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Islands: Literally and in Literature
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It was thus, sitting in the air-conditioned calm of an exclusive library, that I began my strangest journey: a voyage into a land outside space, an expanse without distances; a land of looking-glass events.

Amitav Ghosh
The Shadow Lines

In the following I will present a reading of islands as places and resemblances, including an understanding of map-making both as the drawing of contours inhabiting figments of the imagination and of map-making as the creation of spaces in which the familiar can be established. In addition, I will draw on the importance of spatial rather than temporal settings in connection with literature and art invested with what one could call autobiographical elements; the reason, it seems, being that reality—in a kind of map-making—is given a name, a representative. This is also where I see a difference between theoretical modes of postmodernism and postcolonialism which I'll touch upon briefly at the end of this paper.

I grew up not on an island, but on a peninsula¹ which in Danish, my mother tongue, translates into 'half an island'. This half-island is the main land of a considerably small nation attached to Europe with some 100 km of unnatural border.

I believe it is with small-size land masses as with singular clouds; they can be surveyed and imagined in one optic glance—whether from above or below—and they are often given words of description far from the attempted accuracy of cartography. My half-of-an-island homeland looks like a *nisse*, a pixy, in profile; pointed hat and big nose dripping islands of irregular sizes; its body would then of course make up the rest of Europe, except for Great Britain and Ireland which is but islands off the continent. We have a saying in Danish; that the pixy moves along whenever the problem remains despite the apparent attempt to solve it.

In the Srilankan born, Canadian writer, Michael Ondaatje's memoir, *Running in the Family*, the contours of his childhood island is described as

follows: "Ceylon falls on a map and its outline is the shape of a tear. After the spaces of India and Canada it is so small." (Ondaatje, 1982, p. 147)

In the Fijian born of Indian descend writer and academic, Satendra Nandan's autobiography, *The Wounded Sea*, I read the following presentation of the shape of Fiji: "Fried goat meat, hot and spicy, was passed around in an enamel plate: we took a piece each and the plate stopped on a table on which a crude map of Fiji was carved, it seems, by one of Ratu Reddy's geography pupils. It was upside down. Vitilevu appeared like a lump of turd, and Vanualevu—a hungry crocodile waiting for it to fall into its grinning mouth." (Nandan, p. 80)

In the Spring of 1995, I was asked to comment on the writing of an essay by an art photographer, graduating from the Danish Academy of Fine Arts. Pia Arke is half a Dane, or half a Greenlander, or half of both, which is not really my wording, that is, it is not my intention to sound diminishing: The art of balancing between halves was very much the subject of her paper and her photographs. Arke thinks her childhood island, Greenland, from a specific angle resembles the distorted head of the Elephantman. Some years ago, Pia Arke built, in Denmark, a pinhole camera, a *camera obscura*, the size of a small shed which she moved to Eastern Greenland, placed it on the spot where once her childhood home had been and photographed the view from what had once been the kitchen window while she herself was inside the camera, surrounded by the developing picture. The whole project mocked the early explorers, ethnographers, natural scientists who had come equipped with measuring instruments of all kinds; her camera a bastard in its field, and a moveable hotel for its bastard-creator. Again, bastard is not a name given by me, but a name Pia Arke has adopted herself and in doing so, she is pointing both to her mixed cultural background and to the fact that 'Greenlander' was a name given by the Europeans: Being a Greenlander is thus within Said's concept of orientalism exactly the Other as defined by the colonizers. Thus, when Pia Arke tells the story about herself, which seemingly is what her art is about, she is in a way telling another's story: The story about the one she is not. Pia Arke concluded her essay by defending the value of an 'ethnoaesthetics' with the following words: "Skabelsen af et tredje sted for os, som hverken hører til i det etnografiske objekt eller i det etnografiske subjekt, bliver dermed til lidt mere end en intellektuel mulighed. Der er et vist element af tvingende nødvendighed over vores spil med de forskellige verdners brikker."ⁱⁱ (Arke, 1995, p. 31)

Iceland, by Danes a typical mispronunciation of the English word island, is a small country, though twice the size of Denmark, situated in the northern part of the Atlantic Ocean. I have heard that Icelanders believe they live in the middle of the world (or, at least, in the middle of the Icelandic end of the world, where the US is west and Norway east), and that on Iceland nothing is considered to be small, either places or people. The shape of Iceland reminds me of a sheep, the edges—in reality steep cliffs, fjords and rockfaces—fluffy like

wool, covering the legs, a head held high. The population of Iceland is less than two hundred and fifty thousand.

There seems to be two lines of literary traditions on Iceland: One is, of course, the Icelandic Sagas, the other, the 20th century writer, essayist and social critic, Halldór Laxness who received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1955. As with any other tradition these too have become literary histories, or burdens, following in the tracks of contemporary writers. Halldór Gudmundsson, a publisher from Iceland, recently wrote an article about the contemporary Icelandic novel, in which he contemplates the much discussed postmodernism of the novel in the sense that even though modernism has now become tradition the novel cannot just return to former traditions as if nothing happened. One of his comments reassures that the problem concerns the literary critics more than the novelists, but instead of approaching thus the theoretical issue from a conceptual point of view he does something which he claims is typical of an Icelander; he tells a story which is the Icelandic replacement for philosophical thinking. Since Iceland didn't develop an urban culture until this century they have not either developed a language for abstract thinking. (H. Gudmundsson, p. 55) Telling a story is also part of the oral tradition of the island's literary history, including the paradox of viewing the sagas as both history and literature, which reminded me of a remark in Ondaatje's memoir *Running in the Family*: "in Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts." (Ondaatje, p. 206)

Briefly, I would like to give a presentation of two contemporary Icelandic writers, Einar Kárason and Einar Már Gudmundsson, both of whom write about places on Iceland; the most profound feature of which is that they are places on an island confined more by its own borders than by the borders of others.

Kárason writes about the area in Reykjavik, capital of Iceland, where the barracks that the US army left behind after World War II became the homes of the poorest part of the new urban population. A place which has now disappeared. And Gudmundsson writes, among others, about the emerging new areas of Reykjavik, filling up the places where once the barracks were. Places embedded with stories and anecdotes. Gudmundsson seemingly consolidates a traditional narrative form while, at the same time, disrupting both the referentiality to any reality and the fictionality of the stories; lived experiences are no less illusory than stories, just as stories are no less real than lived experiences. In *Regndrábernes epilog* the stories are set with elements of the grotesque mixing the world of very tangible concreteness with the world of the obscure, or even inhuman: When the silent, sea-smelling ghosts of drowned fishermen arrive in town they leave wet footprints in the church after having rung the bells to be heard. And they encounter the priest by lifting their hats, and, in a comically conveyed gesture, their heads, in greeting. Additionally, the multilayered organization of stories—three parts with each two chapters holding one to four subchapters and 69 subordinate subchapters in all—repeats literally both the titles of the different parts in the chapters and subchapters, and as well this movement of parody in a double perception which the

reflection, or deception, of mirrors conducts: "Det er nemlig en kendsgerning at barbersalonen på grund af de store firkantede spejle i spejlarrangementet virker op til dobbelt så stor som den faktisk er, og det er endda hændt, at selv de mest skarpsynede har troet at der i kælderens til hjørnehuset ved bakken lå to indbyrdes forbundne barbersaloner, som blev drevet af tvillingebrødre."ⁱⁱⁱ (Már Gudmundsson, 1988, p. 153)

Gudmundsson's latest novel, *Universets engle*, is a first-person narrative of a schizophrenic boy (and later man) who tells the story of his own life and death. Parallel to the narrator's balancing between the supposedly real world and his own perception of the world, abnormalities gradually become commonplace, and accepted, within the univers of a more or less claimed realistic setting. This is further strengthened by e.g. the reference in the *author's* footnotes to the existence of a ghost that usually can be seen on the road to Keflavik (where the US military base is situated). But the conflict is not carried through as a simple opposition, because, just as the lived experiences of the narrator is both illusory and concrete, his sense of space is fluid. The wall between Kleppur, the mental hospital, and the life outside may be solid: "Den mur [Berlinmuren] kan falde, men murene mellem mig og verden, de vil aldrig falde; de står urokkeligt solide, selv om ingen ser dem med det blotte øje."^{iv} (Már Gudmundsson, 1995, p. 15), but the wall is not necessarily concrete:

Kleppur findes mange steder, det er ikke kun et hospital, ikke kun et slot, men et mønster vævet af tråde så fine, at ingen kan rede dem ud, hverken kejseren eller børnene, hverken du eller jeg.^v

(Már Gudmundsson, 1995, p. 145)

Likewise the darkness that surrounds the narrator is described as fluid; something that for a while can be poured into a cup, or on the day he dies, poured down the drain as cold coffee. And again the opposite of that darkness is not transformed simply by light, but by a clear blue that "banker på vinduet [knocks on the window]." (p. 218) The blue colours the landscape, the air, the sky, the sea; it is in this landscape that the narrator like the birds or like time ("Udenfor svæver tiden på vinger [Outside time floats on wings]." p. 218) can find no confines and loses himself:

Nu flyver fugle på gudevis.

Nu jubler Guds engle i Paradis.^{vi}

(p. 15)

Kárason's writing follows a more oral tradition, the *telling* of stories, as for instance in his three novels formed as a chronicle about the family in 'the old house', living in the area where once the barracks were. By telling the stories of the place, Kárason manages to make room for it in the imagination though the place itself has now disappeared. And though his setting is realistic he also implants a certain element of the obscure, or the grotesque, in the text which doesn't dissolve the familiarity of a realistic setting, but which *becomes* a reality. For instance, one of the younger brothers, a pilot, dies in a plane crash and afterwards he keeps appearing in the dreams of the women of the house. In the dreams, he urges the women to help his brother, though it is not clear why this brother should be in need of any help. Then unexpectedly an insurance check

from the pilots' union arrives, and the women understand that the money must be spent on a new television set to the brother in need: The old set was destroyed during one of his drunken parties, and his happy addiction to ten hours of watching a day had unwantedly and distressingly stopped.

In my view, what both Kárason and Gudmundsson reach, in very diverse ways, is a literature that has made concrete figments of the imagination occupying the landscape itself and not some geographical map, personal or not. This is done without claiming the truth of facts because the basis for their literature is in both cases stories, whether transported by a writerly or an oral mode.

Now, Iceland, like Greenland, as well as the former Danish West Indies and the Faroe Islands, are islands all marked by the Danish imperial past. The West Indian islands were sold to the US in the beginning of this century, Iceland became an independent republic in 1944, and both Greenland and The Faroe Islands are now homeruling, though Greenland is still subordinate to the Danish foreign policy.

The imperial past, of course, links the contemporary art and literature from Greenland and Iceland to the discussions on postcolonialism, but more than reiterating the historical past, the present is telling another story. And isn't it so that one way to approach and illuminate a given theme or time is exactly by telling another story?

Last winter in the High Alpes in the center of Europe, right where the borders of three countries, Italy, Switzerland and France, meet, I crossed a pass, Colle de Lys, at the altitude of 12,000 feet. I had walked there on skis following the instructions of a map and the adherent written description of the landscape, created on the basis of what was supposed to be my point of view. In other words, I used a map constructed by someone else in order to orient myself, but the construction of the map made it necessary constantly to check that the description corresponded with the actual landmarks of the landscape, otherwise I could easily have gotten lost. Contrary to a map of a city for instance which is constructed to navigate the user from one point to the next, the extreme being the map of the underground, metro, subway, or bussystem, where lines, dots and names become an obscure representation of the city;^{vii} the underground, metro, and subway an even further extreme in being exactly under ground; below the landmarks of the city itself.

In the article "Allegories of the Atlas" José Rabasa shows in his analysis of Mercator's *Atlas* (1569) that Eurocentrism depends on a semantics of space that makes cartographical representation correspond to the signs Europeans projected onto the world: "The possibility and the significance of the map depend on history. The inscription of the map gives place to its silhouette, but its silhouette is historical and only meaningful when it evokes a European history." (Rabasa, p. 5) Rabasa shows that Mercator's *Atlas* claimed a certain objectivity, an open-ended guide one could say, which was not understood as representing a univocal meaning; the meaning emerged when subjected to the reading of the user according to specific interests: "Mercator proceeds by

abbreviation: he expurgates the personal experience from the sources of information; he also omits the problems involved in the production of information. Parallel to a method of navigation from one spatial point to another that a Mercator projection makes possible, the data stocked in the Atlas become isolated points of reference to be interconnected by means of particular interests." (Rabasa, p. 8) Mercator's world map consisted of the representation of islands and continents that had until then been discovered by a Europe holding knowledge and history and thus power. The regions not known, or regions uninteresting, such as the interior of America, islands like Iceland, and desert areas in for instance Africa were under the same illusions of logic and objectivity pictured as populated with monsters, barbarians and other horrors, and in order to balance or totalize the world the map was also inscribed with the contours of a southern continent (*Terra Australis Incognita*). Travelling by use of the map and the

Mercator's world map reproduced in *The Post-Colonial Reader*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 359.

mapping itself seems thus to have been a search for places that had already been imagined, predefined. Also, Rabasa's analysis is based on the palimpsest nature of the *Atlas* the duplicity of which is exactly what permits an allegorical reading, where the different layers occupy contrary meanings and thus allow an element of irony. Rabasa concludes that since the *Atlas* is open-ended "the universal address of the *Atlas* includes readings not confined to a Eurocentric point of view [...] as its ultimate irony." (Rabasa, p. 12)

The partly autobiographical project in Pia Arke's photographs, in ways similar to much so-called postcolonial art, focuses both on a cultural specificity and on a colonial past which inevitably creates a culturally fragmented subject, but the photographs also adopt a subject which is not only placed in time, but more so in a spatial positioning that resembles a geography. Or, one could say that the source of autobiography, memory, is manifested through a distance in time to the actual act of remembrance while the telling or projection of the pictures positions an "I" in space, where memory is not recognition but repetition with its force of irony. Pia Arke's photographs remembers the 'blind spots' of the European mapping.

So I have literally drawn my map of an imagined island both because its outline and natural limits allow me to maintain the illusion of comprehending the whole of which this map belongs, and because it is the point from where I have a view of Pia Arke's art work which in itself is a kind of mapping; it is the reverse of the prefigured European map of the unknown places that were believed to inhabit monsters and other abnormalities, i.e., figments of the imagination. At the same time, I would claim that the imagined island of my mapping is exactly the island of Iceland onto which Kárason and Gudmundsson have shown it is possible to attach a certain specificity without insuring the territorial authority of authenticity in a singular place.

The investment of my own position, which began this paper, relates thus both to the cartographical map, to geography, and to the illusory creation of identity by mapping space, but my attention to the autobiographical element is, as such, not to insist that autobiographies create identities, but to demonstrate that the form can be used for critical reflections by people whose identity has been defined by another authority, by using a generic form in an opposite move. The autobiographical aspect is thus my methodological approach to a set of analytical and theoretical problems.

Arild Linneberg, a Norwegian professor of comparative literature from the University of Bergen, presented in a recent article a reversed repetition (i.e. invested with a certain element of irony) of an earlier critique of the genre of biography, warning against the glorification of what Theodor Adorno called a pseudo-individuality: "For om det er en sammenheng mellom autoritet og undertrykkelse av individet, er der også en sammenheng mellom autoritet og forsvar for det individuelle."^{viii} (Linneberg, 1994-95, p. 47) Adorno's critique of

the genre of biography was pointing to a problematic of authority in a society that tended towards fascism: Biography was a reification of the human accentuation. Linneberg explains that according to Adorno, "[var] forbudet mot kritiske spekulasjoner [...] et uttrykk for det kapitalistiske samfunnets mest undertrykkende tendens: den tingliggjøringa av tanken som gjør spekulativ tenkning til tabu, om den overskrider tilsyneladende fakta."^{ix} (Linneberg, p. 48) Also, with reference to Gertrud Stein, Linneberg shows that the basis of art is not the experience of identity but of non-identity and that the prerequisite for and realization of identity is, again, non-identity. An autobiography that becomes antibiographical is in this sense then based on a non-western view of subjectivity which manifests itself by disappearing into something other. Linneberg places autobiography within western tradition as a subgenre of biography which finds its generic background in the *Bildungsroman* and in history writing both of which again constitute the history of literature.

But, if the "I" of the telling has already been defined as someone else, as the Other, the "I" must inevitably direct the perspective outwards and not inwards (as the expressionists did) which means that the movement in the text does not follow a traditional process of development, i.e. in the linear time of history, but assumes the mapping of a personal space that has been denied a place; a place not as territory but as a place of the imagination.

What Pia Arke does in her photographs, similar to the way Ondaatje constructs his memoirs in *Running in the Family*, is to signal a predefined form which then becomes its own counter-discourse and thus counter-discourse to Eurocentrism because the authority of the form is questioned by its own mode. Both of them construct their island with a view of the ocean; a construction which moves towards a passing of the posts of both postmodernism and postcolonialism.

Postcolonialism resembles postmodernism in the sense that they are both theoretical modes questioning the speaking subject that dictates, i.e., speaks about the Other in order to find a self. In other words, a western understanding of the self which is built on the understanding of the object as generated by the creative subject.^x Deconstruction focuses on difference: neither/nor, dissolving not only the dichotomy of subject/object which the Hegelian dialectic leans against, but also the possibility for the Other to be self. This move in deconstruction has complicated the discussions on referentiality for the postcolonial critics, because without the dichotomies, 'reality' seems to lose its validity, and the 'reality' which western imperialism left behind (and in some sense still does), is often one of the strongest arguments in the critique of western self-reflection in its exclusion of the Other. Likewise, poststructuralism and deconstruction have as relational epistemologies encountered difficulties in relation to moral or ethical answers to concrete political and historical circumstances and events. An issue which, for instance, is elaborated on by the Canadian critic, Stephen Slemon, in his article "Modernism's Last Post" in an *Ariel* special issue on postcolonialism and postmodernism. Slemon argues that "post-colonial cultures have a long history of working towards 'realism' within an awareness of referential slippage", and that this dual agenda is what

distinguishes postcolonialism from the postmodernist crisis of representation in that the postcolonial 'theory', presenting itself "in literary texts and as social practice", is grounded in a *positive* referentiality which "operates alongside a counter-discursive parodic energy." (Slemon, pp. 10-13)

Still, the question, it seems to me, remains if the crisis of representation can be solved at all, whether attempted within the theoretical critique or by concrete measures. Rather, the photographic art of Pia Arke and the literatures of both Einar Már Gudmundsson and Michael Ondaatje from different ends of the world allow for the possible pleasure in getting lost in a landscape not known on beforehand.

Notes:

ⁱ Incidentally, 'island' (Jazīrah) in Arabic also means 'peninsula', which "causes much confusion in geographical matters." p. 2 (footnote 2) in *Tales from the Arabian Nights*, Selected from *The Book of The Thousand Nights and a Night*, translated and annotated by Richard F. Burton (1859) (New York: Avenel Books, 1978).

ⁱⁱ "The creation of a third place, for those of us who belong neither in the ethnographical object nor in the ethnographical subject, becomes thus more than just an intellectual possibility. There is a certain element of compelling necessity in our game with the pawns of the different worlds." (My translation)

ⁱⁱⁱ "It is just so that, because of the large, square mirrors in the arrangement of mirrors, the barber's shop appears as twice as big as it actually is, and it has also occurred that even the most sharp-eyed persons have thought that, in the basement of the corner house by the hill, two mutually connected barber's shops were situated, run by twin brothers." (My translation)

^{iv} "That wall [the Berlin wall] may fall, but the walls between me and the world will never fall; they are immovable and solid, even if nobody can see them with the naked eye." (My translation)

^v "Kleppur exists in many places, it is not only a hospital, not only a castle, but a pattern woven of threads so fine that no one can unravel them, either the emperor or the children, either you or I." (My translation)

^{vi} "Now the birds fly deitywise./Now God's angles glory in Paradise." (My translation)

^{vii} I am indebted to Marianne Ping Huang for drawing my attention to the features of this kind of maps in her analysis of the cityscape in the works of the Norwegian writer, Jan Kjærstad, and the Danish writer, Svend Aage Madsen.

viii "If there is a connection between authority and the oppression of the individual there is as well a connection between authority and the defense of the individual." (My translation)

ix "the prohibition of critical thought showed the most oppressive tendency in capitalist society because of the reification of thought that made speculative thinking a tabu if it exceeds apparent facts". (My translation)

x An idealism which Hegel tried to dissolve by transforming self-reflection to an understanding of the other in the self, i.e. an identity which is both the self and the self of the other; an identity of identity and difference: a negative dialectic.