

Islands erased by snow and ice: approaching the spatial philosophy of cold water island imaginaries

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ABSTRACT: Representations of islands in Western fiction typically revolve around tropical islands. Critical discourse tends to reproduce this tendency and rarely addresses the specific spatial poetics of cold-water island fictions. This paper discusses three texts that poetically deploy the geographical inventory of northern snow- and icescapes to challenge essentialist assumptions about islands: D. H. Lawrence's short story "The man who loved islands", Georgina Harding's novel *The solitude of Thomas Cave*, and Michel Serres's treatise *Le passage du Nord-Ouest*. It is argued that these texts reflect on the importance of the horizontal and vertical components of material and textual topographies for the conception and experience of islands. In all three, the physical transformation of the landscapes by snow and ice serves to put the island concept itself into question. Serres's philosophical text geopoetically portrays the Arctic archipelago of the Northwest Passage to explore the reciprocal relations between language and the material world. In Lawrence and Harding, the snow-covered islands cease to function as economically productive spaces and turn into complex spatial figures offering a philosophical meditation on islandness as a contradictory and multifaceted condition.

Keywords: Arctic imaginary, cold water islands, geopoetics, island literature, Michel Serres, northern islands, Northwest Passage, spatial philosophy

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Introduction

This essay is concerned with the poetics of northern islands, and the spatial philosophy articulated in narratives portraying them. While literary studies have produced a wealth of books and articles on the representation of tropical islands, cold-water island imaginaries have received less attention.¹ More specifically, I would like to suggest that the poetics of snow and ice can have transformative effects on our conceptions of islands. In the introduction to *Extreme tourism: Lessons from the world's cold-water islands*, Baldacchino argues that islands in the polar regions of the world can function as counter-images to fantasies of tropical island paradises: "Given their extreme and insular location, and shorn of the 'paradise' hype of sun, sand, sea (and sex?), islands on the top and bottom of the world can be seen as absolutely the most remote and foreboding destinations on the planet" (2006a, p. 7). Similarly, Kaae (2006) argues that northern islands are often marketed in terms of their difference as touristic

¹ Kassis (2015) and Ricou (1994) are among the texts that address literary representations of northern islands in the context of Victorian travel writing and the islands of Pacific Northwest literature respectively, but even their primary focus is not on the islands themselves.

destinations: “Greenland Tourism markets Greenland as ‘offering experiences from a completely different world’, thereby focusing on the reversals. Contrasting its warm-water cousins of the many S’s (sun, sea, sand, surf, sex, etc.), Greenland may be the land of the many I’s: ice, icebergs, icefjords, indigenous Inuits [sic], inaccessibility, initiation, island isolation and individuality” (Kaae, 2006, p. 108). However, in the following I will argue that while northern island texts typically draw on the imagery of snow and ice to paint suggestive landscapes, there is a set of texts that poetically deploy the specific geographical inventory of Arctic islandscapes to *challenge* rather than reinforce island clichés like “inaccessibility,” “island isolation” and “individuality.”

The northern archipelago and philosophy: Michel Serres

In the fifth volume of his *Hermès* series, *Le passage du Nord-Ouest*, Michel Serres keeps returning to the Arctic imaginary of the voyages of exploration conducted in search of the Northwest Passage from the Atlantic to the Pacific over the course of several centuries. His philosophical interest is the tracing of “‘passages’ which he identifies as links between the physical and the human sciences” (Assad, 1999, p. 17), but his repeated evocation of the Arctic voyages is more than a mere metaphor for his theoretical project. Resonating with the language of the Arctic journals, Serres’s suggestive language serves the function of portraying the search for the Northwest Passage as not only a scientific undertaking, but also a poetic enterprise. His initial description of the Arctic sea features a multiplicity of islands, a disorienting and vast arctic archipelago,

Le passage du Nord-Ouest fait communiquer l’océan Atlantique et le Pacifique, par les parages froids du Grand Nord canadien. Il s’ouvre, se ferme, se tord, à travers l’immense archipel arctique fractal, le long d’un dédale follement compliqué de golfes et chenaux, de bassins et détroits, entre le territoire de Baffin et la terre de Banks. Distribution aléatoire et contraintes régulières fortes, le désordre et les lois. ...

Le labyrinthe global du parcours se reproduit, chaque matin, sous la proue du navire, au parage local. Vous négociez la casse de banquise, l’icefield mouvant, les icebergs flottants, les bourguignons, les cygnes. Petits golfes, chenaux étroits, bassins peu profonds, détroits resserrés. ... Le dessin que forme la glace fait avancer, culer, virer, immobilise.

Des optiques de fantasme trompent, dans un milieu blanc, cristallin, diaphane, brumeux. La terre, l’air et l’eau se confondent, solides et liquides, flocons flous et brouillards se mélangent, ou, au contraire, chacun d’eux se découpe, fractal, et la lumière éclate, irrisée, réfringente, par tout le spectre défini, multiplie les objets, frange les bords, joue avec les distances. Dédale d’erreurs et de précisions à l’observation attentive, golfes, chenaux, bassins, détroits des rayons et des ombres (Serres, 1990, pp. 16-7).²

² The Northwest Passage joins the Atlantic with the Pacific Ocean via the cold waters of the Great Canadian North. It opens itself, closes itself, twists itself, through the immense fractal Arctic archipelago, along a crazily complicated maze of gulfs and fairways, of basins and straits, between the territory of Baffin and Banks Land. Random distribution and strong regular constraints, disorder and laws. ...

I have quoted this passage at some length because it exemplifies Serres's geopoetic strategy of drawing on a rich and precise vocabulary pertaining to the complexities of the physical world to articulate and develop his philosophy. His difficult and highly poetic style is shaped by this close attention to the material world *and* the search for a language that corresponds to it to open up thought and generate new ways of thinking; in the process, both the physical world and language become more complex. In an article on Serres's language, Paulson argues that this opening up of language is what makes it so difficult to translate Serres: "Serres's translators, I would say, dive into their task only to discover that they knew his work – and French, and indeed their own native languages – less well than they thought ..." (Paulson, 2005, pp. 28-9). In the above passage, Serres draws on the archipelagic complexities of the Northwest Passage to think about our relationship to the physical world through language (cf. Serres, 1980, p. 15). For the purposes of this article, it is important to note that Serres refuses any simple account of the northern archipelago. Indeed, any qualification of this labyrinth of islands, any apparent assignment of meaning to the spatial figures he outlines, is immediately corrected or even reversed. The Northwest Passage "opens itself, closes itself, twists itself"; its spatial (dis)order is both "random" and "regular"; it is portrayed as a space that is neither definitively open nor closed, neither arbitrary nor ordered, because it is never fixed and keeps changing its shapes and characteristics, evading any final characterization – in fact, calling for a representation that itself moves by twists and turns. The abundance of words like "labyrinth," "maze," "complicated" and "crazily" serve to reinforce Serres's vision of a fractal archipelago (both words are used repeatedly). His use of a multiplicity of terms for the manifold spatial configurations in the Arctic interplay of land, water and ice ("gulfs," "channels," "basins," "straits" etc.) makes his own text labyrinthine and archipelagic; on every level of his text, the archipelago functions as a principle of multiplicity, diversity, and shifting material and textual spaces.

In the second paragraph, Serres expands this archipelagic principle from the macro- to the microstructures of the polar ocean, turning his attention to the multiplicity of ice islands, icebergs and icefields encountered by the explorers on a daily basis. His use of rare words that designate smaller fragments of ice drifting in the sea ("bourguignons," "cygnes") is challenging even for native speakers of French, and turns his own text into a space that is difficult to navigate. The passage through the Arctic ice and through Serres's text is fraught; both become, in Serres's own words, a space of negotiation ("Vous négociez..."). Again, the spatial design formed by the ice ("dessin": design, drawing) allows for no essentializing account of the Arctic archipelago: in the quick succession of four words, its associations alternate between progression and mobilization ("fait avancer"), retreat ("culer"), turning ("virer"), and immobilization ("immobilize").

This spatial uncertainty, which portrays the Arctic archipelago in terms of a multiplicity of conflicting associations with mobility and immobility at opposite poles, is

The global labyrinth of the trajectory reproduces itself, every morning, under the bow of the ship, in the local waters. You negotiate the fragments of ice floes, the moving ice field, the floating icebergs, the smaller blocks and pieces of ice. Small gulfs, narrow fairways, shallow basins, narrow straits. ... The design formed by the ice makes you advance, retreat, turn, immobilizes.

The optics of phantasm deceive, in a milieu that is white, crystalline, diaphanous, hazy. Land, air and water are confused, solids and liquids, vague flakes and fogs blend into each other, or, on the contrary, each of them stands out, fractal, and the light explodes, iridescent, refracting, across the entire defined spectrum, multiplies objects, frays borders, plays with distances. A maze of errors and of precisions to alert observation, gulfs, fairways, basins, straits of rays and shadows. (translation by author)

paralleled by a perceptual uncertainty in the third paragraph of the passage. If the previous paragraphs focused on the shifts in physical space and its poetic implications, the last section's attention to the diffracting and disorienting effects of light, haze, and a variety of optical effects and illusions further heightens the experiential complexity and uncertainty of Serres's Arctic island world. His poetic account of these perceptions challenges opposites such as solid and liquid and interweaves seemingly absolute categories like land, water and air; objects are multiplied, borders are frayed, distances become uncertain. His very language heightens the explosion of perceptions he portrays: worlds like "cristallin," "diaphane," "éclate," "irrisée" and "réfringente" all point to a multiplication of perceptual effects, which is accompanied by the explosion of Serres's language itself into a diversity of specific and evocative terms relating to perception. But Serres is careful not to turn his arctic archipelago into a space where everything dissolves into a blur and where all boundaries disappear: rather, he portrays the dissolution of individual elements of the landscape as one possible perceptual effect while also allowing for their heightened appearance as discrete entities and their microscopic fragmentation (this is signaled by the ambiguous term "se découper," which can mean 'to stand out' or 'to be dissected').

As Paulson argues in relation to other texts by Serres, language thus becomes a vehicle for a navigational engagement with the material world,

Reference, in Serres, is neither given nor refused; it is something that happens, is worked toward, that is an event. The constantly worked-on relation between discourse and its outside ... is itself fluid 'The discursive is plunged in the intuitive; it is an archipelago in the sea' (*LD*, 282) (Paulson, 2005, p. 29).

It is significant that in the passage quoted by Paulson, Serres, a former sailor himself, again draws on the archipelago to develop his notion of an abandonment of discursive certainties in the interest of approaching the material world. However, Serres's archipelagic vision in *Le passage du Nord-Ouest* suggests that archipelagicity need not be synonymous with fluidity. In response to the recent archipelagic turn in island studies with its emphasis on "disjuncture, connection and entanglement *between and among* islands" (Stratford, Baldacchino, McMahon, Farbotko & Harwood, 2011, p. 114), Hayward called for a closer attention to water, aiming to offer "an expanded definition of an archipelago that attempts to re-emphasize the significance of waters between and waters encircling and connecting islands" (2012, p. 5). Serres's vision goes a step further by questioning the opposition between land and sea; in his text, the three states of H₂O jointly create an archipelagic space where the solid, the fluid and the gaseous intersect. In *Le passage du Nord-Ouest*, Serres challenges our conceptions and perceptions of space through a poetic vision of "a world of islands" (Baldacchino, 2007) with ever-changing significations and associations.³ The premise of this article is that Serres's philosophical interest in the polar islands can be productively linked to a discussion of northern island fiction. I will argue that, while in the case of Serres's *Le passage du Nord-Ouest*, a philosophical text draws on an imaginative account of Arctic landscapes to develop its interests, the texts I will discuss in the second part of this paper are implicitly philosophical in

³ For a discussion of the intersection of politics and Arctic imaginaries, see Steinberg, Tasch & Gerhardt (2015). Always reconstituting itself, the Arctic Ocean poses "special challenges: for navigation and environmental protection, as well as for legal governance" (*ibid.*, p. 50).

their construction of northern islands. The philosophical text draws on a literary depiction of the island; the literary texts, in turn, are philosophical in their reflections on islandness.

Space, text, topography

Before we turn to these texts, a few methodological and theoretical considerations are necessary. Literary studies should not be (but all too often are) concerned with what islands 'are' or 'aren't,' but rather with how they are imagined and conceived. The dialogue between literature and other disciplines, notably geography, is important for studying the imaginative dimension of islands. Any non-literary discourse about island, which includes scientific discourses as much as our everyday assumptions about islands, is informed and shaped by literary visions, or more generally: by the desire to see and imagine islands in a particular way. As a science of texts, literary studies can make an important contribution to our understanding of the cultural, political and economic implications of how islands are represented.⁴ I do not, however, wish to limit my analyses to the imaginary dimension of islands. My readings will be guided by a perspective which neither assumes a stable referent nor simply asserts the primacy of textuality. Instead, as the discussion Serres's Arctic archipelago has suggested, I would like to emphasize the possibility of exploring the material through the textual. This implies a resonance between textuality and the physical environment, a two-sided exchange between material space and poetic practice. I would like to start with an example from Darwin's *Ornithological notes*, where we find his first hint at the theory of evolution,⁵

When I see these Islands in sight of each other, & possessed of but a scanty stock of animals, tenanted by these birds, but slightly differing in structure & filling the same place in Nature, I must suspect they are only varieties. ... If there is the slightest foundation for these remarks the zoology of Archipelagoes will be well worth examining; for such facts would undermine the stability of Species (1963, p. 262).

Darwin's text here constructs two ways of seeing the Galápagos Islands. The passage is structured by two gazes. The first of these focuses on the islands as a group observed from the outside: "When I see these islands." Yet this is immediately followed by a second gaze: "in sight of each other." This second gaze is situated *within* the islands. It is a relational gaze in the horizontal plane which emphasizes interconnection and difference; the initial unity of the group is broken up. In order to formulate his dawning sense that species are not stable, but emerge and transform in interconnection, Darwin has to look from island to island, and observe their differences with respect to each other. Significantly, this is accompanied in the micropoetics of the text by a shift from "Islands" to "Archipelagoes."

The example from Darwin points to the tension between isolation and interconnectedness which has long haunted the spatial imagination of islands. Fiction has used islands as tropes for both a discrete, bounded, autonomous and static space *and* for a fluid, dynamic and interconnected spatiality. However, the majority of texts in the tradition of Western island narratives have favored visions of insular separation and isolation; the texts discussed in this paper challenge these conceptions by constructing multiple layers of their

⁴ Beer (1989) offers an excellent example of an interdisciplinary approach to islands from the perspective of literary studies.

⁵ A more detailed discussion of this passage, albeit in a different context, can be found in Riquet (2016).

islands, thus adding a vertical dimension to their construction of islands, with different layers being linked to conflicting conceptions of island space.⁶

In *Topographies*, Miller advocates a layered view of literary space. For Miller, literary texts function like topographical maps. As he points out, the word ‘topography’ can refer to the description of a place, to the mapping of a landscape, and to the terrain itself; for Miller, this “triple figurative transference” (1995, p. 3) demonstrates the intertwining of physical space and its representation, and alerts us to the ways in which we tend to mistake the latter for the former. The spatial aspects of literature are thus,

... like the transparencies superimposed in palimpsest on a map, each transparency charting some different feature of the landscape beneath: annual rainfall, temperature distribution, altitudes and contours, forest cover, and the like. The landscape “as such” is never given, only one or another of the ways to map it (Miller, 1995, p. 6).⁷

I take from Miller the notion of texts as palimpsests that construct and superimpose different layers of a given space, like layers of geological sediment.

To link Miller’s view of literary space with cultural geography, let us turn to Wylie’s work on landscape. For Wylie, walking, talking and writing are all forms of performing and inhabiting the land, but he resists early phenomenological visions of a fusion between self and world. Instead, he emphasizes distance and discontinuity in our experience of landscape,

An irresolvable paradox of belonging/not-belonging thus arises. ... Between the name and the land, between past, present and future, between word and world, a gap interposes itself, necessarily fragmenting senses of belonging and identification (Wylie, 2012, p. 378).

For Wylie, the landscape always eludes our grasp, and we can never fully inhabit it. From this perspective, Miller’s palimpsestic layers are attempts to grasp space that are never more than partial and must necessarily fail.⁸

⁶ The discrete, map-like representation of Thomas More’s island of Utopia in the 1516 and 1518 frontispieces as well as in the text itself are examples of this Western attempt to produce islands as bounded spaces (cf. Racault 2010, pp. 25-31). The text suggests that the island’s boundedness is both a natural given and actively produced: “[A]ll points of access are so fortified by nature or by contrivance that a mere handful of defenders can repel a powerful attacking force” (2012, p. 57). Prospero’s drawing of a magic circle at the end of *The tempest* is emblematic of his attempt to produce the island as a bounded, controlled space; Robinson Crusoe’s fortification of his personal space through a series of concentric circles serves a similar purpose (see note 9). The imperialist production of discrete islands is memorably expressed in the cartographic vision of the island in R. M. Ballantyne’s 1858 novel *The coral island*: “We found this to be the highest point of the island, and from it we saw our kingdom lying, as it were, like a map around us” (1995, p. 56). Early ethnographers were also attracted to the idea of the island as a discrete field permitting total observation of an unfamiliar culture (cf. Beer 1989, p. 22; Edmond & Smith, 2003, pp. 2-3).

⁷ This quote is actually taken from Miller’s description of the structure of his book, but corresponds with the general approach to literary (as well as philosophical) texts he develops in *Topographies*.

⁸ Miller’s notion of the *atopical* is a useful concept to address the unreachable ground or essence of landscape: “This is a place that is everywhere and nowhere, a place you cannot get to from here. Sooner or later, in a different way in each case, the effort of mapping is interrupted by an encounter with the unmappable. ... This strange locus is another name for the ground of things, the preoriginal ground of the ground, something other to any other activity of mapping” (1995, p. 7).

Taken together, the views advanced by Miller and Wylie complicate the phenomenology of space advocated by Gaston Bachelard in *The poetics of space* (1957). For Bachelard, inner and outer space are linked: the spaces we inhabit become associated with the spaces of the mind. For Bachelard, space is always poeticized, lived in resonance with subjective experience; for literary texts, a Bachelardian perspective implies tracing the ways texts poeticize and re-poeticize space. Rereading Bachelard through Miller and Wylie would imply considering the ways literary texts can gesture towards a frustrated sense of identification between self and world, towards a dis/continuity of spatial experience, a connection in disconnection. Such a perspective is close to the position of Édouard Glissant in *Poetics of relation* (1990). Glissant takes the Caribbean archipelago as a model for a philosophy of cultural identity as relational and archipelagic, as a rhizomatic set of heterogeneous relations with a multiplicity of others through differences, a rejection of universality, and an acknowledgment of non-transparency and opacity,

[T]he Caribbean is ... a sea that explodes the scattered lands into an arc. A sea that diffracts. Without necessarily inferring any advantage whatsoever to their situation, the reality of the Caribbean or Pacific provides a natural illustration of the thought of Relation (Glissant, 2007, pp. 33-4).

Literary islands between isolation and interconnectedness

Glissant draws on the horizontal interconnections of the Caribbean archipelago for his relational philosophy; in doing so, he portrays islands in ways that are very different from the insular visions of the best-known island texts in the Western canon. In the paradigmatic text of Western island fiction, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Crusoe fortifies his body and self by building concentric protective skins around himself (Weaver-Hightower, 2007, p. 33). These include his tent and his palisade, with the border of the island functioning as the outermost skin.⁹ This use of the island as an image of the modern self and of the modern nation as autonomous and bounded entities continues to shape the Western understanding of islands as isolated and closed off. Yet, as Gillis (2003; 2004) argues, this construction of islands goes against much historical reality; thus in early modernity, Atlantic islands were the centre of intercontinental trade, multicultural hubs in the midst of networks of exchange and the circulation of objects, people and good. To put it simply, islands have often been the very opposite of isolated.

The most important challenges to the Western island imaginary have come from the Pacific and the Caribbean. Hau'ofa's (1994) critique of the Western view of Pacific islands as tiny and remote "islands in the far sea," to which he opposes Pacific conceptions of an expansive "sea of islands," is exemplary in this context. In "Our sea of islands," Hau'ofa (1994) demonstrates the economic and political implications of conceiving Pacific islands as small, isolated and dependent rather than as a large network crisscrossed by multiple relations, which is the perspective he advances. Within literary studies, Elizabeth DeLoughrey's *Roots and routes: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island literatures* (2007) is perhaps the finest example of the archipelagic turn in island studies.

⁹ "Crusoe's labours to shore up his body with concentric circles of boundaries, with the largest being the island shores, reflect his altered boy image; his body and his island become subconsciously sutured together" (Weaver-Hightower, 2007, p. 33).

But there are also Western island texts which challenge conceptions of islands as static and isolated. It is interesting that many of these are set on cold-water islands, as most classic Western islands narratives are set on tropical islands, and studies of literary islands tend to replicate this tendency. In the following, I will trace the alternative spatial philosophy of two of these cold-water island texts. In both of them, the island is marked by a tension between isolation and interconnection. If classic tropical island narratives often strive to establish the island as an isolated and self-sufficient space, the texts I will discuss revolve around a breakdown or interruption of economic activity. Yet this economic failure or breakdown should not be read as a realistically motivated comment on the sustainability of northern islands. Rather, it offers a critical comment on Western island fiction's fantasies of insular self-sufficiency. Moreover, and more crucially for the present purposes, it is accompanied by a shift into an aesthetic register; ceasing to function as economically productive spaces, these islands turn into complex spatial figures offering a philosophical meditation on islandness as a contradictory and multifaceted condition. As such, the texts construct their islands as multi-layered spaces made up of various geographical, cultural and textual sediments. They add a vertical plane to articulate a complex spatial philosophy of islandness, functioning as palimpsests or archives constructing multiple versions of the islands.

Infinite space-time: “The man who loved islands” (1927)

My first example, D. H. Lawrence's short story “The man who loved islands” (1927), combines material and textual strata to interrogate the island concept. While the protagonist strives for geometrical reduction in his quest for an island essence, the text as a whole moves in the opposite direction and constructs a complex and expansive spatial poetics. “The man who loved islands” tells the story of an island-lover who settles on three successive islands.¹⁰ The story begins by raising the question of what an island is. But the initial description of the first island offers only a negative definition of what it is *not*,

The island acquired by our potential islander was *not* in the remote oceans. It was quite near at home, *no* palm-trees nor boom of surf on the reef, *nor* any of that kind of thing ... (Lawrence, 2014, p. 563; emphasis added).

The story thus begins by refuting the clichéd tropical island imaginary. In the following, the narrative struggles to offer any essential quality of insularity or islandness¹¹; and fails to do so. Smallness and isolation are repeatedly offered as potential criteria,

An island, if it is big enough, is no better than a continent. It has to be really quite small, before it *feels* like an island; and this story will show how tiny it has to be, before you can presume to fill it with your own personality (Lawrence, 2014, p. 563; emphasis in original).

¹⁰ For a discussion of Lawrence's story in relation to the modernist fascination with islands, see Franks (2006, pp. 105-38). The story is commonly read in relation to subjectivity, isolation and inner space (see also Michelucci 1998, Stoltzfus 2000, and Kearney 1988), but it is rarely discussed in terms of an exploration of islandness itself.

¹¹ Recently, island studies have turned to the notion of *islandness* to counteract the associations of stasis, isolation and remoteness often linked to the term *insularity* (Baldacchino, 2006b, p. 9). I deliberately use both terms here to underscore the text's oscillation between different concepts of (the) island(s).

Each of the three islands is smaller than the previous one, as the islander is dissatisfied with each of them. The first island still has a micro-economy with a farm and several inhabitants; but this economy fails to be self-sufficient and the island devours more and more money. The second island is already reduced, with only the islander and a minimal household. Finally, the islander escapes to his third island, a mere rock in the sea,

Only the turf, and tiny turf-plants, and the sedge by the pool, the seaweed in the ocean. He was glad. He didn't want trees or bushes. They stood up like people, too assertive. His bare, low-pitched island in the pale blue sea was all he wanted. (Lawrence, 2014, p. 574; emphasis added).

This “bare” island is stripped of all the layers that made up the first two islands, and the islander attempts to cut all connections to the outside world. The radical reduction of island space veers towards an even more radical reduction: the islander attempts to “reduc[e] himself to a single point in space” (2014, 564), and fuse with the minimal island. This, the text implies, would be an island that is truly an island. Yet no essential islandness emerges. A point is a geometrical abstraction; in the story, it remains a figure of speech: “... a point being that which has neither length nor breadth, he had to step off it into somewhere else” (2014, p. 564). Having no extension in any direction, a point cannot be inhabited; the island is here reduced to a single dimension, which takes the geometrical drive to abstract and reduce the island to the extreme. This ideal island thus functions as a figure for the impossible island sought by the protagonist.

By the end of the narrative, we are left with nothing. The identification between island and self keeps failing; the islander does not merge with the island. In fact, the island itself disappears in the snow,

Sullenly, he worked to dig himself out. And he managed, through sheer persistency, to get out. He was in the tail of a great drift, many feet high. When he got through, the frozen snow was not more than two feet deep. But his island was gone. Its shape was all changed, great heaping white hills rose where no hills had been, inaccessible, and they fumed like volcanoes, but with snow powder. He was sickened and overcome (Lawrence, 2014, p. 577; emphasis added).

The story thus ends by adding another layer to the island, this time a layer of snow. The effect is that the island becomes unrecognizable to the point of disappearance. The description retains a faint reference to the volcanic islands of the Pacific and Atlantic oceans in the simile “they fumed like volcanoes,” yet the qualifying “but” highlights the incompatibility of the island with familiar (literary) representations of islands. The passage suggests that the existence of the island *as an island* itself is under erasure and thus puts the concept itself into question. It can be argued that the three islands of Lawrence's story are really different palimpsestic layers of the same island, of a kind of ‘ultimate island’¹² that can never be reached. The islander fails to fill each version; or, in Wylie's terms, to merge with the islandscape.

The island resists his grasp already before it is covered in snow,

¹² My use of this term has nothing to do with that of Ruddick (1993) in *Ultimate island: On the nature of British science fiction*, an exploration of the importance of islands and insular spaces in science fiction.

The small island was very small; but, being a hump of rock in the sea, it was bigger than it looked. There was a little track among rocks and bushes, winding and scrambling up and down around the islet, so that it took you twenty minutes to do the circuit. It was more than you would have expected (Lawrence, 2014, pp. 569-570).

In Bachelardian terms, the islander cannot match his imagination with the island space. The island turns out to be the sum of its geographical and rhetorical layers, with no essence hiding underneath. Instead, and precisely for this reason, the text has to keep emphasizing that the island is an island: the word “island” is used almost a hundred times; in relation to the second island, the narrator insists: “Still, it was an island” (2014, 570), and a few lines further on: “Yes, it was an island” (2014, 570). But the more ‘insular’¹³ the island supposedly gets, the less the word itself is used; in the third part, it appears only fourteen times. Rather than arriving at a clear sense of what an island is, the text geographically erodes the island and textually deconstructs the island concept. The more isolated the islander is, and the smaller the island gets, the more the text emphasizes the vastness of the ocean around it,¹⁴ and thus ends on a meditation not on smallness and clearly defined spaces, but on the infinity of space and time. The text thus counters the islander’s drive towards geometrical and dimensional reduction with a spatio-temporal expansion in four dimensions.¹⁵

Quite fittingly, the story ends in a parody of what Pratt (1997, pp. 197-223) has termed “monarch-of-all-I-survey” scenes, which are a stock feature of Western island fiction (cf. Weaver-Hightower, 2007, pp. 1-42): in these scenes, the castaway climbs to a high point of the island and visually appropriates it. In Lawrence’s story, this moment has lost all meaning,

How long it went on, he never knew. Once, like a wraith, he got out, and climbed to the top of a white hill on his unrecognizable island. The sun was hot. “It is summer,” he said to himself, “and the time of leaves. He looked stupidly over the whiteness of his foreign island, over the waste of the lifeless sea. He pretended to imagine he saw the wink of a sail. Because he knew too well there would never again be a sail on the stark sea (Lawrence, 2014, p. 577).

Rather than gaining visual control of the island by climbing a hill and surveying it, the islander here loses any sense of spatial orientation. The island has become “unrecognizable” and “foreign,” and his gaze is “stupid” rather than controlled and purposeful. Indeed, the hill itself has been added to the island by the snow and is thus part of its last layer; the vantage point itself emerges from the unfamiliar structure which puts the island into question. And in the very last two sentences, the snow extends the island into white infinity, threatening to engulf it in the same gesture: “From far off came the mutter of the unsatisfied thunder, and he knew it was the signal of the snow rolling over the sea. He turned, and felt its breath on him” (Lawrence, 2014, p. 577).

¹³ Cf. note 8.

¹⁴ For a discussion of the poetics of the sea in *The man who loved islands*, see Gouirand (1993).

¹⁵ As such, Lawrence’s story responds to the late 19th- and early 20th-century debate in mathematics, physics and literature – and often at their intersection – revolving around the fourth dimension, infinity, and the space-time continuum in the theories and writings of Albert Einstein, Charles Howard Hinton, Maurice Maeterlinck, Edwin Abbot Abbott and many others. Literary modernism frequently explores the aesthetic possibilities opened up by this debate.

An island dis/appears: *The solitude of Thomas Cave* (2007)

If snow transforms the last island of “The man who loved islands” at the end of the story, my second example, Georgina Harding’s novel *The solitude of Thomas Cave* (2007), traces the development of an island covered by layers of snow and ice over an extended period of time. In the process, islandness as a lived experience is examined and interrogated through the complex textual construction of a three-dimensional island in time. The novel uses a more extreme northern setting than “The man who loved islands” for its meditation on islandness. Set in the early seventeenth century, it tells the story of a man working in the whaling business who accepts a wager to spend a winter on an island off Greenland. The historical setting relates the novel closely to the period of intense searching for the Arctic passages to the Pacific. The voyages of Martin Frobisher (1576-78), John Davis (1585-87), Henry Hudson (1607-1611) and William Baffin (1615-16) all fall into this period, and the year in which Baffin considerably advanced the search for a Northwest Passage by discovering and sailing far into what is now called Baffin Bay (1616) coincides with the year in which Thomas Cave winters on his island in Harding’s novel. One of Harding’s historical sources for her novel was William Scoresby’s *Account of the Arctic regions* (1820). Scoresby was an English whaler who himself played an important role in the exploration of the Arctic seas; his account begins with an overview of previous journeys to the Arctic and the various searches for a northwest, northeast or northern route to the Pacific. Scoresby repeatedly emphasizes the unlikeliness of finding such a passage, portraying the Arctic sea as a barrier to navigators: “In seas perpetually encumbered with ice, and probably crowded with islands, if not divided by necks of land, the chance of great discoveries and of extensive navigations toward the north-west, even under the best arrangements, and under the boldest seamen, is but small” (Scoresby, 1820, pp. 32-33). In this passage, then, Scoresby figures the frozen land- and seascapes of the polar regions as inaccessible and immobilizing territories. We should add to this, however, that the description is highly indeterminate in its spatial imaginary. The initial assertion of a frozen continuity (“seas perpetually encumbered with ice”) sits uneasily with the speculative subordinate clauses that immediately follow it: the imagined probability of a multitude of islands or, alternatively, a sea divided by “necks of land,” raises the question of whether the island concept has any meaning in a frozen ocean. The probable islands thus appear as an almost irrelevant afterthought, and are presented as interchangeable with both ice (i.e. frozen water) and bodies of land connected with the mainland. Indeed, the very categories of land and sea are confused; as in Serres’s poetic account of the Northwest Passage, solid and liquid lose their distinctive identities.

It is this spatial indeterminacy which, some twenty pages onwards, leads Scoresby to correct his assertion of a forbidding and impassable polar ocean in a surprising and remarkable way. Asserting that the polar regions could be travelled (and that even the North Pole could easily be reached) by sledge or on foot, he seems to suggest that explorers made the mistake of treating the frozen ocean *as* an ocean, and advocate a view that treats it as land, irrespective of whether the layers of snow and ice actually cover mainland, islands or water. To be more precise, his imagined journey abandons these distinctions altogether,

With favourable winds, great advantage might be derived from sails set upon the sledge; which sails, when the travellers were at rest, would serve for the erection of tents. Small vacancies in the ice would not prevent the journey, as the sledges would be

so adapted as to answer the purpose of boats; nor would the usual unevenness of the ice, or the depth or softness of the snow, be an insurmountable difficulty, as journeys of near equal length, and under similar inconveniencies, have been accomplished (Scoresby, 1820, p. 55).

In this account, Spitzbergen becomes the imagined island departure for an Arctic journey. Yet its island status is no longer relevant. The proposed journey challenges received categories of land- and seascape: the sledge is reimagined as part boat, whose “sails” are in turn reimagined as tents. Scoresby goes so far as to imagine the sledge as an actual, albeit temporary, boat fit to navigate “small vacancies in the ice.”

As soon as Scoresby’s text gives up the categories of land and sea, then, the islands of the frozen ocean are no longer imagined as isolated and inaccessible, but suddenly become spaces of connection and movement; Spitzbergen loses its discreteness, is indefinitely extended and becomes the starting point for an exploration of an expansive and interconnected snow- and icescape. Terms such as “sea,” “land” and “island” no longer matter for the determination of (in)accessibility: instead, a typology of ice substitutes for a typology of land- and seaforms,

On the kind of ice, indeed, which occurs generally on the coast of Spitzbergen, in small irregular masses, constituting what is called drift-ice, heaped one piece upon another to a considerable height, intermixed with fragments of ice-bergs, and forming as rough a surface as can well be imagined, the journey would doubtless be impractical; but on field-ice, found commonly within a few leagues of the sea in high latitudes, in sheets of many miles in diameter, and frequently of very even surface, the difficulties of travelling would be very inferior (Scoresby, 1820, p. 56).

In this passage, the different formations making up the layers of ice covering land and sea become the decisive categories for a description of the Arctic: terms like “drift-ice,” “fragments of ice-bergs” and “field-ice” are used to account for the diversity of the icescape and its spatial features. The ocean and its islands disappear under layers of snow and ice.

This phenomenal and linguistic disappearance of islands takes on a philosophical dimension in *The solitude of Thomas Cave*. In Harding’s novel, the spatial indeterminacy of Scoresby’s text is further developed and translates into a philosophical meditation on islandness. This exploration of the im/possibility of Arctic island space revolves around the polyvalent status of the island on which Cave spends a winter. Significantly, while the paratextual¹⁶ announcement of “The Experience of Thomas Cave” in the title to the second section of the book specifies the location as an “uncharted island of Svalbard” (Harding, 2007, p. 25), the narrative proper does not make the island location explicit until the sea is already frozen,

Before his eyes an eagle view: throughout his field of vision, mountains in the form of flames, burning white with the sun upon them, and beyond in all directions, smooth and blue-white, a frozen sea.

¹⁶ First developed by Genette (1997), the concept of paratext refers to the elements on the border or periphery of the text, such as titles, footnotes, epigraphs and book blurbs.

It is my opinion that this cannot be East Greenland but an island, a place for which we have no name. Our ships had sailed the southern coast and we had thought the land to be a promontory or projection from a greater mainland but yesterday I climbed the mountain to the north and discovered that it was not so, that the place is indeed surrounded by sea in all directions. The sea to the north appears to be frozen so it is yet possible that it may connect by the ice to further land (Harding, 2007, p. 37; italics in original).

Like the protagonist in Lawrence's story, Cave has a monarch-of-all-I-survey moment as he climbs to the highest point of the island. Unlike in the former story, this moment does give Cave some form of orientation and spatial certainty as the island status is ascertained. On another level, however, the text introduces a more fundamental spatial indeterminacy, for it presents us with an apparent paradox: at the moment when Cave has become most fully isolated by the freezing of the sea, the island loses its distinct identity and becomes part of a wider landscape of snow and ice. In other words, the island is named as such at the very moment when its island status becomes irrelevant, and Cave imagines the island in icy connection to "further land." Cave's isolation has nothing to do with the fact that he is on an island; as such, the island concept itself is challenged.

It is therefore significant that the view from the top of the island is described twice. Only Cave's diary, written in italics, uses the words "island" and "mainland"; while the omniscient narrator's description preceding the diary entry is aligned with Cave's "field of vision," it also expresses an alternative and more expansive view that focuses on the continuities of the snow- and icescape around the mountain and in which the island concept need not be articulated. While Cave thinks in terms of the geographical categories he inherits both from his trade and from his castaway predecessors in island fiction, the text as a whole puts those categories into question. By having Cave pronounce the word "island," it thus suggests that the island concept is tied to a distinctly human vision of space. In addition, what isolates Cave connects the island to the mainland for other life forms: thanks to the frozen sea, polar bears now seem to reach the island by crossing the ice,

Since the sea has been frozen I have seen a number of white bears. Since I have not seen such a quantity before I think it is possible that they have come across the ice ... (Harding, 2007, p. 59).

As in Lawrence's story, the island physically changes its shape in the snow, and all traces of economic activity are erased,

Every surface reflects the moonlight, white and smoothed as the wind has left it, the form of the tent gone into a dune, the boilers, the two remaining shallows, *every mark of the whalers erased, his footprints gone from the ground*. There was a path he had made to a pool far along the beach where water still ran from beneath the glacier and since the beginning of winter he had been able to break through the ice. *It is quite lost now, the landmarks about it eerily altered*. He sees that he will not find the spot again but must melt snow for his drinking until the ice itself begins to thaw. ... And before he turns his eyes back to the ground he sees that *she is standing not twenty yards off where the beach merges with the ice* (Harding, 2007, p. 73; emphasis added).

Cave's own footprints are erased along with the traces of whaling activity. Human inscriptions are absorbed by the island's new and ever-changing shape; the footpath is lost, and the tent is transformed into a dune. Not only human traces disappear, but the physical geography of the island itself is altered to the point where all reference points vanish. Throughout the novel, the frozen landscape is frequently described as empty and immobile ("the empty enormity of the North"; Harding, 2007, p. 87), but the island becomes filled not only with snow and ice but also with memories as Cave remembers and even hallucinates his dead wife. In this above passage, significantly, she appears at the border of the island, challenging the latter's apparent isolation. She manifests the return of the world Cave wished to leave behind as he aimed to go "[s]omewhere hard and cold. Somewhere that had no memory. No history of man. Or woman" (Harding, 2007, p. 125). But the reverse happens: rather than vanishing, his memories return to him in the Arctic snow- and icescape. In the long polar night where Cave cannot really see anything, the island turns into a mental landscape, and a layer of memories is added to the layers of snow and ice.

This layering of inner and outer landscapes is emphasized through the metaphorical link between the wintery landscape and Cave's mental condition: "He lives in constant fatigue, he drifts between waking and sleeping, his brain turning without focus, his identity becoming frozen, *clear and yet thick, opaque as ice*" (Harding, 2007, p. 87; emphasis added). This metaphorical identification of Cave and the landscape, however, does not imply a fusion of self and island; these are linked in that the identity of both becomes opaque; both consist of conflicting layers, each marked by different degrees of isolation and interconnection.

Conclusion

In Serres's *Le passage du Nord-Ouest*, as well as in the fictional visions of northern islands, isolation and interconnection are rhetorical modes rather than essential qualities of islandness. In all three texts, the visible material changes that Arctic landscapes undergo become linked to the textual production of multiple, conflicting island conceptions. "The man who loved islands" begins by defining the island in negative terms, directly challenging the tropical island imaginary of Western fiction. As the story proceeds, the island concept is gradually eroded while the text adds layer upon layer to the poetic construction of its island(s). At the end, the island is quite literally buried in snow, changed beyond recognition; with it, the island *concept* is lost in the infinity of time and space. In *The Solitude of Thomas Cave*, the island textually appears at the moment of its physical disappearance in a continuous landscape of snow and ice; the island concept is evoked at the very moment when its usefulness is put into question. In different ways, both texts function like topographical maps, with each (geographical and rhetorical) vertical layer of the island constructing a different horizontal vision of island space in a continuum between complete isolation and total interconnectedness. Furthermore, both texts draw on deceptive perceptual effects to heighten their interrogation of island space, and their protagonists' experience of the northern islands becomes unreliable: if Lawrence's island eludes the grasp of both protagonist and reader, Harding's novel repeatedly draws on the specific perceptual illusions of the polar regions, such as when we learn that "the apparent height of the land was an illusory effect of the fog" (159). In their articulation of an interrogative philosophy of island space, these texts resonate with the Arctic archipelago in Serres's text. Like Harding, Serres draws on the spatial imaginaries in the Arctic journals of

explorers like Scoresby. If the literary texts are philosophical, Serres's philosophical text is perhaps the most literary of all three texts discussed in this paper: in it, material transformations and perceptual uncertainties explode, and Serres's suggestive geopoetic language oscillates between a multiplicity of spatial perspectives within single sentences. If these northern texts offer a challenge to the Western island imaginary, it is not to celebrate interconnectedness, but to put forward a complex spatial philosophy of islandness, challenging all essentialist accounts of island space.

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