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The Great South Land

Abstract

A traveller stayed here at the Herberge last night. I sat and listened as he told stories to my father and anyone else who would listen. He drank ale and as the night drew on the stories became more and more fantastic.

The Great South Land

Reality is that which is.

The English word 'real' stems from a word which meant *regal*, of or pertaining to the king.

'Real' in Spanish means *royal*.

Real property is that which is proper to the king.

Real estate is the estate of the king.

Reality is that which pertains to the one in power, is that over which he has power, is his domain, his estate, is proper to him.

The ideal king rules over everything as far as the eye can see. His eye. What he cannot see is not royal, not real.

He sees what is proper to him.

To be real is to be visible to the king.

The king is in his counting house.

Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality* (1983)

The Pinnacles at Nambung National Park, Western Australia comprises a large landscape of extraordinary rock forms. They were first sighted by early Dutch navigators who thought they were the ruins of an ancient city.

The Australian Adventure (1988)

The listener speaks:

A traveller stayed here at the Herberge last night. I sat and listened as he told stories to my father and anyone else who would listen. He drank ale and as the night drew on the stories became more and more fantastic.

He had been to places that I had never imagined, even in my dreams. But he said that they are real, that they do exist. He told tales of forests dripping with mist, of flowers bigger than a man's head, of buildings so massive that it takes a day to walk around the perimeter. He said that instead of narrow cobbled streets there are footways encrusted with sparkling jewels - ruby, sapphire, emerald. But even more fantastic were his tales of the Great South Land - they now call it New Holland - which, he said, is no other than the fabled land of Atlantis. And, he said that he saw the ruins of the Atlantean civilization with his very own eyes.

The observer speaks:

'It was a bright day with the sun sparkling on the water and the sky overhead like the blue domes of the infidel. We had been following the coast for a week or more and though we had taken shelter in a cove here and there along the coast we had seen nothing to indicate a kingdom or a civilization of any kind. Then as we sailed along a stretch of coast in the vicinity of latitude thirty, the fellow in the fore-castle cried, "City ahoy".'

'We, none of us, believed him. But we pulled in nearer to the land and dropped anchor (we had our guns manned in case of aggression). We moored in a shallow bay a few hundred strokes from the shore, remaining overnight, half expecting the people of the city to come out in boats and welcome us.'

The unseeable speaks:

The ghosts come from the west following the track of the wind from Bralgu. They wait. They sit and dream and wait for the sun and the moon to set. Then they are coming to us over the water from the west. These ghosts from the Land of the Dead must be very old. They are unlike the other visitors who come from the dreaming places beyond the sea. Their extremities are pale, like the feathers of old cockatoo. Elsewhere they are adorned with coloured feather-skin. They are stiff-legged and they leave the strangest of tracks. Their feet have no partings. They move in strange ways, standing stiff-legged or lying on their backs.

They come out of the west and make fast fire magic. They touch our earth and walk around our country ignoring our ways, crossing tracks, scattering their tracks in ways we have not seen - even the eldest of our people knows no stories of ghosts such as these. They do not carry out the usual practices. They do not follow our maps. They carry off parts of our mother. They take hot stones with them, they break and damage the places left to us by other dreaming spirits.

With neither spear nor boomerang, animals fall down dead. Angry spirit shouts go up and the animals die.

They do not seem to hear us. We squat nearby, just beyond their range - all day. We sing dreaming songs, but they do not seem to hear us. Except one, who came near, who spoke gibberish and who fled when we approached him.

The moon dances, waiting. They walk to the west from their camp. They climb into their boats and follow the clouds to the west. The earth is quiet again.

The observer speaks:

At sunrise I went up on deck, and there before my eyes were the golden pillars. Thousands of golden pillars. The captain was there too, with his glass. He passed it to me, I could hardly believe my eyes. As each man looked he gasped at what lay before him. Line after line of golden pillars.

We discussed how we should protect ourselves as we went ashore, since any king with such wealth would surely wish to protect it.

We agreed after some time that we would go ashore in groups of three. The first three were excited at being chosen to be the leaders, but there was fear in their eyes as they left. We watched as they stepped from the boat and approached the gleaming pillars. All was quiet. I went in the second group of three. We landed unharmed and tried to catch up with those ahead of us. Others followed.

We walked forward into what might have been a forest of stone pillars (alas, they were not solid gold after all). The area of the ancient city - for it could be none other than that - was huge. A winding track wove between the ancient foundations of the city.

That night we discussed how it might have been that the city was destroyed, what had happened and how long ago the disaster had occurred - for why else would anyone desert this wondrous place with its vista of green India sea? The place was utterly deserted and appeared to have been for eons. As we talked, our imaginations wandered through the possibilities. We agreed that some giant wave must have destroyed everything and everyone. Perhaps the city was once even bigger than the remains we saw.

The next day we set out, again in groups of three, to draw a map of the ancient city. It was so vast and complex of design that by the end of the day we had covered a mere fraction of it. Our captain was intent on doing this, so that we could return to Holland with a map of our findings. He assured us that the king would send us back better prepared for further explorations.

But to return to the ruined city. Such a city it must have been. Such an extraordinary civilization. The design was beyond anything I had ever seen before. Our mathematician, admittedly more accustomed to mapping latitude and longitude, turned himself to the task of deciphering the pattern of the city. He said that if it resembled anything, it resembled the pattern of the stars in the sky.

We found no sign of habitation, no sign of living beings, no king. Only our shipboard fool reported he'd seen naked men and women bedaubed with paint and feathers, but when we went to investigate, there was no one and no trace of anyone. I think he must have seen ghosts or his imaginings had run riot. He said too, that he had heard singing and the sound such as might be made by a giant buzzing bee, but none of us heard a thing. He had his moment of glory in entertaining us with a ridiculous story about a hopping mouse as big as a man!

After making the maps and after searching and exploring in the area we returned to the ship and set sail. It is a land of eternal sun and one day I would like to go back and see if there might be a people such as we found in other places. But none of them could have built such a city. They were unenlightened and dispirited savages.

The city we saw could only have been built by a civilization so old and so sophisticated such as the one Plato writes of. His Atlantis was a city of light (just as this one was) and built on geometric principles (such as those reflected in the stars). This, I am certain, is, or rather was, the city of Atlantis. It is the land we have dreamed of, the land we have all known about in our minds for millennia. But we are too late, too late to speak with those enlightened inhabitants of the past.

I am sure that at one time it was encrusted with gold, but only the pillars have withstood the winds of time. They remain, the skeleton of humanity's pinnacle of achievement.

The King speaks:

This fabulous story you tell me Sir, what is your proof? This map is mere marks on paper. Any fool could concoct that. And judging by your shipboard fool, and the outrageous stories he has told to my fool, I would suggest that this tale you tell is entirely fabricated. No one else tells such stories - giant hopping mice and swans that are black! What do you take me for? A fool? And how would this Plato know? He's dead. A lot of use. Maps, marks on paper, stories told by fools. They are nothing. I want to see some real evidence of this place. Where are the jewels, the gold, the real things of conquest. A city's not much good if it doesn't have any inhabitants. Ha ha. I tell you what. You go and talk to my cartographer. Tell him your story and show him your map.

Tell him to put the city on the map and call the place New Holland. At least if it's worth anything we'll own it. But I'm not wasting my gold in sending you back there.

The listener speaks:

New Holland. How lovely. How fresh, not like this Old Holland. That place where the sun shines on vast plains and gold shimmers before your eyes. The Great South Land, yes, surely it must be. Or else the world would topple over, top heavy. And with so many people here, there must be just the same number there - somewhere. God likes symmetry and beauty and geometry.

Oh, to sail out beyond these narrow canals, these constricting streets, these eternally grey skies into the world of sun and sea (even a raging sea) and space. I would go there on this thin thread of hope to start life anew, to start a life that I do not know in advance. What strange adventures would befall me, Hilde? What wondrous sights would I see? Oh, for motion and for light, I would do anything. Anything.

Perhaps there are kings there still, and queens and princesses, girls like me. How I would like to talk with them, to have them tell me their history; to tell them about this world. About the rain that is so constant, about the small cozy rooms and the talk over ale and how I first came to hear of their civilization. A traveller, I would say, passed by and told of you.

I have been looking at the cartographer's newest map. He has drawn in the land described by the traveller. He has drawn Zephyr blowing the ship towards the west coast of a vast and amorphous land. And there, right on the coast, is the single city. The city is labelled Atlantis. The land mass has written, in ornate calligraphy, 'New Holland'.

I want to go and see it for myself.