

Vitorino Nemésio's *Corsário das Ilhas*: Travels in his Homeland¹

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Translated by Miguel Moniz

Abstract. This essay is an attempt to show how Vitorino Nemésio's *Corsário das Ilhas*, a collection of travel writings based in the Azores during successive return trips to his native land, brings to mind the old debate in the social sciences about the validity of travel literature as a way to understand a society, since Nemésio himself is simultaneously an insider and an outsider. Weber's concept of *Verstehen* (empathetic understanding) as a fundamental element in the process of depicting the whole of culture is also marvelously exemplified in the writings of this master of words and of descriptions.

Exemplified in the writing of Vitorino Nemésio is a case that completely confounds the debate over which is the more trustworthy perspective from which to view a society or a culture—the view from the inside or that from the outside. By extension, this debate is also revelatory of broader questions in examining the nature and objectives of the social sciences themselves, a discipline whose diverse philosophical traditions are concerned with the search for distinct conclusions, even as those within the discipline also deal in disparate possibilities. Theoretical discussions in the post-Max Weber period have long debated the classic use of the Weberian term *Verstehen* to signify the act of simultaneously understanding both the intention and context of human action.² In Weber's use, *Verstehen* has multiple, interrelated meanings: cap-

turing and understanding the nature of things and the meaning of this knowledge itself; it is related to gaining the profound knowledge that comes from close contact of extensive experience; and (in an important aspect of the Weberian concept) it is about empathetic knowledge, that is, a sense of a genuinely positive identification with the known object.³

Ethnographers and anthropologists have extended the discussion of the limits of knowledge to include knowledge of a culture.⁴ In this context, travel literature figured as an appendix located somewhere between fiction and impressionistic observation that, although perhaps not as methodologically rigorous, could nonetheless contribute to the "understanding" of a culture, ultimately one of the objectives of the social sciences.

Over a number of years, thanks to the enthusiasm surrounding the emerging social sciences and the position that work in the discipline would effect social transformation (here I am reminded of Althusser announcing that Marx had fomented a revolutionary transformation of history into the social science *par excellence*), travel literature was relegated to a minor, often disparaged, place.

More recently, thanks to a generalized recognition of the explanatory limitations of the social sciences, travel literature has been rehabilitated as an important source and potential contributor to the broader understanding of a culture. Beginning with the premise that understanding is necessarily fragmented, and recognizing that in its contemporary formulation "the real" is infinitely multivariate and never entirely able to be grasped, it is theoretically logical that travel writing is able to contribute insights into a particular culture.⁵

It is apparent that the intellectual barriers that privilege the validity of "scientific study" of a society, when compared to travel literature accounts, are weakened once it is understood that the theoretical presuppositions of approach and methodology separating the two discourses have less of a foundation.⁶ As these previous assumptions have been challenged, there has been a renewed understanding of the explanatory validity of past travel literature narratives.

Even recently, in a study about the ethnologies derived from travel writing (focusing on those written during the Renaissance period), Joan Pau Rubiés notes:

Some roots of early modern "natural and human history" have been taken for granted. Travel literature not only created an empirical ground which, by its sheer massive presence, imposed itself in the thinking of seventeenth-century theo-

gians and philosophers: it also prompted debates about methods of exposition, induction and comparison.⁷ (xi)

In the cultural history of the Azores there is a diverse and rich plethora of documents that are useful in evaluating the contribution of travel literature and the deeper understanding of Azorean culture and society that such writing provides. Within two of the most accomplished works of Azorean travel writing rests a departure point for comparisons of two paradigms that exist in texts examining the archipelago through travel literature. The first case is presented by a non-Azorean outsider, Raul Brandão, who wrote the classic *Ilhas Desconhecidas* based on a trip he took to the islands in the 1920s. The indisputable *sine qua non* of the other paradigm (comprised of works that are generated by views from within) is Vitorino Nemésio who, through both his fiction and non-fiction writing, provides a virtual x-ray of insight into the archipelago and his fellow Azorean islanders.

In this essay I will limit myself specifically to Nemésio's paradigm, examining it through his work *Corsário das Ilhas*, a series of collected travel *crônicas* written during two return trips to the Azores in 1946 and an additional trip made later in 1955. Born and raised in the Azores, Nemésio was deeply familiar with Azorean insular life. He was born in Terceira, where he lived for years, then left for Faial, where he was a student before leaving the islands to study for many years in Coimbra, where he later also taught. The "travels" that provided the data for *Corsário das Ilhas*—given that Nemésio undertook them after having lived abroad for some time—constituted a kind of return of the insider. Although he was raised in the islands, his many years of absence from them also gave him a perspective that can at times be contemplated as one from the point of view of an outsider.

In an essay about the book *Era do Átomo, Crise do Homem*,⁸ I made note of Nemésio's unlimited curiosity (in his own words: "Only a man who is curious about everything can adequately dignify the space that life has given him to fill" [*Sob os Signos* 130]).⁹ In the same essay I also remarked on his profound spirit of observation and his disposition to empirical attention that seemed always to find Nemésio's gaze cast to the ground, combing the Azorean earth with his fingers in search of the smallest discoveries, the better to illuminate the soul of that land where his feet trod. With this spirit, Nemésio's writing links together an intricate latticework of data and detailed observations ("my writing is fluid like the ocean" [*Corsário* 67]) that usually

arrive at a penetrating and incisive understanding of his and our universe. Since his childhood, Nemésio was fascinated with nature and was attached to his native islands like a barnacle to a ship, describing the archipelago and its inhabitants in colorful swaths of writing—today seen as classic works on Azorean cultural identity. In one of these (albeit brief) treatments, he penetrates into the character of the Azorean soul. “Geography for us has as much value as history... Like the mermaid we have a dual nature: we are flesh and stone. Our gaze is drenched by the wet of the ocean” (Nemésio *Ínsula*).

Based on this insight, Nemésio points out that in the development of Azorean culture, physical geography has played a pivotal role in the history of the archipelago. If one hopes to fully understand that history, then one must pay attention to the geographic factors that have shaped the development of social life in the islands. Nemésio beautifully captures what scholars in contemporary studies of cultural identity phenomena commonly refer to today as the displacement of identity brought on by geographic dislocation. Furthermore, the character of Azorean geography and the nature in which the islanders have been both created and dislocated is also an important factor in the Azorean psychological make-up.

The presence of the Azores in Nemésio's prose was duly treated in two notable studies. One was the book *Açorianidade na Prosa de Vitorino Nemésio*,¹⁰ by Heraldo G. da Silva, and the other is the introduction to the second and third edition of *Corsário das Ilhas*, by António M. B. Machado Pires.¹¹

Nemésio himself referred to *Corsário das Ilhas* as a “travel journal” and Machado Pires called it part collection of *crônicas* and part travel diary. Clara Rocha saw it as a “journey to the deepest part of memory” and “to the deepest part of himself” (479). Urbano Bettencourt said of Nemésio that “he makes of the island the magnetic pole from which radiates a universe of relations—serendipity, encounter, and discovery—and in which the same space that provides the point of departure also provides the arrival point, which is at once both the center and the periphery” (27).

In these trips of his to the Azores, “whose austere beauty escapes those hurried travelers who are preoccupied with the search for blushing indigo skies and colored, Eden-like panoramas” (*Corsário* 48),¹² Nemésio experiences the islands after a number of years of absence from them, allowing him to experience the Azores as if it were, in a way, for the first time.

Although with his prodigious memory, even after so much time away, it is difficult for him not to experience the islands as his own: “a native of a par-

ticular place is like a criminal, always returning to the scene of the crime” (101), or as Nemésio also says, “the most important thing in the memory of the searching pilgrim, is that grieving place within, which the heart blames for its existence upon the traveler remembering the transplantation” (101).

The basaltic rocks of his islands “gave them an apocalyptic feel, in the profuse vegetation, rich in a range of greens, softly draped in intimacy” (49). “The ash-hued sky softly melds where the clouds meet the rocks, softening one’s perspective of the view. There grows a vague torpor from the accentuated atmospheric pressure, and the sweaty humidity—disemboweled from the lava—gives the earth a living smell” (51). Always paying attention to detail, Nemésio was a thoughtful empiricist familiar with the islands’ vegetation:

Other species of Australian and Japanese flora have been introduced into the island ecology, supplanting indigenous species, which sought refuge in the remote, humid and sterile lands of the interior. There isn’t a garden in the islands that does not have one or two sprigs of camellia, that does not possess two or three shady trees, which islanders will assimilate with the nomenclature of the familiar *louro* [bay leaf tree], for the rounded aspect of its leaf. But the leafy respiratory organs of these shady shelters, imported from Australia and Japan, are infinitely more ample and fleshy than the indigenous *louro*, as they burst forth with fruits both polished, coarse, and smooth, which the boys, not being able to eat, turn into toys with which to play. (176)

The islands have “a temperate Atlantic climate, which hibernates softly and late as it touches one like a woman’s skin” (51). But the volcanoes and earthquakes do not leave the islanders in peace. It is a “land with its own entrails, pulled out by the rumblings and eruptions,” “churning and transforming the land at least once a century” (62). Because of this, Azoreans feel what “is vulnerable and fragile about being both an island and, with more good reason still, an islander.” The climate, the weather, colors the life of the islanders, grey is the hue most frequently shaping the rhythm and tone of the days—“our melancholy is born from these sad, low, dumb skies, is it not?” (110). The fog

is a mass of water mist dispersed in veils, draped over the rounded forms of mountains of pumice stone, scattered about the island gathered in striation—sometimes unstable, sometimes static—creating suddenly a kind of campanula over the island. This cover, a lid on a tureen, can suffocate us for days or merely for a morning or

afternoon. It can yet shrink away receding to cover only a swath of the environment, to finally completely dissipate leaving in its place a broad celestial blue, cut with opal tones, which some one or another milky and evaporating cloud comes to scar. (189)

The ocean, “our lamb and our wolf” (80), is a determining presence in insular identity:

Separating us from the world is that thin line of salt at the rim of the land that rises incorruptible, the arc of the horizon... There is movement and power; at other times tranquility and dumb stillness... Extension ... extension ... (And no matter how much we detest ellipses, which are typographic spasms, the thing is just like that. We have to express ourselves in the right proportion of exaltation and limited syntax). (60)

Because of this, “everything for the islander is summed up in longitude and separation” (58)—“our insular sensibility is defined by loneliness and limit” (62). “The radical attitude of the islander is to arrive at the door of the house and interrogate the ocean”; because there is a “type of motto guiding the destiny of the islander—which is to watch, and to hold vigil” (62).

The metaphors tumble like water over a fall in Nemésio’s writing and drain into a labyrinth of associations. Nemésio had a “wanderer’s imagination” (68) and so was a sort of “pilot and explorer of metaphor” (83). “I am not a mariner, but I am an islander and therefore a seafarer of sorts” (121), “I fancy myself a corsair and a merchant” (72), a corsair arriving “in those first days of the islands, that is what I mean, when they arrived in this alien land on board a ship, full of wonder, and set foot on *terra firma* without anyone expecting their arrival” (183).

His descriptions of the settlements and the cities are interwoven with perceptive psychological observations. “It is in the center of this radial geometric rose that the small Azorean cities make their nest, full of a maritime sensibility, full of reclusive and calm work, full of communion with others even through the isolation and longitude” (81). His island is “embroidered with homes along the route that runs at the ocean’s edge” (87), a road “sown with rows of white houses” (97); it is an “abundant land, permeated everywhere by the smell of lava and calf-skin” (88). At times he brandishes a painter’s flourish in his depictions, a single brush producing a striking description of his native village. “Praia, for me, is summed up in the clock tower of the Town Hall—sedate and inert” (127).

Around “the good natured and cunning tongues of Angra” (112) he feels at home with friends—“this is the calming *tertúlia*,¹³ the objective *tertúlia*, the *tertúlia* of lost time. . . . One finds for oneself here the serenity of the grave” (113).

Less familiar with Ponta Delgada, he notes of the city’s pace “above all else, this old, calm, urban, and labored rhythm, which I do not know how to define, is composed of modesty, solemnity, and efficiency. . . . There is a rhythm here in the balcony windows, in the green shutters, in the ox-drawn carriages, as the various ropes trailing back from the ox’s horns slowly waggle . . . in the plazas and streets animated by workers, where everything is regulated by the clock tower in the church of the *Matriz*!¹⁴ and by the melancholy hum of the siren from the packet boat in the harbor” (214).

Even in his descriptions of this urban environment, one is yet aware of the sensation of insularity. There is always present in Nemésio’s writing about the port and the ocean in which it is enveloped a contemplation and understanding of the insular trope. It is present, for example, in the following passage, where, once again, Nemésio’s preoccupation with the theme returns in the simple attempt to situate (or perhaps, to anchor) the island in the world.

It was only the presence of the ships at anchor in the small beach ports that gave to us any certainty that there was a wider world settled beyond us: they brought with them the excitement and existence of other longitudes. We could live at 38° 38’ 33” N. lat. and 27° 12’ 48” W. Long. (Greenwich). From there, Brest is 1147 miles away; Southampton, 1237; Hamburg, 1802; Stockholm, 2539; Leningrad, 2835; Genoa, 1914; Constantinople, 2444; Boston, 2020; Port-Said, 3087; Aden, 4355. The longest distance calculated was that to Sydney, in Australia: 14,822 miles via Cape Horn; if by way of the Cape of Good Hope, the route would shorten by 2889 miles, not a small thing.

The desire to leave and explore the world began for him with his return journeys to his islands. Once more, he reveals his preoccupation with the theme of isolation in another swath of writing in which he attempts to situate himself even as he is jumping from one island to the other:

I undertook then my first true navigation—land behind me, land to my front—but without time or distance to lose the view of the one side after waving good-bye to the lighthouses and the shade of the other. From Angra to Santa Cruz da Graciosa, 45 miles and the launch of the Coast Guard. To Calheta, São Jorge, 39

miles and the Guarda Fiscal in military dress. To Lajes do Pico, 52 miles and the whaling boats. Finally, to Horta, 71 miles and the first coal dump and cable armory. Is this or not a summary of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Over the Sea*? (122)

Hence, from the sea, one could never be certain if “the island is a cloud, or if a cloud is the island” (110). Later, he saw it as “the teasing illusion of an island from the distance,” “a sly look behind at the other island” (110).

Cited in this paper are but a few examples of Nemésio’s quilted text, embroidered as it were with elements of ethnography, geography, anthropology, sociology, and social psychology. All are written in a humanist narrative with landscapes rendered human and gentle by the presence of the islanders or at least the presence of one islander—the author—an islander tenderly impassioned about his native land. Nemésio’s *Corsário das Ilhas* is a rich example of the *Verstehen* discussed by Max Weber in the way it presents an empathetic view of a reality that he knew from the inside; but is also a view taken from a relative distance—as the author had left the islands for the outside.

Given Nemésio’s relation to the islands in this way, the subject of his observation is at times affected as in a Gestalt switch. Indisputably, it is difficult to find in the work a systematized conjunct of themes, and although filled with empirical elements, they are not rigorously collected and analyzed; the work, however, does provide a deep and acute penetration into the intimate reality that he describes. The reader is lifted by the hand of the observer and shares his empathy with the object under consideration, this microcosmos that Nemésio hopes to understand and hopes to make better understood.

It is this “universe of relations,” as Urbano Bettencourt calls it, that Nemésio so eloquently captures. Yet, the universe of relations described by Nemésio extends not only to the islands he explicates with his magical prose but to his own personal relation to the islands. It is Nemésio’s unique relation to the islands as both insider and outsider (if one would use such words in his case) that, as has been pointed out throughout this essay, shapes his descriptions. It is Nemésio’s unique relation to the Azores, and the particular way this relationship situates him within them, that make his descriptions of his *terra natal* such rich resources for understanding both the course of island life and, through them, furthers the discussion of the explanatory validity of travel literature and the debates over insider and outsider claims to explicatory knowledge.

The images in the labyrinthine mind of the writer/observer emerge in the words and empirical data that are vested in Nemésio’s metaphors, which boil

in an almost anarchical cauldron. Ultimately, he leaves the reader with a profound sense of pleasure. It is the pleasure that Nemésio has from his travels in his *terra*. The reader experiences the pleasure that Nemésio feels, while taking his own pleasure in the islands that live through Nemésio's verbal genius—something that could be accomplished only by a veritable *corsário* of words.

Notes

I wish to thank Miguel Moniz for the translation of this paper from the original Portuguese, especially considering the numerous quotations of Nemésio's prose, whose translation is no easy task. I also want to thank him for his most helpful editorial suggestions.

¹ A *corsário* is a corsair, a wandering explorer.

² The debate is one that has previously been taken up in philosophy, before the social sciences, such as with its treatment by the German J. G. Droysen, who postulated the possible objectives of knowledge stemming from three different scientific methods: the philosophical, searching for knowing; the physical, searching for explaining; and the historical, understanding.

³ See Weber's *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*.

⁴ See for example Peter Winch's classic, *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy*, along with his equally classic essay "Understanding a Primitive Society." A good study about the dual tradition in philosophy, applicable even today, is by Georg Henrik von Wright, *Understanding and Explanation*.

⁵ Marshall Sahlins leaned heavily on travel literature in forming the arguments presented in *Islands of History* and in putting to rest Gananath Obeyesekere's (1992) attempted criticism of the work in his book-length response: *How Natives Think*. The debate between the two anthropologists is situated in the same theoretical imbroglio taken up in this essay.

⁶ There are a number of examples of recent ethnographic studies that have taken the form of fiction, and a theoretical discussion of this dual approach has received many interesting contributions on the part of anthropologists. See, for example: Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer*; Alma Gottlieb and Philip Graham, *Parallel Worlds*; and also Laurel Richardson and Ernest Lockridge, *Travels with Ernest*. Various additional examples are notable in this regard coming from the area of autoethnography. One recent example is found in the doctoral thesis of Anne P. McClard, "Nested Tales," about an ethnographic experience on the island of São Jorge, Azores. The author combines an ethnographic narrative with the fictional genre so that she can provide the experimental reality she presents with greater fidelity.

⁷ See, also by McClard, "New worlds and Renaissance ethnology" and "Instructions for Travellers."

⁸ "Nemésio, o humanista-ponte entre as 'duas culturas.'" I should make note here of another work that has a more global objective: José Martins Garcia's *Vitorino Nemésio—A Obra e o Homem*, and also Urbano Bettencourt's introduction to two books of "Azorean" stories by Nemésio in the *Obras Completas, Paço do Milhafre e O Mistério do Paço do Milhafre*. English-language readers will also find some excellent data in the introduction to the English translation of *Mau Tempo no Canal* by Francisco Cota Fagundes.

⁹ There are numerous references to Nemésio's vast curiosity. I would especially call attention to the philosopher José Barata Moura's "Nemésio, 'Pensador.'"

¹⁰ This book is a tract about the Azores directly based on Nemésio's writing.

¹¹ Written for the edition put out by Bertrand, in 1983, it was also included in the *Obras Completas* edition (vol. XVI).

¹² From this point forward all quotations from Nemésio refer to this work.

¹³ A *tertúlia* is a type of intellectual salon—well-organized or spontaneous—where issues both large and small are discussed and debated.

¹⁴ The central church of a religious jurisdiction.

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