranean Island Travels – Paradigms of Travel?

The voyager most famous for traveling around the Mediterranean island region is Ulysses – a hero of the Trojan War, whom Homer sends on an arduous journey home to the island of Ithaca in his epic poem *Odyssey* from the eighth or seventh century BC. The journey takes a detour via the island of Kirke, the island of Polyphemos, and to Ogygia, the island of Calypso. The epithet of the enduring, *πολύτλας δῖος Ὀδυσσεύς* (XXIV, 537), shows that Ulysses becomes in the course of the journey more and more of a sufferer (Grethlein 2017, 105), while also revealing the physical journey to be a philosophically encoded narrative of a journey through life that is associatively linked to the Mediterranean. The significance of the events that befall Troy and those islands, which oscillate between reality and myth, remains relevant beyond antiquity and its epics of the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and Virgil's *Aeneid* for the Middle Ages – since quite a few dynasties include themselves in the genealogy of these heroes. The idea of (life) travel also remains topical in its *interpretatio christiana*. Homer's hero thus defines the cartographic, exploratory, and literary view of travel for centuries – and not just in the Mediterranean. Along with military expeditions, pilgrimages, trade journeys, messenger journeys, political journeys, and educational journeys,² life travel and Ulysses continue to be constitutive.

2.1 Navigation and Narration – the Possibilities and Limits of Travel in the Mediterranean Sea

The influence of antiquity on the central development processes of cartography is clear. Initially, knowledge of exact coastlines was primarily reserved for seafarers themselves (Schneider 2018, 38) who made notes that drew on their expertise.³ Based on ancient and also increasingly medieval coastal descriptions named *peri-ploi* (Edson et al. 2011, 61), the spread of the compass and developments in ship-

2 On the different types of travel, see Novoa Portela (2008, 159–195); Deluz (2008, 101–125); Reichert (2008a, 197–231).

3 Unlike in antiquity, written sailing instructions could only be found from the late Middle Ages onwards, since helmsmen did not necessarily have literacy skills. The basis for orientation lay in spatial memory and oral reports of experience. Thus, parts of Icelandic sagas can be understood as sailing instructions, as can be assumed of, for instance, the location of the island of Hennö near Bergen (Ohler 1991, 66–67; Ash 2007, 511).

building technology,⁴ portolan maps were created – the oldest having been documented in the thirteenth century. The maps offered a visualization of coastal descriptions (Horst 2012, 28), and they represented the sea as a fabric, *marteloio* (Reichert 2013, 102). However, interest was initially directed at a north-south gradient in areas close to one's own experience. This focus existed not least due to an anti-Nordic prejudice that has at times been detectable since antiquity and because of a contrasting emphasis on the relevance of central and southern Europe by classical authors such as Tacitus (Bremer 2008, 849). Also, the importance of the Mediterranean as a transport route required precise documentation of southern European areas – of the Mediterranean Atlantic, the waters beyond the Strait of Gibraltar.⁵ That caused a lack of knowledge and accuracy in relation to the north (Reichert 2013, 103), and led to its imaginative charges (Wunderli 1993, 2).

The connotative relevance of antiquity is revealed in the designation of limits to the accessible world, the Mediterranean, as the “Pillars of Hercules” (Edson et al. ²2011, 72), as well as in references to ancient travelers in new nautical maps and genres. Closely related to the emergence of the maps particularly in the fifteenth century is an exemplifying view of islands (Reichert 2013, 103) in the form of the *Isolarii* – printed nautical charts that focus on individual islands (Barber 2006, 62).⁶ The *Liber Insularum Archipelagi* by the Florentine humanist Cristoforo Buondelmonti, whose own travels retrace the paths of Ulysses and Helen, introduces the reader to the journeys of the heroes as well as to the Aegean and the Ionian Sea (Reichert 2013, 103–105) – a region eminently important for the worldview and self-image of the fifteenth century (Reichert 2013, 105). The genre of the island book, *insularium*, was developed on this basis and remained of interest until the seventeenth century. This also led to the consideration of other areas (Reichert 2013, 106). Cartographic thinking in and with islands – also beyond the Mediterranean – is additionally visible in the fact that islands are inserted to secure a cartographer's copyright or for the self-stylization of supposed discoverers (Brooke-Hitching 2017, 9–11).

4 In particular, the hulk and cog types of ships were used in the Mediterranean for transport purposes. The Middle Ages took up and surpassed ancient technology by constructing robust ships to sail the Atlantic (Ohler 1991, 63–64).

5 On the relevance of Italian mariners regarding the exploration of those areas see Reichert (2013, 103).

6 On the connections between portolans and island books, see Harvey (1987, 283).

2.2 Ulysses's Legacy? Projections of Travel and Space

Medieval literature also inherited the legacy of the *Odyssey* and the journey of life. The meaning of Ulysses as *homo viator* as well as a journey that converts into knowledge retains a central relevance in Neoplatonism, in Plotinus and Augustine. Thus, in an *imitatio* of Ulysses, one is urged to recognize the potential phases of the soul's inner journeying home, and not to let oneself be distracted by the siren songs of the body (Fox 2017, 280–281). Recoded in Christian terms, however, the journey of life undergoes a modification as a return home to God. Since the tactical game of the ancient deities – who punish the long-suffering traveler with adversity precisely in the supposed tangibility of the destination – is countered in varying degrees of intensity by the protective hand of divine grace, the traveler is also able to venture out of the Mediterranean context into the unknown by placing their trust in God.⁷

In Konrad's von Würzburg *Trojanerkrieg*, from 1278 to 1287, a connection between physical and cognitive travel is hinted at in the considerations of Thetis, the goddess of the sea, who is looking for a safe place far away from war for her son Achilles. She translates Achilles's potential journey into her discursive thought process, in which she breaks away from mainland-centered thinking in the stages of Thrace, Macedonia, and the islands of Lemnos, Delos, and Skyros. Konrad also challenges his readers to embark on a journey of literary reception, cognitively connecting the island journeys assigned to each central hero and noting the consequences for their own life journeys (Ebermeier 2019).

A projection of the *Odyssey* into other spaces, linking the idea of the island in the West with the semantics of paradise, is shown in the saint's legend *Navigatio sancti Brendani abbatis* from the ninth or tenth century and its Middle German version that draws a parallel (Wagner 2011, 268) – the *Reise-Fassung* of the twelfth century. Both works send Brendan as an 'Irish Ulysses' (Semmler 1993, 104) on a *peregrinatio*, on a search for the *terra repromissionis sanctorum* away from the Mediterranean context, but they do not wrestle him away from its connotation. The combination of "elements of a saint's life, a marvellous sea voyage and an allegorical journey through life" (Strijbosch 2006, 1) unites ancient and oriental narrative concepts,⁸ Irish travel stories and Nordic thematic traditions (Boyer 1989, 37–44). Brendan's odyssey under the protection of God reveals in Ireland a space that is not only geographically, but also politically and culturally located on the periph-

7 A boldness that Dante's Ulysses had committed himself, but which ended neither with homecoming nor discovery, but shipwreck, as he tells in the *Divine Comedy* (canto 26).

8 On the interplay of oriental and ancient narrative traditions, see Kühn (2008, 113).

ery of the Christian world from the perspective of southern and central Europe, including England (Reichert 2001, 101). This space becomes tangible due to the concrete and familiar Christian coding of the destination.

The tension between reality and myth (Wunderli 1993, 1) remains relevant beyond the early and High Middle Ages, and so a projection of some facets of the *Odyssey* into other spaces can be seen in the voyages of discovery in later centuries. Thus, the work entitled *Columbus's Letter on the First Voyage* – written in the tradition of late-medieval travel literature, translated many times and printed in 1494 – includes versions that form the hermeneutical starting point for the European reception of Columbus's voyages (Wagner 2011, 265–266), and it also reveals a connection between reality and myth. In succession to the saint, Columbus seeks the earthly paradise (Grimm 1995, 73–113) and tends to transfer the corresponding semantics of salvation onto the encountered islands (Wagner 2011, 268). Columbus's self-image as a geographer and actor in salvation history (Watts 1985, 73–102) leads to the pragmatic exploration of the entire globe in a religious context. This represents the apocalyptic prerequisite for the Parousia of Christ, the premise for the realization of the biblical claim to the universality of faith (Wagner 2011, 269; Wehle 1995, 185) – the voyage of discovery becomes a journey home to God. Islands are thus associated with a paradisiacal potential and conceived as spatial forms to be discovered and accessed.

2.3 A Departure from the Mediterranean – A Change of Perspective

While literary characters' island journeys in the Mediterranean are not infrequently coded as journeys based on cognition from a mainland-centered perspective, for Mediterranean islanders, economic aspects are often the motivation for a departure on a long journey. A *homo viator* who undertakes a life journey and requires reflection, is juxtaposed with a *homo economicus* who has a pragmatic focus on their aims. Thus, abstract, cognitive travel to surveyable island locations is at odds with concrete, pragmatically intended travel to a vast mainland. This internal view of Mediterranean islands, and the shift in perspective of non-Mediterranean authors, colors the island connotation with a tendency toward mainland-associated familiarity and turns islands into hybrid constructs of the foreign and the everyday.

Thus, *Fortunatus*, as one of the first prose novels written in German by an anonymous author and without a literary model, was published in print in 1509. It presents Cyprus as *fruchtbar aller handen edler natürlicher fruchten* (387, 22) (i. e., of natural abundance like a *locus amoenus*). From an outside perspective, Cy-

prus functions as a stop on the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, while the internal perspective focuses on the economic fate of Fortunatus, who – because of the plight of his parents – leaves the island to travel to places such as Flanders and England. The pursuit of prosperity turns out to be a perverted odyssey that puts the return home to one's self in opposition to an expedition to seek out material things and prestige. Dangerous sea voyages recede into the background.

The *Odyssey* shifts completely into everyday contexts in its humorous presentation. Horace's *Satire* 2.5 and medieval works conceived as a response to the reception of Roman satirists, such as the eleventh- and twelfth-century *Nummus*-satire, probably written by Thierry of St. Trond (Schmitz 2008, 63–64), as well as the twelfth-century poem *Post rabiem rixe* by Hugh Primas, outline Ithaca as a place of “trivial reality” (Schmitz 2008, 62) from which the returning Ulysses strives to escape. In the early modern period, the geographical decentering is reinforced. The attractive quality of eccentric spaces, which in the ‘age of discoveries’ are increasingly imagined as islands beyond the ‘familiar’ Mediterranean area, leaves its mark on some of the most well-known narrative works of the Romance languages. The protagonists in these travel stories will not travel across the Mediterranean. Mediterranean islands are integrated alongside Atlantic, Indian, unlocatable, and fantastic islands in a global spatial order that makes the Mediterranean recede behind the primacy of the exotic.

This trend is apparent in Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1516/32) although it is not a travel narrative in the strict sense. The multiplication of plot lines in this epic poem results in a multiplication of journeys, travelers, and travel routes. This tendency is reinforced by a new means of transportation: a flying horse called a hippogryph that makes vertical locomotion possible. The scope of the plot remains Mediterranean – due to the basic opposition between Christians and Saracens. Regarding islands in the poem, two stand out: the Isola di Alcina and Lipadusa (Lampedusa). The former is prototypical of a utopian and fantastical island home to a sorceress, modeled on Circe's Aiaia but of vague location, accessible only by hippogryph (Klettke 2017). The second, Lampedusa, is the stage for the final duel between the Saracens and the Christian paladins. Ariosto also integrates into his narrative a debate about the likelihood that this battle could have taken place on Lampedusa: a certain Federico Fulgoso, who knows the island from his own experience, doubts that the rugged rocky island could have been the scene of a clash on horseback. Ariosto then justifies his view by stating in the text that the battle site was later altered by an earthquake: “Un sasso che 'l tremuoto aperse, / le cadde sopra, e tutta la coperse” (XLII, 21). This would explain the actual appearance of the island and thus does not refute his narrative. In *Orlando furioso*, even those islands modeled after Homeric antetypes are no longer necessarily lo-

cated in the Mediterranean. In addition, it is remarkable that the discrepancy between literary representation and topological reality is discussed in the text itself.

François Rabelais's *Quart livre* (1548/1552) is not a Mediterranean oeuvre in itself, but here too does the tension between real Mediterranean islands and fantastic island spaces become tangible. In the first edition from 1548, Rabelais referred to himself as the “calloïer des îles Hyères,” i. e., as a Greek monk from the Hyères archipelago off the Côte d'Azur. In the 1552 edition, this reference disappeared, probably because the mention of the islands had become politically explosive after they had gained geostrategic importance. Nevertheless, the ephemeral reference suggests that the author may have spent some time on this archipelago, which would also explain the strong Mediterranean coloration of his nautical vocabulary (Demonet 2012). The voyage route that the main character Pantagruel undertakes on several ships, while searching for the oracle of the divine bottle, Bachuc, is vaguely northward. Of greater relevance than the geographical location of the itinerary is its ‘island-hopping’ nature: the islands are lined up in an archipelago-like but paratactic manner; each of them offers a new, self-contained micronarrative of its own (Lestringant 1988, 249). According to Demonet (2012), the îles Hyères – and possibly their cartographic representation – might have been the model for this island order. The voyage is a journey into open waters that reaches no destination, but it enacts the potential connectedness of the islands by linking ‘their’ micronarratives, which would have otherwise remained isolated, to form a travel tale.

While Rabelais takes his characters to the Far North and from there into fantasy, Miguel de Cervantes's *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda* (1617) begins in the northern seas, between Greenland, Iceland, and Denmark, among a similar chain of islands. Again, the paratactic archipelago supports an elliptical narrative, as each island potentially comes up with a new micronarrative. Clearly, Cervantes chooses northern Europe as an adventurous setting for the beginning of the novel, because it is largely beyond the knowledge of his readership and thus offers more fictional scope without the author having to resort to the fantastic. The Mediterranean is still the frame of reference, with Rome the destination. The voyage correlates with a literary evolution: “As the novel journeys southward, it evolves from ancient chronicle to medieval romance to premodern novel; it becomes more realistic” (Moore 2013, 20). Mediterranean islands now seem to have become uninteresting to the novel's plot. They serve merely as a point of comparison – Friesland for example is “tan grande como Sicilia” (Cervantes 1997 [1617], 721).

Baltasar Gracián's *El Criticón* (1651–1657) also begins on eccentric insular ground: after a shipwreck, Critilio is stranded on the island of St. Helena, in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, where he meets Andrenio, who lives in the state of nature. After managing to leave St. Helena, the two cross Europe on an educational and adventurous pilgrimage, with their route largely coinciding with that of

Persiles, including their destination of Rome. In this allegorical life journey, Mediterranean islands have become merely illustrative material, such as when Andreño learns to read the islands from Homer's *Odyssey* as allegories for the dangers of Spanish court life (chapter 11: "El golfo cortesano."). This example shows that a reduction in external action is more than compensated for by a journey to find oneself, or by an educational journey with the aim of learning how to decipher the world. Here, the *homo viator* model is evident. The narrative begins and ends on an island. The destination of the journey is the island of Immortality: it lies in a sea of ink that the two heroes cross in a ship made of book covers. The journey of life, coded in terms of salvation history, thus leads from the real island on the periphery between the Old and the New World to the transcendent island of Immortality set in the sea of *fama*, filled with ink in which the most famous writers bathe their pens – "tinta de los famosos escritores que en ella bañan sus plumas" (Gracián ¹⁰2007, 790). Here, the pure island metaphor stands not for another island, but for the immortality of everything written (and to be written): for a kind of hypertrophic literary palimpsest.

3 In Search of the Utopian – A Journey Beyond the Mediterranean?

Although islands that can be surveyed (Moser 2005, 409) and that initially appear to be flexibly located seem particularly suited to utopian and dystopian thematizations, it is precisely the utopias that are considered paradigmatic from today's perspective – Atlantis and Utopia – that are also located far from the Mediterranean. Mediterranean-associated imaginaries remain partially significant, but their spatial context is of decreasing relevance, especially as literature often prioritizes an island space itself over its local features, foregoing the tradition of travel encodings. Further, an island's referentiality is replaced by its functional use as a projective foil – an implication it shares with other spatial forms, such as tree gardens or *minne* (love) grottos beyond the Mediterranean, since these can also become a type of nonplace. The question of the relevance of the Mediterranean in a context of increasing empiricism is tied to the quality of the utopia or idyllic being staged as natural, salvation-historical, or political.

3.1 Mediterranean Islands as Ambiguous Spaces and Hints of the Utopian Beyond the Mediterranean

The Mediterranean islands, which are increasingly integrated into travelers' experiences from the late Middle Ages onwards, hint at the idyllic in their flora and fauna. However, this is shifted into a comparison with reality, so that these islands are not so much assigned a cognitive meaning, but become a representation of ambiguous spaces in a modified way. Crete, for example, is considered a luxury, fertile place that is worthy of comparison with the Isles of the Blessed. According to travel reports, however, criticism of the hygiene among the island society was common. Further, a holistic view on Mediterranean insularity also shows the ambiguity of utopian or dystopian codings, such as Rhodes revealing itself to be inhospitable, or Cyprus proving to be the best and most distinguished island in the Mediterranean, while also raising questions regarding usability and empiricism (Reichert 2001, 120–123).

An inkling of the paradisiacal, an unattained promise, is portrayed in the sixteenth-century *Historia of D. Johann Fausten*, in relation to, among others, the island of Crete. On his journey through the world and with the aim of seeing paradise – *auch endlich das Paradeiß sehen [zu] können* (916, 26–27) – Faust also contemplates the island of Crete and its fauna. This fauna does not consist of any threatening animals, except for *grosse giftige Spinnen* (916, 16) – poisonous spiders – which add a problematic aspect to the island. The characteristics of this island, as well as other islands, viewed with the help of Mephistopheles intensify the desire for the idyllic, but they cannot themselves be paradise. Depending on the tradition in the genre, the paradisiacal is sometimes found far from the Mediterranean, for instance, as an island of paradise in the Irish region, as in the legend *Navigatio*, or as Avalon or *insula pomorum* in the Arthurian narrative tradition.

The medieval world of thought localized utopias or the idyllic far from the influence of empiricism in the Atlantic – a local rendering that feeds on the ancient tradition of imagination at a distance. Here, the Isles of the Blessed can be found, the conception of which is linked to mental premises that have their roots in archaic times and can be traced back to Homer and Hesiod. Beyond the Pillars of Hercules, the furthest known point in Mediterranean navigation, the islands retain at first a mythical distance and are not furnished with geographical references until the Roman occupation of the Iberian Peninsula and the events of the Civil War in the first century BC. They often oscillate between the mere reproduction of geographical facts, their exaggeration, and the recurrent echoes of literary tradition. The location of the island of Thule or *Ultima Thule* – a cipher for a distant outpost in the ancient world – as the most northern of all the Britannic islands

around the Arctic Circle, or else in the south, is also characterized by spatial remoteness, which the Mediterranean area is only able to provide to a limited extent (Reichert 2008b, 641–643).

The same applies to natural utopias, which, like the island of Taprobana, are associated with *abundantia*, which has Indian connotations as a counter-world to one's own reality, thus recalling the ancient traditions of Hellenistic authors (Reichert 2008b, 644). Gold, gemstone, and spice islands are especially associated with the region of Southeast Asia. According to Folker Reichert (2008b, 651–652), a possible reason for cartographers in the Middle Ages to locate idyllic islands in the Atlantic⁹ is that those areas beyond the Pillars of Hercules were neglected in the geography of antiquity, while the maritime space in the east provided little room for speculation due to it being relatively easy to experience.

3.2 Sociopolitical Utopias Between Mediterranean Settings and Placelessness

In his works *Timaeus* and *Critias*, Plato also locates his sociopolitical utopia, Atlantis, as spatially and temporally distant from the Mediterranean realm of experience. Bearing connotations linked to the Pillars of Hercules, and sunk into the sea because of tremendous earthquakes (*Tim.*, 25c–25d; *Crit.*, 108e–109a), the island can only be experienced through memory and is located in the past. As an island of an extraordinary size (*Tim.*, 24e–25a), whose *δύναμις βασιλέων κρατοῦσα μὲν πάσης τῆς νήσου, πολλῶν δὲ ἄλλων νήσων καὶ μερῶν τῆς ἡπείρου* (*Tim.*, 25a) (as an island, that is characterized by intensive contact with other islands and with the mainland), Atlantis, as with the historical Mediterranean island states, proves to be interconnected, thus negating associations with isolation. As a distant concept, however, Atlantis is based in the Mediterranean only with regard to its thought trigger.

That ambivalence of the distant and the known is relevant for representations of the hoped-for, the caricatured and the criticized, in order to analyze the latter but also to revise it. Aristophanes's comedy from the fifth century BC, *Birds*, focuses on the Mediterranean's own experiential space, but balances reflections on political developments and their critique in a coordinate system by projecting a horizontal plane onto a vertical one. The drama deals with the questionable issues of political power in a city in the clouds. Sparta, *τὸ μέγα τοῦτο τοῦκ Λακεδαιμόνος Σπάρτην ὄνομα* (v. 814), is considered in the characters' reflections to be a possible

⁹ Prominent islands of the Atlantic are also dealt with in detail by William H. Babcock (1975).

name for the city, but it is substituted by ‘cloud cuckoo-land’, *Νεφελοκοκκυλία* (v. 821), – an insular nonplace thus associated with the Mediterranean and with placelessness at the same time. As for philosophical journeys of thought, the messenger of the gods, Iris, remains relevant here, but turns into a character of the discourse of power.

In medieval literature, island societies appear less in the tradition of political concepts of thought than in concepts relating to ancient worldviews, such as those of Pliny the Elder. Counterworlds to the known are thus located, from a German-speaking perspective, in the Mediterranean – without them being declared as a utopia. Konrad’s von Würzburg *Trojanerkrieg* presents Lemnos as an Amazon island, *dā niht wan frouwen inne sint* (v. 13817). This island has been designed in opposition to the male-coded socialization of Achilles, for whom his mother seeks a safe place far away from Troy. However, the affinity for war of the Amazons and a proximity to the reality of life result in a preference for the island of Skyros. It, too, is a world of contrasts (Sieber 2002, 67), populated by women, but peacefully ruled by a king – a socio-referential game of ideas with a partially familiar structure. The ambiguity of the Mediterranean lends itself to Konrad’s warning against war – a reaction to the peaceless context of the time (Freitag 1988/1989, 380).

In a satirical analysis of society, Sebastian Brant in his fifteenth century *Narrenschiff* narrates the ship’s voyage to Narragonia as a journey of fools, nullifying a Mediterranean location not least because of a certain parodic displacement in the journey of life. The sixteenth-century *Lalebuch* also presents a satirical image of society, yet it is not located on an island but rather in the space *deß Großmächtigen vnnd weitläufftigen Königreichs Vtopien* (5, 3–4), that is, the powerful and expansive empire of Utopia, which alludes intertextually to More’s work (Aurnhammer and Detering 2019, 116). The capital *Vthen* (5, 5) and *Vdeys[,] der Vtopische Keyser* (5, 11) or Utopian Regent, all refer to ancient traditions such as Homer’s *Odyssey*, but they are part of a parodic inversion of humanist ‘Nemo’ and ‘Utopia’ literature; the work’s title already caricatures philosophical discourses in its play on the Greek *λαλέω*, to slur, or *λάλημα*, chatter (Aurnhammer and Detering 2019, 116). The reading of the title *Lale* as an anagram hinting at ‘Alle’ (everyone) (Aurnhammer and Detering 2019, 116), also situates what is being depicted to be in the context of the near.

Insular utopias in the early modern period, however, follow utopia’s etymology as a nonplace, and they dislocate it from the potential space of experience. Thus, at the beginning of the sixteenth century in his work *Utopia*, which is constitutive of the genre of literary utopias (Reisch 2010, 159), Thomas More locates the ideal of an existence in harmony with nature (Claeys 2011, 61) in the Republic of Utopus on

an island, whose key ideas respond to the social grievances of the time.¹⁰ The creation of an alternative world by the Renaissance scholar (Claeys 2011, 60) – a world identified as the goal of political action – leads the island to serve as a foil for concrete visions that include, among others, a vision of an organic community. It also lets the referential power of the island as well as the journey of life recede into the background.

For most utopias conceived using the model of Thomas More, the following features remain key: they are located on an island beyond the known world, i.e., beyond the Mediterranean; arrival at the *utopos* is accidental (e.g., after shipwreck or drifting away); and the representation of what is seen takes the form of a travelogue embedded in a frame narrative. More names himself as the narrator of the frame narrative, while the character of Raphael Hythloday reports on his discovery in or beyond the New World. In Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* (1627), it is an anonymous first-person narrator who reports how his ship drifts off on the voyage from Peru to Asia and lands at the unknown island of Bensalem, the *new Atlantis*. Bacon's island stands out from other utopian islands due to its emphasis on isolation through insularity, which protects the ideal moment from corrosive influences. In Tommaso Campanella's *La città del Sole* (1623), the titular city of the sun is located on Taprobana, presumably in the Indian Ocean. Here, the divergence from the familiar Mediterranean world is particularly palpable, as the setting comprises a dialog between a Hospitaller of the Order of Malta and a Genoese helmsman of Columbus recounting his discovery. Confronted with the account of the distant and utopian island and the presence of the transatlantic expeditions, the Mediterranean is clearly relegated to the background.

Thus, the question arises of whether the utopian 'nonplace' would have to be read as 'non-Mediterranean'. This is due to Mediterranean islands functioning as known places par excellence.¹¹ They are known not necessarily through one's own contemplation, but through a long literary tradition that, since antiquity, has continually updated mythical Mediterranean journeys. In this regard, François Fénelon's *Télémaque* (1699) must be mentioned in conclusion. This book, the actual title of which is *Suite du quatrième livre de l'Odyssée d'Homère*, fills a gap in the *Odyssey* – hence there is a natural fixation on the Mediterranean region. Accordingly, the islands visited or mentioned by the son of Ulysses are numerous: Calypsos, Sicily, Cyprus, Crete, and Ithaca. However, the Mediterranean island spaces disappear to some extent during an allegoresis that leads the reader less to a knowledge of dis-

¹⁰ Davis (2010, 40–47) considers the sociopolitical references of the work.

¹¹ Although more knowledge about distant islands has accumulated since the Medieval, which also gradually blocks their utopian potential (Glaser 1996, 234).

tant islands, and rather to the recognition of generally valid rules and patterns. As in Gracián's *Criticón*, the 'Homeric' islands become literary allegories, the decoding of which prepares one for coping with courtly and political life.

4 Outlook and Conclusion

4.1 Islands and Identity in Modern Times

In the European Mediterranean literatures of the late-modern period from the eighteenth century onward, two tendencies can be identified regarding islands; both of which are to be seen in the broader context of how collective identities relate to territories. We will only roughly delineate them, as the complexity and the potential literary corpus of 'islands and identity in modern times' would necessitate a separate work of its own. The first is an exoticizing continental view of spaces that have supposedly remained archaic, especially due to their being isolated by insularity; the second is the affirmation of a specificity characterized precisely by the openness and connectivity of insular cultures.

The re-exoticization of spaces known through literature and sometimes even through historiography has occurred in the transcription of personal travel experience: the island being no longer a place imagined solely from a distance or as a natural part of one's own lifeworld – instead, being compared, during a visit, with island images previously acquired through reading. In the eighteenth century, the protagonist is still the nobleman of the Grand Tour, replaced in the nineteenth century by the Baedeker tourist as well as the travel writer. Early on, the island stood metonymically for the foreignness of the south. Islands would be considered to represent the Mediterranean as a whole, or at least a larger geographical entity; this is something that Goethe's (1970 [1816/17], 246) well-known saying "to have seen Italy without having seen Sicily is not to have seen Italy at all, for Sicily is the clue to everything" reflects prototypically. There do exist interesting cases of this practice, such as Prosper Mérimée, who wrote one 'Corsican' novella before a trip to Corsica in 1839 and one afterward. Both narratives thematize the ideas of *vendetta* and Corsican mentality: while *Matteo Falcone* (1829) deals with the archaic restoration of family honor through the killing of a ten-year-old, *Colomba* (1840) describes a thoroughly complex web of insular and Mediterranean perceptions of the other and of the self; this would reflect the digestion of his travel experiences (Glosch and Losfeld 2000). During Europe's industrialization, then, the Mediterranean islands were increasingly credited with having preserved an archaic substance outside the grasp of modernity through their supposed isolation. Au-

thors as diverse as Walter Benjamin (Valero 2019) and Ernst Jünger (Benedetti 2019) discovered the last bastions of organic communities in Ibiza or Sardinia just before they were ‘corrupted’ by touristification or electrification.

Literary island representations have been charged with collective (self-)representation, the island being emphasized as the space of a community or of specific cultural phenomena that distinguish the islanders from outsiders. This becomes particularly vivid in the case of the large islands of the Western Mediterranean, which have not become politically independent nations yet have found a medium of collectivization in literature, especially during the twentieth century. The most established instance of this is the famous concept of *sicilianità* or *sicilitudine*, coined above all – but not only – by Leonarda Sciascia, to describe a mentality derived directly from insularity. In a seminal article, Sciascia (1970, 12) begins his considerations on *sicilitudine* based on the geographical position of the island. From this geographical fact, he then derives a strategic vulnerability of which the numerous invasions, ranging from the Arabic invasion in AD 827 to the American landing in 1943, are an ineluctable expression, a vulnerability that causes insecurity and fear. This fear would then provoke a certain folly and finally proudness because “a un certo punto l’insicurezza, la paura, si rovesciano nell’illusione che una siffatta insularità [...] costituisca privilegio e forza” (13). So, the natural vulnerability of the island would turn into resilience, and finally this specific islandness would be reflected in Sicilian literature and other cultural artifacts, like *sardità* in Sardinian or *corsité* in Corsican literature. In these cases, islandness as a specific cultural feature of island communities competes with the paradigms of national literatures and testifies to the fragile construction of collective identities even and especially when they invoke supposedly natural entities.

4.2 Toward a Specification of Mediterranean Islandness

In the *Handbook of Island Studies*, in an article named “Literature and the Literary Gaze” McMahon and André (2018, 297) assert that “island topographies and topologies have structured literary forms.” Indeed, islands have shaped these forms just as those literary forms have structured our access to the specific spatiality of islands. This mediation happens via the figural, the trope, and this is why we must not disregard “the insights into misreading the discourse as a concept (an object) rather than a literary figure (a process)” (303). Although it is tempting to assign harmonizing concepts to complex representations of islands in literary texts, they are first of all to be considered as figures that reconfigure the topological space in a tropological way. This reconfiguration depends on historical and geographical conditions. The specificity of the Mediterranean island cannot be a

supra-temporal essence, but only a characteristic or a bundle of characteristics that becomes visible through contrasts with other islands or literatures. There is no such thing as a single key concept of literary Mediterranean islandness. However, after our journey through literary history, we can plead that in the Mediterranean context the tabula rasa and peripherality features are less potent, while another concept does become apparent: the island as palimpsest. Compared to remote utopian islands, oceanic, 'fortune' or 'desert' islands, Mediterranean island spaces have accumulated particularly dense layers of meaning, or, as Roger (2009, 54) states: "l'insularité méditerranéenne est une moire d'histoires, un archipel de récits distincts: c'est un chapelet de *noms propres*."

This chaplet of proper names alludes to the Mediterranean as a particular palimpsestic space. As we have stated in our introduction, the various islands and island phenomena can be seen as metaphors, metonymies, or antonomasias, that only make sense when considered as woven into narratives and connected with the geographical space as well as with the intertextual space. This is what Carile's (2009, 23) comment about every Mediterranean island being an "île palimpseste" may be taken to mean – and this is why the Mediterranean area is a central cradle for island imaginaries and island narratives.¹² Through this interplay of continuity and divergence, the Mediterranean has formed a stable associative foil for centuries, also having inspired imaginations and conceptualizations of islands beyond the Mediterranean.

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