

A rural landscape both anchored and set adrift: John Updike and the Azores in literature

Frank F. Sousa

(University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth)

Transatlantic travel writing on the Azores harkens back to the ship log of the first documented east-bound crossing, which recorded Columbus's return voyage to Europe in 1493. Most of the writings after Columbus tend to express the dazzle of the traveler's first impression, i.e., a profound sense of wonder or something akin to the sublime, upon sighting the Azores, terra firma, after lengthy travel in the empty, desolate ocean.

This article focuses on one of the most aesthetically compelling texts ever written on the Azores expressing this experience of awe—namely, the poem “Azores” by the great American novelist John Updike. The study will also consider other texts on the Azores by authors of note, from Chateaubriand, in 1791, to several twentieth-century poets, including Juan Ramon Jiménez¹. Specifically, the article will concentrate on the relationship between sea, ship and island not only from the point of view of the traveler, especially in Updike's poem, but also from the perspective of the islander, particularly as exemplified in the poem “Ilha” by Pedro da Silveira.

In the late eighteenth century, Chateaubriand muses, in volume one of his memoirs, that “Il y a quelque chose de magique à voir s'élever la terre du fond de la mer,” and compares this experience of being wonderstruck after a long voyage with that of Columbus finding America, in 1492, and Vasco da Gama arriving in India, in 1498 (204-05).

Less than half a century later, one of the Bullar brothers, who visited the Azores in 1839, reflects on the feeling of imprisonment felt on the ship and the relief that sighting land, the Azores, meant:

“‘Land on the lee-bow, sir,’ was the first sound that came to my ears in this morning's watch; and scarcely could the words of reprieve to a criminal in his condemned cell sound more sweetly

¹ For a bibliography of texts written by visitors to the Azores, see Miguel Moniz's *Azores*, World Bibliographical Series, vol. 221, Oxford: Clio Press, 1999.

than this short sentence in mine. In the distance, the land looked like a clearly defined cloud of dense grey mist resting on the horizon. On coming nearer, the prevailing colours of distant green fields and fallow grounds. When about twenty or thirty miles from the north-eastern end of the Island of St. Michael's, the view was by contrast grand and stupendous. We had left the tame scenery of the south of England, with its 'pale and white-faced shores,' only three weeks ago; when this morning a wall of lofty mountains, rising abruptly from the ocean, seamed with ravines, glens, and gullies, variegated with bright lights, and the shadows of heavy clouds brooding on their tops, enlivened by scattered white houses, by 'a silent waterfall,' tumbling into the sea from a ledge of rocks, and mingling its small white thread with the surf that rolled upon the shore, impressed me with an idea of grandeur far above any I had formed of the Island of St. Michael's". (15-16)

The sensation of excitement at the discovery, as it were, of the Azores in the middle of the Atlantic, is also conveyed Thomas Wentworth Higginson—a nineteenth-century American intellectual and early supporter of Emily Dickinson who is now largely forgotten—who visited Faial and Pico for six months in 1855-56:

"Suddenly one morning something looms high and cloudlike far away, and you are told that it is land. Then you feel...as if this must be some great and unprecedented success, and in no way the expected or usual result of such enterprises. A sea-captain of twenty-five years' experience told me that this sensation never wore off, and that he still felt as fresh a sense of something extraordinary, at the sight of land, as upon his first voyage". (227)

In *Innocents Abroad* (1869), the most celebrated American book of travel for over one hundred years, Mark Twain describes the familiar reaction to sighting the Azores, after a long trek in the Atlantic Ocean:

"At three o'clock on the morning of the 21st of June, we were awakened and notified that the Azores were in sight. I said I did not take any interest in islands at three o'clock in the morning. But another persecutor came...The island in sight was Flores. It seemed only a mountain of mud standing up out of the dull mists of the sea. But as we bore down upon it, the sun came out and

made it a beautiful picture—a mass of green farms and meadows that swelled up to a height of fifteen hundred feet, and mingled its upper outlines with the clouds. . . . It was the aurora borealis of the frozen pole exiled to a summer land”! (49)

Curiously, the metaphor of the island as ship appears in several authors. It’s as if the traveler on a ship transfers the reality of constant motion inside a vessel to the island, terra firma that bobs up and down in the ocean, seemingly at anchor, and going nowhere, as Mark Twain suggests: “We sailed along the shore of the Island of Pico, under a stately green pyramid that rose up with unbroken sweep from our very feet to an altitude of 7,613 feet, and thrust its summit above the white clouds like an island adrift in a fog” (61). This image of course fits closely with that of Chateaubriand and others who emphasize the massiveness and verticality of the islands and the way they seem to spring from the ocean.

The Spanish poet Juan Ramon Ramirez, in the prose poem “La Isla Transfigurada” from 1917, expresses something similar upon sighting one of the islands of the Azores after an intensely rainy day: “Malva, de oro y vaga—igual que un gran barco boca abajo sobre el mar concentrado y azul ultramar—, en un ocaso Amarillo que ornan mágicas nubes incoloras, gritos complicados de luz, la ‘Isla de los Muertos’, de Bocklin” (375).

The island as ship also appears in the work of the most celebrated author from the Azores, Vitorino Nemésio. Though born in Terceira, he lived most of his life in mainland Portugal but often traveled by boat back to his place of origin. Here is the view of the island from a ship in the foremost Azorean novel to date, *Mau Tempo no Canal*, 1944 (*Stormy Isles: An Azorean Tale*, 1999): “The bulky mass of São Jorge, stretching from Point Rosais to Topo, looked like a ship made blue by the very smoke of its passage toward the ‘hypothetical island’ of Fernão Dulmo. . . .” (22). And, “Over the revolving, moonlit earth, sheltered from mankind, the roosters seemed to have taken the island of Pico, which looked like a huge, dark massive battleship in the middle of the deserted sea” (244-45); finally, “At night, the fifteen large windows of *Dona Maria Josefa de Ávila’s* Home, lit high up on the mountain, gave the island all the seeming of a liner anchored in a safe harbor” (365).

In *Immagini elle Antille* (1937), more specifically the text “Aterrisagem na Atlântida,” the Italian poet Lionello Fiumi relates the extraordinary experience of finding solid earth in the middle of the ocean: “Após quarto dias de adeus à Europa e de confidências com

o Atlântico, quando já o hábito começa a tornar-se uma líquida superfície horizontal, eis, repentinamente, um sobressalto de sólido” (191)². As noted earlier, the beauty and grandeur of the islands are magnified for the traveler by the preceding unrelenting monotony of the sea voyage. On the one hand, one is also struck by the repetition of feelings related to monotony and dread as a response to the wide-open, deserted sea, and, on the other hand, the excitement and delight that spring from the sighting of the Azores, land, in the middle of the vast ocean.

Franco Moretti, in the *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900*, more specifically, the chapter entitled, “Toward a Geography of Literature,” argues that “geography is not an inert container, is not a box where cultural history ‘happens’, but an active force, that pervades the literary field and shapes it in depth” (3). For those who know Azorean literature well, this fact is evident in writers such as Roberto de Mesquita, Vitorino Nemésio and João de Melo, whose poems and novels are imbued with a profound sense of geography, space and place, i.e., the archipelago of the Azores and its history in the middle of the Atlantic; but this is no less true about literature about the islands written by outsiders. Indeed, the similarities in the way these literary responses to the Azores mimic and reflect each other support the notion that the Azores are not just a geographical feature incorporated into the writing but play an active role in shaping and directing the texts. Updike’s poem “Azores” is a good example of geography conditioning a work of literature.

Though much better known for his fiction, John Updike is also the author of seven collections of poetry, the most recent of which, *Americana and Other Poems*, was published in 2001. In fact, his very first book, from 1958, was a collection of poetry entitled *The Carpentered Hen and Other Tame Creatures*. First published in *Harper’s Magazine* in January 1964, the poem “Azores” was included in *Midpoint and Other Poems*, in 1969, and *Collected Poems, 1953-1993*, in 1993. In the 1969 edition it appears under the rubric of “Light Verse,” a common designation that appears in most of Updike’s collections, used to group poems characterized by wit and charm. However, in *Collected Poems* “Azores” is moved to the general section usually reserved for his more serious poems. In fact, in the preface to this collection, Updike specifically refers to “Azores” as an example of a serious poem, “derive[d] from the real (the given,

² The Portuguese version of the text, translated by Pedro J. Silveira, is published in Silveira’s “Em torno de como três poetas contemporâneos viram os Açores,” *Conheci-mento dos Açores através da literatura: comunicações apresentadas na IX Semana de Estudos dos Açores*. Angra do Heroísmo: Instituto Açoriano da Cultura, 1988, 191-95.

substantial) world,” in other words, a specific place, as opposed to the light verse inspired by “the man-made world of information” (xxiii).

In terms of critical attention, “Azores” is mentioned, but only in passing, by the most important critic of Updike’s poetry, Donald J. Greiner, in his *The Other John Updike: Poems/Short Stories/Prose/Play* (42). But in Portugal the poem has been the object of considerable attention, in part, because of its theme, the Azores, and the prominence of the author. It was translated by Jorge de Sena, one of the most important Portuguese poets and literary critics of the twentieth century, and published three times. Sena included it in his anthology of twentieth century poetry, *Poesia do Século XX: De Thomas Hardy a C. V. Cattaneo* (1978), giving as the reasons for the decision, “[a] notável segurança que possui, e [o] seu tema português” (473). Sena’s excellent translation also appears in a short article by George Monteiro, in 1979, at the end of a text by the Azorean poet and critic Pedro da Silveira, in 1988³, and in a collection of poems by Azoreans, in translation, entitled *The Sea Within*, in 1984. For our purposes here, Monteiro’s article, “Os Açores de John Updike e Pedro da Silveira,” functions as the point of departure for this study, in that this critic was the first to suggest a possible comparison and a relationship of reciprocity between Updike’s poem and Azorean poetry, specifically Pedro da Silveira’s “Ilha,” published in his book with the suggestive and dramatic title of *A Ilha e o Mundo*, in 1952.

³ Pedro da Silveira published, in translation into Portuguese, the texts from Updike, Fiumi and Ramón Jiménez, with very little commentary on the actual texts.

The ostensibly simple but ultimately complex structure of Updike’s poem—which might explain the “assuredness” noted by Sena—and the fact that “Azores” is one of the most perceptive works of literature ever written by a traveler to the islands of the Azores, are reasons enough to justify a lengthier and more detailed study. This critical reading will call attention to the internal workings of the poem and its keen eye for detail, and will also examine it in relation to other texts on the Azores by foreigners and islanders alike that include the motifs of the ship, sea and island.

“Azores” is comprised of nine quatrains, in which the second and fourth lines of each stanza rhyme, *abcb*. As already suggested, this composition, though apparently simple in its conception, encompasses an astonishing intricacy and a depth and breadth of experience revealed through a close reading. A work so complex

calls for a detailed commentary on its poetic structure, technique, concepts and nuanced imagery.

In light of the relative brevity of “Azores” and to enhance a close reading here, a complete transcription follows:

Azores

Great green ships
 themselves, they ride
at anchor forever;
 beneath the tide

huge roots of lava
 hold them fast
in mid-Atlantic
 to the past.

The tourists, thrilling
 from the deck,
hail shrilly pretty
 hillsides flecked

with cottages
 (confetti) and
sweet lozenges
 of chocolate (land).

They marvel at
 the dainty fields
and terraces
 hand-tilled to yield

the most fruits
 of vines and trees
imported by
 the Portuguese:

a rural landscape
 set adrift
from centuries ago.
 The rift

enlarges.
 The ship proceeds.
 Again the constant
 music feeds

an emptiness astern,
 Azores gone.
 The void behind, the void
 ahead are one.

The first line is a metaphor identifying the archipelago of the Azores as “Great green ships.” The second line, beginning with “themselves,” calls attention to the fact that the speaker of the poem is himself located on a ship, a fact that will be confirmed later on in the poem, and that determines the point of view of the poetic voice. Continuing with the second line and into the third, we read, “they ride/ at anchor forever;” which suggests an opposition between movement and groundedness, permanence and impermanence, one that will be repeated throughout the poem. That is, the expression “they ride at anchor” brings to mind the bobbing of a ship at sea, along with the implied possibility of upping anchor and sailing away, while the addition of “forever” ties down, as it were, the metaphoric vessel, along with “anchor,” to a specific, limited location and to static, eternal time.

The vertical movement of the “ships” is underscored in the last line of the first stanza in two ways: first, by the line, “beneath the tide,” the opening words of a sentence that concludes at the end of the next, or second, quatrain. Further, the vertical, particularly downward movement, is now suggested by both “beneath” and the space between this line and first line of the next stanza. Curiously, the horizontal movement in tension with the vertical is already evident in the first quatrain, through the juxtaposition of two elements. One is in the placement of the second and fourth verses (which rhyme) to the right of the first and third, suggesting horizontality. In the other, verticality is evident when one considers that the first and third verses can be read sequentially as “Great green ships” “at anchor forever,” while the second and fourth also work together, “themselves, they ride” “beneath the tide.”

From the objects observed, Updike moves to information in books, to what is hidden under the sea: “huge roots of lava/hold them fast/in mid-Atlantic/to the past.” Here the reader learns of the

geological formation of the Azores, once again suggesting verticality, followed by information regarding the place, the geographical location of the archipelago. The reference to roots once again calls attention to permanence and stability, while the word “fast”, though in the first instance suggests fixedness, has, inevitably, a connotation of movement. The stanza concludes with another explicit opposition that sets the present against the past, developing meanings already suggested in the “forever” of the third line of the poem and the time associated with geological formations.

The third quatrain suggests enthusiasm at the discovery of something completely unexpected and exciting. These verses bring the reader back to the present and reveal the vantage point of the poetic voice, already suggested in the first stanza by “themselves,” which works in opposition to the not explicitly stated “ourselves” or “myself.” The third stanza reveals to the reader that the speaker is on a ship with tourists (from whom he distances himself) who view the Azores from the deck: “The tourists, thrilling/from the deck,/hail shrilly pretty/hillsides flecked.” By the end of the quatrain, the boat is closer to the islands, as the hillsides have come into clear view. The excitement of sighting and approaching land is captured by the expression “thrilling,” suggesting exclamations of exhilaration upon seeing terra firma while also calling to mind, by its phonetic proximity, the trilling, singing of birds, typically found on the coast and around islands. After the initial distant impression of the color green, we now hear the sound, vibrations, and high pitched voices of a crowd of people who, excitedly, “hail shrilly pretty/hillsides flecked.” Curiously, the poet casts himself here as traveler in subtle opposition to the tourists, a conventional distinction in travel literature, according to Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan (2).

In the fourth stanza the poet follows the gaze of the tourists introduced in the last lines of the third stanza. The festive atmosphere continues with cottages transformed by the imagination into confetti⁴ (“with cottages/(confetti)”) followed by the imagined and metaphorical, “sweet lozenges/of chocolate,” whose grounding in observed reality, “(land)”, now comes after, an inversion that curiously mirrors other inversions in the poem. That is, initially “confetti” is the parenthetical description of cottages while the inverse is true in the second half of the stanza, when the phrase “sweet lozenges/of chocolate” precedes the parenthetical referent, “(land)”, usurping

⁴ In contrast to the festive and picturesque view of the Azores seen in Updike’s poem and the works of other travelers considered here, in John Malcom Brinnin’s poem, “Talking to the Azores,” similar aspects of the landscape are transformed into negative images, to wit: “I can’t believe/ your villages that look like strung-out teeth,/ your dead moon mountains, your slow smoke-ring clouds” (156-57).

and inverting the rhetorical progression from reality to metaphor. This transformation suggests a certain reversal of perspective, one that informs the very structure of the poem while conjuring up a sense of the magical nature of this space called the Azores. The reference to candy calls attention to the pleasure of a taste that is sweet, amplifying the visual connection to the landscape, through the brown of the chocolate, with another sensory experience. The next stanza, with appealing imagery, reminds us that the “lozenges of chocolate” are, actually and specifically, fields that have been recently cultivated, i.e., “the dainty fields/the terraces/hand-tilled.” This last reference calls attention to a mode of agriculture from the past, to a traditional rural life, from before the development of mechanization associated with the first industrial revolution. Indeed, we are here close to what Northrop Frye would consider pastoral mode or elegiac reverie.

This stanza continues the animation expressed in the third. Here, “They [the tourists] marvel at the dainty fields/and terraces/hand-tilled to yield,” lines I mentioned earlier, a view permitted by the ship’s movement of approximation to the islands already suggested by the third stanza in its reference to human habitation (“cottages”). It once again evokes the pleasure of taste in the word “dainty,” which implies, first of all, smallness and quaintness, but also brings to mind “dainties” or sweets, perfect in their neatness and miniaturization, thereby connoting something doll-like about the landscape.

The sixth stanza, with its “modest fruits/of vines and trees/imported by/the Portuguese,” harkens back to something humble and unpretentious and suggests an historical fact—that these islands in the middle of the Atlantic antedate their colonization by the Portuguese, for the vines and trees are “imported” by them. Now, for the first time in the poem, we learn the nationality of the islands, an identity introduced from an external source, superimposed, as it were, through colonization and population, on a natural beauty that had existed “forever.” This attention to human habitation continues into the seventh quatrain, which refers to the inhabited space that characterizes the Azores, i.e., “a rural landscape” that, in almost Saramagan terms—when one considers his novel *The Stone Raft*—has been “set adrift/from centuries ago,” a phrase which seems to contradict the first and second stanzas, in which the islands are seen as anchored and rooted.

In this stanza we find a reference to the “past” already mentioned in the second quatrain. But here the reference is to human time (“centuries ago”) and not geological time (“forever”). The gaze from the ship finds a place lost in time, as the expression “set adrift/centuries ago” suggests, as if the islands were emissaries from a time gone by. It is as though the poet views the Azores in present time but that this new-found space in the middle of the Atlantic really belongs to the past, suggesting, ever so subtly, the island as mental construct, the mythical island so often present in literature since Classical Antiquity. One is reminded of Yi-Fu Tuan’s argument that the island “symbolizes a state of prelapsarian innocence and bliss, quarantined by the sea from the ills of the continent” (120). In this respect, the poem fits well within a certain tradition of travel writing characterized by a nostalgia for other times and places, particularly a simpler past, before the encroachment of modernity.

Now the movement observed in the first two stanzas—toward proximity, as the ship approaches the islands—resumes, takes on speed, this time moving away, past the archipelago. The form of the poem itself gives emphasis to the rift and distance by opening up a space, i.e., separating the last line of the seventh quatrain, “the rift,” from the first line of the next stanza, “enlarges.” The ship and the poet proceed and “Again the constant/music feeds.” This line, which ends the eighth stanza, reminds us of the activity and sounds of tourists and ship mentioned in the third quatrain. What is left, as the ship moves beyond the Azores, is “an emptiness astern,/Azores gone” in rear view. The poem concludes with the lines “The void behind, the void/ahead are one,” which signals a considerable change in tone in part through the repetition of the ominous word “void”⁵. This shift, though drastic, is foreshadowed by other elements within the poem.

I began this commentary by pointing to the regular rhyme scheme of “Azores,” which might suggest a certain perfection, a sense of the poet’s Apollonian assuredness and calmness before the nothingness that haunts him at every turn. Yet, this apparent tranquility is already disturbed in the second line, as previously noted, by its lack of alignment with the first, its placement to the right with a marked indentation. This alternating, constant changing, systematic in every stanza, could once again suggest perfection. But upon a careful reading, one discerns that the apparent symmetry in the rhyme is also broken. In the third, fifth, and ninth quatrains we find imperfect,

⁵ In quite possibly the greatest book on the Azores ever written by a traveler, Raul Brandão, in 1926, calls attention to this sense of insignificance before the seemingly all-encompassing Atlantic, characterized by “a vasta desolação monótona” (31), to which he adds later: “o homem neste momento sente que vale tanto como um cisco para esta coisa imensa e negra.” and “um lamento que se prolonga e me enche de pavor—é o ne-grume, o mar imenso e desconhecido, todo o mar” (35).

slant rhymes, “deck” with “flecked,” then “fields” with “yield,” and an eye rhyme, “gone” with “one,” words that look alike but sound different. These rhymes introduce dissonance, an unpleasant and unexpected combination of sounds, which parallels the shifts in tone throughout the poem. Once again order is broken and the poem brings us closer to the imperfection of experienced, lived life. Thus, Updike takes advantage of the aesthetic potential of place by recreating the geographic location of the Azores in the midst of the enormous ocean, emblem of infinity, eternity and death, as Michael Ferber argues in *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols* (179-83). He invokes the void, or endless space, and thereby suggests the threat of meaninglessness, the inescapable dread (*Angst*) inherent in existence. The conclusion calls attention to the autobiographical persona of the poem, John Updike, who himself was in the middle of his life, as suggested in the title of the book *Midpoint and Other Poems*. Just like the Azores in the middle of the Atlantic, Updike experiences the past and future as vague and undefined. In other words, the ocean in the poem becomes a metaphor for the life experience of the poet. And the use of natural imagery, of islands in the middle of the Atlantic surrounded by sea, call to mind the threat of nothingness, of death itself, and life becomes projected in the Atlantic space lived by the poetic persona. However, the sense of lightness that comes through the clever rhymes and attractive images keeps the poem from the rarified space of tragedy, and make one consider the possibility that the poem still belongs, to an extent, in the category of “light verse,” without any negative connotation. Ultimately, in this poem there is a freshness, an ability to surprise, that necessary element of poetry, as Pessoa once remarked, without which there is no great art.

We now turn to an examination of this poem in the context of texts written about the Azores by the islanders themselves, particularly those that encompass reference to the sea, ship and island. As we survey these texts a distinction emerges between the texts written by travelers and those written by islanders, a possibility suggested by the contradictory reactions in the poem by Updike, between excitement and delight and monotony and dread. Though Updike’s poem includes a reference to the void, this composition, like those of other travelers, describes the arrival in the Azores as a magical experience

For the islander, on the other hand, the excitement he feels quite often resides in the ship. While ocean-going travelers and

visitors, as a rule, express relief at sighting the island in contrast to the weariness they feel related to the oppressive vastness and sameness associated with the deserted ocean, the point of view of the islander stresses the narrowness of life on the island, hemmed in by the vast, limitless horizon of the sea. Curiously, the traveler on a ship in the open ocean experiences something quite similar to the islander sea-locked, as it were, in the middle of the seemingly endless and monotonous ocean.

This view of the island and sea as limiting and oppressive is integral to the concept of “Açorianidade,” a term coined by Vitorino Nemésio in 1932, derived from the term “Portugalidade,” which in turn comes from “Hispanidad,” that is, the belief in a certain essence associated with a space and a people. In the case of the Azores, some of these elements are the melancholy associated with the aloneness and isolation experienced in the middle of the vast ocean or void. The Azores, by their geographical location and specific history, have developed (the argument by several Azorean writers goes) a different *imaginário*, one that sets Azorean literature apart from that of mainland Portugal. Eduardo Lourenço, Portugal’s premier cultural critic today, expresses this idea succinctly, as follows:

I know—and, if I didn’t know, the historical and mythical reality of the Archipelago would remind me of it—that I am not precisely in Viana do Castelo nor in Bragança, which are not defined in the Constitution as autonomous regions...but in the Azores, a singular territory and reality within the space that is a Portuguese invention, but to which centuries, distance and men have given a specific identity. (88; translation mine)

This is not far from the concept of literature and geography discussed earlier in reference to Moretti.

The often-referred to “Azorean torpor,” a term coined by an English traveler and assumed by Azorean writers such as Vitorino Nemésio, indelibly marks the writing of the authors and poets of this region. But of all these characteristics, the distinctive culture and literature of the Azores are often defined by the physical place, the experiencing of a tangible location. It is this Azorean sense of place that is often expressed in the literature. It is this lived experience that marks the difference between the external gaze onto the island and

⁶ Not unexpectedly, similar motifs of the island, sea and ship are common in the poetry of Cape Verde. Jorge Barbosa’s “Poema do Mar,” in *No Reino de Caliban*, volume 1, concludes with the same sense of enclosure and desperation:

Este convite de toda a
hora
que o Mar nos faz para a
evasão!

Este desespero de querer
partir e ter que ficar!(98)

And Arnaldo França’s poem, “Dois poemas do mar,” in the same anthology, echoes the poem “Ilha,” in the reference to the ship that represents the escape from the limitations of the island:

Fugir,
deixar no mar o sulco
branco
da hélice do vapor,
que as vagas mansas
apaguem. (138)

Just as in other Azorean poems examined above, the conclusion is pessimistic and defeatist, for the sense of impotence in converting desire into reality:

Só nos olhos
(saudade estranha)
a distância percorrida,
— por percorrer. (139)

The same sentiment pervades Manuel Lopes’ “Cais,” also in this collection, when he writes:

Nunca parti deste cais
e tenho o mundo na mão!
Para mim nunca é de mais
responder sim
cinquenta vezes a cada
não.

Por cada barco que me
negou
cinquenta partem por
mim
Mundo pequeno para
quem ficou...

Mundo pequeno para
quem ficou... (104)

the reciprocal gaze from the islands out toward the sea and the ship, which, whether imaginary or real, are seen both as potential connections to the world beyond, including its potential riches, and reminders of the islands' inescapable isolation and poverty.

As Updike's poem served to introduce themes and perspectives of the traveler upon the Azores, an examination of the poem "Ilha" by Pedro da Silveira, published in *A Ilha e o Mundo*, in 1952 (also in *Fui ao mar buscar laranjas*, from 1999, the edition cited here), will model the islanders' use of the motifs of the island, sea and ship. We will consider this poem within a broader context, which includes other poems by this author and by other islanders.⁶

Here is the poem:

Ilha

Só isto:

O céu fechado, uma ganhoa
pairando. Mar. E um barco na distância:
olhos de fome a adivinhar-lhe, à proa,
Califórnia perdidas de abundância⁷. (53)

⁷ For an English translation of "Ilha," see *The Sea Within: A Selection of Azorean Poems*, ed. Onésimo T. Almeida, trans. George Monteiro, Providence, RI: Gávea Brown, 1984.

Silveira's composition is, in spite of its brevity, deceptively complex. Comprised of five lines—an unusual isolated line followed by a quatrain with regular rhyme *abab*—the poem speaks of the Azorean experience of emigration to the United States, with its historical roots in the nineteenth century, having developed into the major pathway to escaping the sense of isolation, insularity, and poverty associated with life on the islands.

The opening line of the poem, which ends in a colon, suggests that what follows is subsumed under "Só isto," as if the entire island experience were reduced to what is contained in the quatrain. The very next line, i.e., the first line of the quatrain, "O céu fechado, uma ganhoa," which concludes in the second line with "pairando," calls to mind the notion of no exit, a type of enclosed incarceration, a claustrophobic space, coupled with the stagnation of hovering, a form of stillness, characterized by a lack of movement in flight, *in potentia*, as it were, which leaves the heron poised to fly in any given direction or simply to land. The very next word, "Mar," located at the very center of the poem, spatially and thematically, is a sentence

unto itself, not encumbered or limited by any modifier, suggesting the absolute omnipresence of the sea. The phrase that follows, “E um barco na distância:”, introduces a new moment in the poem, the sudden appearance of a boat, which relieves the void of empty space and represents a call to adventure. (Interestingly, the boat functions here very similarly to the island in “Azores.”) The phrase moves the poem forward while connecting it to what comes before it, with the copulative conjunction “And.” Just as occurs with the first line of the poem, the second use of the colon suggests an explanation to follow. Also, “na distância” places the speaker far from the boat, the potential vehicle that would allow for an escape from the enclosed space that is the island. The idiomatic expression that begins the third line of the quatrain, “olhos de fome,” which is also a synecdoche for the speaker of the poem, adds dramatic tension and a sense of desperation to the scene. The hungry eyes, imagined as being at the prow, seem to foresee, long for, or look forward to, in space and in time—rendered by the word “adivinhar”—to the Californias of the poetic persona’s dreams. But as the word “perdidas” suggests, these mythical places of wealth, “de abundância,” that have called Azoreans since the early nineteenth century⁸, are forever lost and unattainable.⁹ The oxymoronic phrase “Califórnia perdidas de abundância,” then, insinuates a desire and longing with no hope for fulfillment.¹⁰ This same bleak tone, with a profound sense of drama and tragedy, is found in other poems by Pedro da Silveira (*Fui ao mar buscar laranjas*, 1999), including “Último Oeste”, where one reads: “A terra acaba aqui.../Com ela tudo o que eu intento” (13), and in “Relance”: “Sobre a folha azul do mar/vem um vapor e outro vai./—Eu fico a vê-los passando” (14). These poems, from the 1940s, written during the period when emigration to the United States came to almost a complete halt due to restrictive immigration laws passed by Congress about twenty years earlier, highlight a poignant sense of desperation and imprisonment before the sea¹¹.

For centuries the boat was, on the one hand, the means of escape and, on the other, the vehicle that brought excitement to the island, materials and news of other lands and peoples. The magical experience of seeing the island in Updike’s poem is mirrored in the reaction of the islanders to the boat in “Dia de Vapor,” also by Silveira: “Quando o vapor chega/ é como se fosse dia santo na ilha,” as the “multidão que fica em terra” has only “olhos ávidos para todos os

⁸For information on the history of Azorean immigration to the United States, including a chapter specifically dedicated to California, see Jerry Williams, *In Pursuit of Their Dreams: A History of Azorean Immigration to the United States*, 2nd ed, North Dartmouth, MA: University of Massachusetts Dartmouth Center for Portuguese Studies and Culture, 2005.

⁹A short story by Diogo Ivens, “Viagem certa” (1949), in *Antologia açoriana do conto açoriano: séculos XIX e XX*, ed. João de Melo, Lisboa: Vega, 1978, 211-15, in which a group of laborers toiling in a field in the island of São Miguel gaze out onto the ocean and spot a ship headed for America, expresses, in the most poignant way, the profound desire to escape, coupled with the frustration of not being able to do so.

¹⁰The bleakness of the tone in this poem contrasts sharply with the optimistic gazing out to sea in a poem like John Mansfield’s “Sea Fever,” from 1902 (in *The Collected Poems of John Mansfield*, London: W. Heinemann, 1927, 27-28). In this poem there is a wonderful, if naïve, celebration of the sea-faring adventure as synonymous with freedom. Silveira’s poem is pessimistic and tragic, and the gaze out onto the ocean is more pragmatic, having financial objectives, maybe as a result of the poverty on the island. In other words, “ilha” conveys a profound sense of a push away from the island itself, in addition to the pull of California. Similar to Mansfield’s poem, Katherine Vaz’s short story “Island Fever” (in *Fado and Other Stories*, Pittsburgh, UP Press, 1997, 75-76), set in Faial, Azores, also captures a different sense of mystery and marvel at the possibility of boat travel in the wide-open Atlantic.

¹¹ The notion of the island as prison in Pedro da Silveira and some Cape Verdean poets is developed by Francisco Cota Fagundes in "Uma visão da outra margem: a emi-gração em *A Ilha de o Mundo* de Pedro da Silveira," *Desta e da outra margem do Atlântico: estudos de literatura açoriana e da diáspora*, Lisboa: Edições Salamandra, 2003, 147-77.

pormenores desse/acontecimento mensal" (*A Ilha*, 54). This sense of exhilaration and anticipation highlights what William Boelhower suggests in "'I'll Teach You to Flow': On Figuring Out Atlantic Studies," when he states that the "Atlantic is a dynamic and fluid space of transit and communication and cargo" (38).

The sensation of angst, melancholy, isolation, solitude and emptiness before the wide open ocean expressed in "Ilha" is evident in other Azorean poetry. The poetry of Roberto de Mesquita (1871-1923)—a Symbolist who, according to Nemésio, was the first to discover the geographical reality of the islands, suggesting that the geography is not only a lived reality but also a poetic construct within a certain historical period—expresses this kind of imagery. In the poem "Dia Santo (Versos dum isolado)," one reads that, "O mar adormeceu desoladoramente,/ Parece-me um deserto.../É cada vez mais triste este deserto de água," and two stanzas later, "E vou talvez viver, morrer nesta prisão" (195-96). In "O Dólmén," the speaker imagines his situation on the island as comparable to that of the traveler on a boat:

Turva-me o coração, por esta soledade,
Uma tristeza vaga, uma melancolia
Como a que no mar largo o viajante invade
Ao ver só água e céu, do barco em calmaria. (83)

And, indeed, the melancholy and dread expressed in the travelers' texts arise from this situation.

In these Azorean poems, the Atlantic, which provides the opportunity to escape, also represents an impediment to any movement away from the island. In Mesquita, as in Silveira, we sense the isolation of the islands, which is made even more poignant by the empty, desert-like ocean. Curiously, for the islander, the surrounding islands within view can function as a relief from the sense of nothingness, of isolation, in the same way that the weary traveler on a boat finds comfort and connectedness upon sighting an island. One can observe this in one of the most cited passages on the Azores from the most celebrated and influential work written by a traveler to the islands. I am referring to Raúl Brandão's *As ilhas desconhecidas* (1926), where one reads the following, as he visits the island of Pico:

Ao longe vai aparecendo e acompanha-me sempre outra ilha, S. Jorge, estirada a todo o comprimento. Já percebi que o que as ilhas têm de mais belo e as completa, é a ilha em frente—o Corvo as Flores, Faial, o Pico, O Pico São Jorge, S. Jorge a Terceira e a Graciosa... (93)

This reference, which speaks of the wonder of having an island in view from another island, seems to suggest a possibility of relief from the oppression of constantly seeing open, unlimited horizon, i.e., the sea. In a sense, the companion island seen in the islander's outward gaze functions very similarly to the island in the poem "Azores." That is, it breaks the monotony, loneliness and sense of isolation, by connecting the self, in some way, to the other.

The poems examined here suggest different perspectives on the Azores, if not on islands in general. John Updike and the other travelers call attention to the idealized view of island present in much of the Western tradition from Hesiod and Homer on down to the twentieth century, including, to a certain extent, the opinion of a traveler such as Raúl Brandão, in *As ilhas desconhecidas*. However, the inhabitants of places of isolation such as the Azores seem to take a much dimmer view of the potential for enchantment offered by their lived-in spaces, as is evident in Azorean poetry from Roberto de Mesquita in the late nineteenth century to a contemporary writer such as João de Melo (cf. the poem, "Olhar com navio dentro" or the essentially bleak novel *O meu mundo não é deste reino* both from the 1980s and both available in translation¹²). Nonetheless, the sense of chafing at the narrowness of island life expressed in the Azorean poetry discussed here is, to an extent, a poetic and literary construct that has a specific historical period, as these concerns of isolation and *angst* are essentially non-existent in poetry written before Mesquita, i.e., from the eighteenth century through almost all of the nineteenth century, as can be gleaned from reading the collection *Antologia da poesia açoriana*, from 1977, edited by Pedro da Silveira. This raises the question of how the archipelago's poetry and literature in general are being affected now that travel to and from the islands has been made easier by modern technology, now that planes have replaced ships as the primary means of transportation, now that the trends of globalization and the long reach of television and the Internet have strengthened the links and shortened the distance between the

¹² O poema de João de Melo, "Olhar com navio dentro", foi primeiro publicado no primeiro livro de poemas do autor: *Navegação da Terra* (Lisboa: Editorial Vega, 1980). Figura também em *The Sea Within: A Selection of Azorean Poems*, ed. Onésimo T. Almeida, trans. George Monteiro. Providence, RI: Gávea Brown, 1984.

islands and the mainland. An extension of my analysis beyond the scope of this paper could lead to an examination of the effect of globalization, the greater degree of mobility, greater movement of ideas, goods and people on contemporary Azorean poets, the younger generation. Does the distance between the Azores and the continents on either side still provoke a sense of anxiety or have other motifs, poetic constructions replaced these maybe worn out metaphors or concerns? Is globalization depriving Azorean writers of a distinctive sense of place, one of their traditional tools, or is writing in great measure dependent on the capacity of the writer's imagination to create his or her own world? Is Doreen Massey, author of *Space, Place and Gender* (1998), correct in saying that "The identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple" (9), contrary to the traditional idea of environmental determinism, so often invoked in literary criticism of Azorean authors and suggested at the outset of this article with the passage from Moretti?

It remains to be seen what role geography will continue to play in the composition of the self and literature in the Azores, when, as Wallace Stevens wrote, "Poetry is a response to the daily necessity of getting the world right" (167).

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