

On the verge: A poetry of the unconscious

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Article



Abstract

The author embarks on a search for the meaning of a birthmark on his calf in the shape of the map of Brazil, interpreting it as a symbol and unfolding its effect on his life. This search leads him to reflect on his life and his non-place in the world. Finally, by following the traces he discovers in his biography, he is drawn to St. Brendan, an Irish monk from the 5th century. The study and symbolic interpretation of this saint's life introduce him to a powerful subcutaneous goddess, to whom he utters a prayer at the end of the text. It is a poetic text rather than an academic one, meant to guide the reader towards an experience rather than knowledge.

Keywords: poetry of the unconscious, incubation, symbols, St. Brendan, mirror of the soul

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My original idea had been to refer to the body as a producer of symbols. I had intended to start from an experience in which, lying down, I realized how a body in absolute stillness invariably generates visions. Ephemeral visions that disappear as soon as consciousness focuses its attention on them. In other words, I was looking to talk about the ancient practice of incubation, a technique practiced by the pre-Socratics to travel to the underworld, which inspired Carl Gustav Jung to pursue active imagination, and which Peter Kingsley describes so beautifully in "The Dark Places of Wisdom", a book soon to be published by Editora Vozes. During incubation, there is a strange sensation that it is the body itself, and not the mind, that carries me to the world of the dead. It feels as if the unconscious is on the verge

of emerging, just waiting for the right moment to hatch. The body is a producer of symbols, and the mind is just its projection screen.

But then my mother, who always calls me when I need her, picked up her phone on the other side of the Atlantic and dialed my number.

"Do you remember the birthmark on your calf? What happened to it?" asked Mom.

My mother's question struck an old nerve. As the good nurse she is, she reminded me that you must care for what hurts.

I tried to duck the question and dodge the confrontation, I told her that my goal was to talk about the body as a producer of symbols, indeed, but not in such a literal sense.

My wife and I are about to move to Europe. I have tried to convince myself that we are leaving to be closer to my parents, who are quite elderly and need us to be more present, but my mother's question caused a stir that calls into question the legitimacy of such a convenient justification.

That night, I went to bed tired and dreamt of an old map that showed me a place that did not exist. A splash of ink, a stain of dark pigments that the tip of a brush had left on an island traced out some night by the hand of a navigator gifted with bravery and recklessness.

When I woke up, I could not seem to find myself.

It seemed as if the night had erased all traces of myself, all the scratches left on school desks and bar tables, all the words scribbled in notebooks, on walls, and beaches.

I woke up and there was no sign of myself.

I was born in the early days of spring in the Northern Hemisphere, bound for a certain destination. As I lay in my mother's arms, the midwife at the hospital in Schaffhausen, Switzerland, earnestly said to her: "With a head that big, your son will be a pope or a butcher. My mother, a Protestant Christian, replied: "A Pope my son shall not be".

My head was so big that nobody paid any attention to the birthmark on the newborn's right calf. It was only days later that my father while bathing me, called my mother and said: "It looks like the map of Brazil".

And Mom replied: "He can be a butcher in Brazil too".

My attempts to avoid a destiny inscribed on my skull, driven by the dread I felt at the prolonged agony of the pigs slaughtered in the backyard of our house in Campo Alegre de Lourdes, a small town in Bahia bordering Piauí, where my parents worked as evangelical missionaries, and my daily struggle to bear the weight of my head,

overshadowed for several years the message that the spot on my skin had sought to convey to me.

Once my body caught up with my head and stopped suffering from the load it was carrying when I finally had the physical resources to turn my attention to the map of Brazil printed on my skin, I never suspected that its meaning could be anything other than the obvious: my place in this world had a name that filled me with pride: Brazil.

Over more than five decades, I never questioned that Brazil was the place I should be. Not even in the 15 years I spent in my home country studying and working did I believe for a single second that I would spend the rest of my life in that little piece of land squeezed between Germany, France, Italy, and Austria. After all, I bore the mark of the country to which I belonged on my skin.

My homeland was Brazil, but I was not Brazilian.

I remember how, in high school at a bilingual school in São Paulo, I would walk around the courtyard with Andrea, a classmate from Germany, who, like me, had grown up in Brazil with a passport from another country: we dreamed of an island in the middle of the Atlantic that could provide a home for our hearts torn between two continents.

We sat on a wall next to the snack cart and I told Andrea the stories of my childhood. During the day, I ran barefoot through the caatinga, that land scoured by drought. At night, my mother would tell me in German the stories of the people of Israel on their long walk through the desert or the story of the 40 days Christ spent in the desert when he was tempted by the Devil.

During the day, I shuddered with fear whenever there was a rumor that a gunman had appeared in town. Or my eyes would widen when we were visited by the old farmer who, alone with a rifle in her youth, had fought off Lampião's gang who had come to steal the gold from her farm. In the evenings, after bathing, I would listen to the tales of the Brothers Grimm that my father read to me in German.

I was living my adventures on Brazilian soil, but it was the German language that made them into stories I could understand.

I looked at Andrea and said: "I wanted to live on an island in the middle of the Atlantic, where everything in me spoke the same language: the sun on my skin, the colors in my eyes, the madness in my heart, the judgment in my mind".

Silently, Andrea took my hand and showed me that when you hold hands with someone you love, your fingers should intertwine. And then – with her fingers intertwined with mine – she told me about the Island of Brazil, or *Hy Brazil*, or Island of St. Brendan, a floating island that traveled across the Atlantic.

We decided to seek it out once we had graduated. It seemed like the perfect destination for our dreams.

After high school, Andrea went to study in Germany, and I returned to Switzerland. When I went to visit her in Berlin, I saw her holding hands with someone else. Their fingers were intertwined. I leaned my mouth close to her ear and, hurting, asked softly: "What about the Island of Brazil, the Island of St. Brendan?"

"The island is not there. St. Brendan was a religious lunatic," she replied and said goodbye without holding my hand.

Later, I learned that the man Andrea now loved was a Marxist student who dreamed of a revolution on the continent and could never be settled for a paradise the size of an island.

The piece of land on which we seek our home in this world is an ephemeral place, a soil that slips through our fingers.

I realize now that I have always lived between worlds, not only between Brazil and Switzerland – as the son of evangelical missionaries, but also between the rugged surface of planet Earth and the streets of gold in the sky.

I say this with neither irony nor sarcasm. For a boy who, by day, imagined a treasure of gold hidden on a farm in the heart of the Bahia hinterland and, by night, dreamed of gold guarded by dragons in the mountains that rise on the banks of the Rhine in Germany, there was no more seductive image than a heavenly Jerusalem, a city made of gold whose streets reflected and mirrored the brilliance of the sun.

I now realize that my destiny was shaped not by the size of my head, nor by a heart that beat in one land and a mind that breathed the air of another. What most marked my destiny was that my body grew where my spirit was not.

Here I am in this world, yet I do not belong to it.

Saint Brendan was born in 482 A.D. in a small Irish town. He became a monk and founded several monasteries. He prayed that God would grant him the grace to find his lost paradise and understood that, for him to be granted this grace, he would have to wander to "another place", wherever "the island promised to the saints" was. Paradise would not come to him.

The oldest account of St. Brendan's travels, a text written in the 8th century, claims that 60 men accompanied him. Other later sources increase or reduce this number, depending on which trait of St. Brendan's personality they wished to highlight.

Saint Brendan's journey by sea lasted seven years. It was seven years full of adventures, just a few of which I will reproduce here.

St. Brendan leaves the Irish coast and travels west for 15 days when he and his men are pushed by a current to a rock, where they find a palace with food and are visited by the Devil.

Curiously, however, it neither attacks them nor tempts them. From there, they travel for seven months in an unknown direction, until they come across an island where sheep abound. While building a fire to roast one of the animals, the island sinks: Saint Brendan and his men discover that the island is a gigantic animal, that never minded the weight of the sailors, but could not stand the heat of the coals on its skin. Continuing their navigation, they arrive at an island whose birds turn out to be fallen angels.

Then they sail for a further six months, come across an island with a monastery, and then get stuck in a seven-month calm. Once the winds return, they are carried to an island where a white bird prevents them from eating poisonous fish. They spend Pentecost on a large sea monster, where they remain for seven weeks. They then set off for regions where the sea is asleep and the blood runs cold in their veins. They are chased by a sea serpent that breathes fire. Responding to the Saint's prayer, another monster appears and slays the serpent. On another occasion, a dragon saves them from a griffin. They later approach a coast where smoke, flames, and evil forces abound. A demon flies over their boat and dives into the sea. In the midst of this environment, they find an island with a mountain covered in clouds, home to the entrance to hell – here they come across Judas in torment. The next day, they find an island inhabited by a white-bearded hermit, who guides them to the Promised Land.

Once again, the islands emerge. One is covered in grassland and gardens. On another, the Emerald Isle, fruit trees and vineyards grow. Saint Brendan heads north. At night, "bright arches appear over the deep blue velvet of the sky". A crystal church appears on the surface of the water. Then, finally, they find the Isle of Wonders, "the land promised to the saints". Everything here is peace and joy. St. Brendan remains in paradise for 40 days before returning to his homeland.

As we look at ancient maps, it is not only striking that the continents of ancient times were different in number, size, and shape. There were also lands and islands that no longer exist. We quickly label them imaginary, products of fantasy, as they do not appear on satellite images and cannot be located by modern GPS devices. We therefore claim that they never existed. We call the navigators who sighted them centuries ago fabulists who invented the existence of lands populated by imaginary beings with unimaginable riches to excuse their nocturnal voyages by sea. We regard the missionaries who accompanied them as fanatical colonizers who, under the pretext of fighting demons, killed to conquer paradise.

We hasten to explain that the crystal church that St. Brendan sees on the surface of the water is an iceberg and that the bright arcs in the sky are the aurora borealis. Sheep Island is one of the Faroe Islands (the name conveniently means “sheep island” in Danish – and we take that as proof enough). Hell is a volcano on the island of Jan Mayen in Iceland. We even suspect that the demons spotted were polar bears.

We denounce the ignorance of our ancestors, who lacked modern science and knowledge, we laugh at the naivety of those wild adventurers who risked their lives to satisfy the longings of their hearts.

Thus, we deprive ourselves of the miracle of glimpsing an island protected by a curtain of fire in the fog, we miss the opportunity to be shipwrecked and saved by demons who cannot find their way back to hell, we no longer believe in the possibility of drinking the sweetest water of life in an oasis in the middle of the desert, because physics teaches us that although the fairy Morgana is nothing more than a fantasy figure, a story to scare children, she continues to deceive our eyes and thus tells us: do not believe in stories!

This impoverishes our souls. How rich the life of a monk was, for everything he experienced outside in the world mirrored the reality of his soul. He knew that it was absolutely crucial that his external life mirrored all that he experienced inside, for only then would he be able to know himself and, by knowing himself, know God.

The Devil's cordial visit taught St. Brendan that evil exists within him, but although it is present, it need not always manifest itself. The fallen angel birds showed him that, although they fell, they still had wings, capable of flying between heaven and earth, and that the only effect of their fall was a grammatical change, i.e. the substitution of Heaven with a capital “h” for heaven with a lower case “h”. The fights between the monsters revealed to him that not all fights need to be fought in person and that sometimes it is enough to wait for an adversary to appear who is a match for our enemy. And the seven-month-long peace certainly taught him that you should not be in a hurry to reach paradise.

What is most surprising about St. Brendan's story, though, is that once he finally reached paradise, the land of peace and joy, he remained there for only 40 days. He had devoted seven years of his life to finding paradise, but upon finding it, he only remained there for a little over a month. The number of days is striking, as it refers to the number of days Christ spent in the desert under temptation from Satan.

Allow me to ask a blasphemous question: what trial did St. Brendan have to face in paradise?

After all the adventures he had experienced, after all the dangers he had faced on his journey, St. Brendan did not know what to do in paradise. He endured 40 days of boredom and, after those 40 days, returned to his monastery in Ireland, where he lived for many more years until he died at the age of 93.

Perhaps, the theologian in me wonders, one must go through hell before learning to live in paradise. Where there is only peace and joy, where anger, hatred, cunning, bravery, and even religious fervor have nothing to do. Only love endures peace and joy. And love is learned in hell. Perhaps St. Brendan understood that there is no hell more formidable than a monastery, and so he returned to his abbey. And I say that without irony or sarcasm.

Otherwise, and this would be a more coherent explanation with the narrative of Saint Brendan's journey, he failed to see himself in the mirror that paradise offered him. Perhaps he could not find in himself the joy and peace that pervaded paradise.

What makes a simple Christian into a saint is the realization that he does not deserve paradise. St. Brendan accepted his fate and returned to the hell of monastic life, to the cell of the dark night of the soul.

I lie down in the darkness of the night and remain still. While I wait for my body to force its stillness on my mind, my thoughts return to my birthmark. I am more convinced than ever that it is time to leave Brazil.

A few years ago, the birthmark on my calf began to change shape. First, Brazil became Pangea, a shapeless, unrecognizable land mass. Then it broke like a heart. Over the last few years, the pigments have regrouped around it and given it the contours of a woman: a dress and long hair that flutters in the wind, a powerful goddess whose raised arm is the wind that breaks the waves on the high seas.

I shudder, I am overwhelmed with awe, for I can see in her the subcutaneous goddess, the catalyzing force always at my fingertips, which persists in reminding me that there is no difference, no difference at all, between the micro and the macro, between the inside and the outside, between heaven and earth, between what touches the finger and what touches the heart.

Suddenly, in the stillness of the deep night, I am overcome with dread of this ruthless goddess who will never cease to show me that the world and I are one. They call her the goddess of love, fertility, beauty, wealth, magic, war, and death because I too am ecstasy and despair, abundance and scarcity, ingenuity, and manipulation, creation and destruction, fear and love.

Embrace it, says the darkness still, and no longer flee. Wherever you run, you will always bear the world on your skin.

My breath catches, my heart stops, and in that second of utter inertia, I glimpse a world in which my dread of the goddess retreats and allows room for the fear I once had of the gods.

And then, just before being lifted by the paralyzed body into the world of those who no longer move, words like flowers from a prayer burst from the pores of my skin:

Your hand touches me under the skin

With the tip of your finger, you write stories, tales, love poems

In the vast region of the hypodermis.

Ever since I was born, you've been scribbling, sketching, erasing, drafting, writing

The story of the life you wish for me.

Whenever I bow my head to pray to You

My gaze lands on the words

Written on my chest, on my arms, on the palms of my hands

And I read.

I read it all backward.

I read it all backward.

And I live life in reverse.

As I lie down and close my eyes

I shudder, my skin crawls

In anticipation of your touch

And the nightmare you'll tell me about.

I hear it all backward.

All my life I've tried to shed my skin,

A lifetime I've tried to write my story out there in the world

All my life I've tried to convince myself that dreams aren't made or written: They are made.

All my life I've been out running around the world

Thinking I was searching for my life's dream.

In fact, it was you looking for a mirror.

The mirror reveals all things in reverse,

The mirror is the world upside down,

That's why when I saw you for the first time,

I didn't recognize myself.
I fell in love with my opposite
Through your skin, through the story you told.
Then you took the tip of my finger and placed it on your skin.
"Walk across it," you said," decipher me.
Read me from back to front,
Find the words hidden in the most secret folds of skin
And weep and shudder and recognize in my skin the story I
wrote for you."

(Perhaps you are wondering: what is this language that the goddess uses to tell us the story of our lives? Perhaps you, like me, would rather learn this divine language that reveals to us the secret of existence. A great start is to lie down, remain still, focus on your skin, and be aware of the sensations of the skin, for whenever the world touches our skin and affects us, there is a finger underneath the skin that reacts to the touch. Or hold hands with someone you love. Intertwine your fingers, and realize how your skins merge and mingle. For the language of the goddess is not language, it is touch.)

Markus André Hediger has a degree in Literature and Theology from the University of Zurich, Switzerland, and a Master's degree in Linguistics, also from the University of Zurich. He works as a translator and lecturer and has translated, among many other works, the "Black Books" by C.G. Jung. He is the author of the book "*O universo do peito – O encontro com a alma na imaginação ativa*", published by Editora Vozes.

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