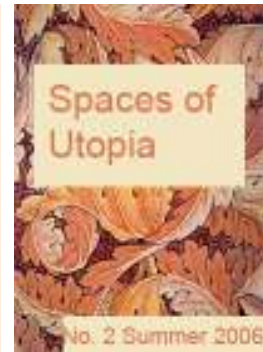


From Mindscapes to Landscapes:

J.G. Ballard's Self-sought Utopia in *Concrete Island*

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Geography has always been a faithful ally of utopian narratives. The need for an isolated place which allowed aseptic experiments in social organization always found ample room for development in the estrangement provided by unexpected hidden valleys, unexplored tropical forests, remote islands absent from maps and, most especially in the twentieth century, alien ecologies on far-off planets.

In 1962, J.G. Ballard wrote a guest editorial for *New World Science Fiction* in which he somehow lamented the disastrous [*sic*] influence H.G. Wells had had on the development of the science fiction genre because

Not only did he provide it with the repertory of ideas that have virtually monopolised the medium for the last fifty years, but he established the conventions of its style and form, with its simple plots, journalistic narrative, and standard range of situation and character. (Ballard 1962: 117)

As a conclusion to his argument he suggested that a return was required to less scientific but more fictional literary landscapes because, as he saw it, "the biggest developments of the immediate future will take place, not on the Moon or Mars, but on Earth, and it is *inner* space, not outer, that needs to be explored". And he concluded: "The only truly alien planet is Earth" (*ibidem*). This statement, which in time has become a defining trait of much of his short and extended fiction, outlines what Peter Brigg has called Ballard's "Urban

Disaster Trilogy" (Brigg 1985), a term which would include his novels *Crash* (1973), *Concrete Island* (1974) and *High Rise* (1975).

It is precisely Ballard's concept of inner space, understood as a redefinition of the science-fictional scenario, which allows for new insights into the human mind and its interfaces with society. This, together with his reassessment of the idea of cosmic solitude present in most of his work, which often borders on existentialism, encourages a reading of *Concrete Island* from a utopian perspective. What follows is thus an attempt to understand the utopian and dystopian elements of Ballard's novel, be they internal or external, and the ways in which they may relate to more conventional interpretations of the utopian *locus*.

For Gregory Stephenson, "[l]ike those of the surrealists, Ballard's landscapes are mindscapes, externalizations of inner, psychic states possessing precisely that quality which the author has ascribed to the imagery of pictorial surrealism, the attribute of representing an 'iconography of inner space'" (Stephenson 1991: 164).

The working hypothesis is that, as Ballard's novel seems to suggest, there is no real difference between inner and outer territories when it comes to creating a utopian landscape. As a matter of fact, as is the case with *Concrete Island*, both spaces tend to overlap.

Concrete Island deals with a brief period in Robert Maitland's life. Maitland is a 35-year-old successful architect whose car has a blow-out as he is driving at more than 70 m.p.h. As a consequence, the car jumps an embankment and he is thrown into an enclosed plot of land, a traffic island created by the convergence of three motorways above. Miraculously alive, despite the write-off condition of his car, he manages to climb the slope of the as yet unlandscaped traffic island and tries to have someone stop and help him. Unfortunately, the kind of thoroughfare, the speed of the vehicles at that

spot, the impossibility to stop without endangering one's own life and the apparent disinterest of most drivers prevent his rescue. Eventually, when he gathers strength and courage to cross the motorway in order to reach an emergency call-box, he is hit by a wooden trestle thrown at him by an unexpected car. Seriously injured and exhausted by the effort, he falls again onto the island. Several unsuccessful attempts confirm that getting out will not be an easy job. In the end, he falls asleep only to wake up to a new reality, which conforms the remaining ninety percent of the novel.

The similarities in plot between *Concrete Island* and *Robinson Crusoe* are so evident that the comparison between the two texts comes almost automatically. For instance, the publisher on the Farrar, Straus and Giroux edition (1974) uses Crusoe as a cultural referent on the book cover. Peter Brigg (1985), David Punter (1985) and Roger Luckhurst (1997) do not fail to recognise the connections between the two works; and even the main character, Maitland, establishes an intertextual link between his present condition and that of Defoe's hero when he says: "Maitland, poor man, you're marooned here like Crusoe — If you don't look out you'll be beached here for ever..." (Ballard 1998: 32).

As the novel progresses, Maitland's stay on the island goes through several stages which, when observed in detail, very much overlap with Crusoe's period spent in isolation, the only difference being the length of the stay, which in Maitland's case is reduced to some days. Roughly speaking, Crusoe's story could be divided into five stages which are neither mutually exclusive nor necessarily consecutive. Stage one would correspond to the period immediately after his arrival on the island (though it spans over the years) and it is characterized by his expressed or implicit conviction that sooner or later he will be rescued or will sail away from the island. Stage two is best represented by the period he devotes to exploring the island and salvage as much as he can

from the shipwreck flotsam. Stage three is outlined by the acceptance that he may remain on the island indefinitely and features an increasing concern with security. In stage four the island has become his home and is regarded as a property, a sense which is distorted by the sudden intrusion of new characters whose relation with the place was prior to his arrival. Finally, stage five marks the conclusion of the story with Crusoe physically – though not psychologically – leaving the island for a receptive society which has even respected his fortune.

The structure of the plot in *Concrete Island* suggests a very similar division. Much like in Defoe's novel, the nexus between the various stages is provided by Maitland's emotional need to control (or possess) the island. Between his early intention "to fix in his mind this place of wild grass and abandoned cars where he had very nearly lost his life" (Ballard 1998: 11), when he was convinced his rescue was a matter of minutes, and his book-closing explanation that "he felt no real need to leave the island, and this alone confirmed that he had established his dominion over it" (*idem*, 176), his personality undergoes an evolution which can only be understood if the conflict of self-acceptance remains central.

If, on the one hand, for Crusoe the idea of control and possession is clearly defined by capitalism, empire and religion, in the case of Maitland his version of the control/possession idea is delimited by the need to come to terms with himself. Therefore, despite all the opportunities to escape offered by circumstance, he decides to stay on the island waiting for an ambiguous and idealised moment that may never occur.

Maitland's predicament develops in an existential territory grotesquely familiar, the outcome of corrupting Crusoe's coordinates. The representation of that scenario, sketched by coarse references to capitalism or by revealing examples of the power of money, adds to the notion that regardless of their

common starting point, Crusoe's and Maitland's attitudes and behaviour while on their respective islands respond to differing strategies in life. In the case of Crusoe, because his stay on the island is regarded merely as an accident, one more stage in his progress as a good Christian, an honourable English subject and a modern *homo economicus* (Watt 1957). In the case of Maitland, because his accident and subsequent stay on the island trigger off an emotional chain reaction clearly linked to a fragile psychological condition prior to the accident. In his analysis of *Robinson Crusoe* from a Calvinist point of view, Stuart Sim maintains that "Defoe's virtue lies in his attempt to encompass the contradictions of his own belief system: to construct a character who is simultaneously a free agent (free to sin or to do good) and a pawn in a universal game (predetermined to be elected or reprobated as the case may be)" (Sim 1995: 169).

In turn, it may be said of Ballard's novel that this new Crusoe is a free agent insofar as he is given chances to escape. Paradoxically, his escape would only imply a return to an alienating reality which somehow was instrumental in his accident:

Today, speeding along the motorway when he was already tired after a three-day conference, preoccupied by the slight duplicity involved in seeing his wife soon after a week spent with Helen Fairfax, he had almost wilfully devised the crash, perhaps as some bizarre kind of rationalization. (Ballard 1998: 9)

Throughout the story the periodical references to his wife Catherine and his lover Helen, the broken promise to collect his eight-year-old son from school, the aloofness of his daily work, and some other instances suggest that the material comfort of his life is regularly intruded by anxiety and a deep sense of guilt. A sense of guilt that can only be exorcised by deserting the external world and focussing on his isolate and desolate inner space.

The reasons why Maitland's personality, otherwise described as "cautious and clear-minded" (*ibidem*) may have been framing an alibi to vanish

from the real world are to be found in a state of apparent satisfaction with his social status quo which, nevertheless, harbours a profound individual dissatisfaction. It is in this context that the accident becomes a sought-for solution and the island emerges as a utopian landscape in the classic sense: a chance to start afresh. The utopian background provided by the island, though, responds to a circumstantial need and is not to be taken as a final stage. It is a sort of stop-over for Maitland to come to terms with himself and the world around him. In other words, a conscious self-marginalization until the alienating structures of the external world – represented by the three motorways above him – allow him to re-enter his social niche. At least, this is what he seems to wish, given his recurrent analyses of his plight as something temporary. The island cannot thus be understood as a closed system offering a new social organization which grants individual happiness. It is merely a parallel reality destined to converge with the external world at a more favourable vertex. This interpretation may be said to question the utopian quality of the island, as the notion of utopia as a perfect place seems to belong to Maitland's original world, to which he wishes to return.

During his bouts of fever Maitland often mentions his mother, his wife Catherine and his lover Helen. They are the three corners of a defective emotional triangle marked by dissatisfaction. It is precisely the recurrence of female images what endows the island, this “desolate pubic triangle” (Punter 1985), with a new role and which fosters an interpretation of the text closer to psychoanalysis.

To Maitland's great surprise, the island is inhabited by two weird characters: Jane, a young, mentally unstable prostitute who abandoned a secure and conventional life after an unwanted pregnancy, and Proctor, a former circus acrobat, now a grotesque male figure, mentally handicapped after

an accident. Both of them form yet another triangle which Maitland will have to face in order to disentangle his own life.

One of the most fascinating and controversial tenets in psychoanalysis is the so-called transference process by which the patients transfer onto their psychoanalysts parts (or the whole) of the phobias and/or phobias which make up their mental disorder. Psychoanalysts become then indirect participants in their patients' sufferings, who can thus estrange themselves from their own selves and analyze the nature of their conflict.

As the text displays more remarks which reveal Maitland's unhappy condition before the accident, his early attempts to leave the island become less and less convincing. What at first could be understood as the challenging arrogance of a rich, famous architect who thinks is in control of his life proves to be the flickering flame of a thin personality increasingly torn by guilt and emptiness. The three motorways which delimit the boundaries of the new territory gradually become psychological contours: namely, Maitland's mother, Catherine and Helen, and unlike the physical space of the island, they grow more and more blurred, just like his relationships with each of these women.

In the first place, there is Maitland's mother, who appears in the text as a painful recollection of childhood regrets. She is the one who deserted him when he was crying to go to another room to take care of his younger sister. Secondly, there is his lover Helen Fairfax. Their affair is publicly known: even his wife knows. Actually the chances of being rescued from the island are very limited as both lover and wife are bound to understand his absence as part of the alternative emotional game he plays regularly. Finally, his wife Catherine, who resurfaces in the text in moments of psychological crisis, as if to confirm that the great conflict points at her and the other two women were mere Freudian sidekicks in this charade. Whereas Maitland's mother just exists as part of his emotional backdrop, and Helen is only a faint rival to his wife,

Catherine is alternatively and literally used and abused by Maitland. At times he shouts her name at the passing cars (Ballard 1998: 21). Other times he thinks that “the sound of his wife’s name moved through the silent grass” (*idem*, 23). Sometimes he whispers her name “well aware that in some obscure way he was blaming her for his plight, for the pain of the injured leg, and for the cold night air that lay over his body like a damp shroud” (*idem*, 25). Other times he feels “he should have thanked her for marooning him here” (*idem*, 27). All three emotional referents eventually narrow down to create a territory he calls “the island”.

Originally meant to be a geographical reference, the island soon acquires a psychological dimension, becomes a personified element in the story, and begins to act as Maitland’s interlocutor. That is how the island becomes involved in the process of psychoanalytical transference mentioned before. Ever since the moment of the accident, Maitland sees his body and conscience as separate elements. For instance, the surface of his car renders “a distorted reflection of himself” (*idem*, 13). His injured leg seems to belong to an alternative other, and so we read that “he carried his right leg in both hands like a joint of meat” (*idem*, 30). On one occasion he admits to himself that “[he was] behaving in a vaguely eccentric way, as if he had forgotten who he was. Parts of his mind seemed to be detaching themselves from the centre of his consciousness” (*idem*, 63). And last but not least, in the course his monologues he often addresses himself as “Maitland”. All in all, a clear picture that he is prepared to trust, love and hate the island much like a psychoanalyst.

In turn, the island offers both the physical milieu and the psychological features to act as mediator between his external self, that is, his life before the accident, and his present situation. From a physical point of view the island is an enclosure, seemingly with no way out but the steep embankments which delimit its borders. Most of the island is covered with waist-high grass,

something which far from threatening Maitland's injured body, "rustled excitedly, parting in circular waves, beckoning him into its spirals" (*idem*, 68). But the grass is not only alluring. It is also firm and comforting. Maitland is fascinated by "the reassuring voice of this immense green creature eager to protect and guide him" (*ibidem*). The island is actually the result of building the motorways on a plot of land which had already been there before World War II. Maitland's car is not the only one. There are other car wrecks which possibly conceal secrets Maitland is not interested in, too involved in his own survival. There is neither food nor water, though by the time Maitland begins to worry about these two elements, the problem has been sorted out as he discovers he is not alone.

From a psychological point of view, the island is harsh but sympathetic, reassuring though metaphysically impossible. The island will help, but only those who want to help themselves. Consequently, the island features two elements which require the will to join (or to oppose) them, namely Jane and Proctor. The fact that neither of these characters is presented as psychologically stable seems to suggest that the island is merely opposing two such characters to Maitland so that he can psychoanalyze himself and decide what is wrong with him. On the one hand, a girl full of guilt for something which happened in the past and with a strong resentment against society and successful people like Maitland. On the other hand, a poor, ageing, deformed acrobat who refuses to leave the security of the enclosure lest he should be humiliated again in life. Both Jane and Proctor have reached a tacit agreement which allows them to lead a life of mutual support as regards the basics.

This is the scenario Maitland has to accept and possibly overcome if he is ever to go back to his own world. Both Jane and Proctor help Maitland in their own way, which is often vindictive, humiliating and violent. For much of the time Maitland adopts a self-pitying attitude, and insists on being helped according to his expectations. During this period he is afraid of Proctor, whose strength and

unpredictability might end with his life at any moment. But he is also abused by resentful Jane, who can torture him physically (i.e. by giving him glycol to drink instead of water) and psychologically (i.e. by telling him repeatedly that she has called for help).

By the fourth day, Maitland's pain has receded in general and consists basically of a permanent headache. By then he begins to analyze his plight and decides to use some of his former life's skills to oppose these two freaks. As he cannot physically compete with either of them, he decides to use his cunning to humiliate them. And so he develops a sadomasochistic relationship with Proctor, whom he half-bribes with the wine he had in his car and with some money, and whom he submits by urinating on him (precisely what a police officer had done some time before). In the case of Jane, their relationship also has sadomasochistic undertones. With her, though, he does not use force but psychological torture. Maitland manages to redirect all her hate and resentment against her past life and so has her partially at his mercy. It is precisely this change of scenario which marks the turning point of Maitland's condition. The victim turns his self-pity into oppressing violence. Some days later, a repair vehicle happens to stop by. Proctor sees it but instead of calling for help he starts playing with the ropes much like he used to do on his trapeze. Eventually, Proctor gets himself killed as the driver accelerates and his body thuds against a pillar. Jane then decides to leave the island as she suspects the police will soon be around.

But the process of transference is not complete yet and so Maitland cannot leave the island. In a moment of mutual trust the girl offers to run for help. This time, though, Maitland, in full command of the circumstances, rejects her sincere proposal: "Jane, don't call for help. I'll leave the island, but I'll do it in my own time" (*idem*, 174). This remark serves as a turning point in Maitland's transference process. From his standpoint he watches the girl climb the

embankment of the feeder road, and to his great surprise “he realized that there was no secret pathway – she walked straight up the slope, picking her way along a succession of familiar foot-holds, the suitcase in a strong hand” (*ibidem*), which was one of his most recurrent obsessions. He then buries Proctor and begins to feel “a sense of gathering physical strength, as if unseen powers of his body had begun to discharge their long-stored energies (...) He was glad that both Proctor and the young woman had gone. Their presence had brought out unwelcome strains in his character, qualities irrelevant to the task of coming to terms with the island” (*idem*, 175). All in all, a problematic interpretation of the whole incident, as he assumes his real self is different from what he has revealed during the previous days. The remark becomes even thornier as we remember that during his feverish slumbers he even admitted: “I am the island” (*idem*, 131). By the end of the last chapter, “he lay calmly in the doorway of his pavilion, realizing that he was truly alone on the island. He would stay there until he could escape by his own efforts” (*idem*, 175). It is at this moment that the island confirms the role I assigned to it before. When Maitland admits that “in some ways the task he had set himself was meaningless. Already he felt no real need to leave the island, and this alone confirmed that he had established his dominion over it” (*idem*, 176), he is actually admitting that the transference process has been set in motion. What is not so clear, though, is whether he has obtained enough insight to face the decisions that leaving the island may entail. The final paragraph of the text could not be more ambiguous: “In a few hours it would be dusk. Maitland thought of Catherine and his son. He would be seeing them soon. When he had eaten it would be time to rest, and to plan his escape from the island” (*ibidem*). In other words: stage one in the transference process has been completed. The island has offered an oblique perspective and he has comprehended his situation. Stage two, unfortunately, still seems far away. He has learned how other people *live* on the

island, and, when necessary, *leave* the island. Maitland is willing to admit that. However, the very fact that he still wants to *escape* from the island seems to suggest that he is still a long way from his otherwise acknowledged need to come to terms with his own life.

Like a conventional psychoanalyst, the island listens, sporadically asks for more details, and then tries to portray a picture of an inner territory. Unfortunately, the island cannot offer certainties, grant happiness or do away with doubts.

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