

Exoticism or reality? The Azores seen by an English traveler^{*}

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*Islands are platforms for the emergence of national identity
and for the affirmation of cultural specificity.*

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Travel literature chronicles subjective and unique experiences in spaces that may already be well known and aimed at the masses, but that each traveler-narrator senses and describes in their own way. Therefore, it constitutes an immersion in the culture of the Other, in its difference but also in what it has in common with the traveler. This contact with the Other can be marked by euphoria—when travelers feel welcomed and enjoy a peaceful communication with the locals, while acknowledging the qualities of the destination—or by dysphoria—when narrators express their displeasure with the destination or with traveling mishaps.¹ As a result, the texts of this literary subgenre draw a picture of the destination societies and simultaneously open spaces in the discourse to convey admiration or rejection and to unveil elements that enrich

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1 See, for example, the contrast between the enthusiastic tone of Pero Vaz de Caminha's *Letter to King Manuel of Portugal Concerning the Discovery of Brazil* and the *Tragic History of The Sea*, marked by shipwrecks, diseases and other tragedies.

different fields of study: geographical, historical, linguistic, economic, political, natural, anthropological, religious, among others. Therefore, travelers sketch the identity profile of the places they visit, contributing to the imagery of these spaces, while simultaneously leaving clues for the configuration of their own identity.

In the case of *Relato da minha viagem aos Açores 1812-1814* (literally, *Report of My Trip to the Azores, 1812-1814*), Briant Barrett describes in minute detail a number aspects of the Azores Islands he visited, highlighting several identity traits of the Azores in his chronicle and, at times, contrasting them to his home country, England. This travelogue, whose manuscript is deposited at the Ponta Delgada Public Library and Regional Archive, was translated and published by Letras Lavadas in 2017 based on a manuscript that was reorganized and prefaced by Susana Serpa Silva, one of the proponents of this publication. She was also responsible for the title along with Manuela Vaz de Medeiros.

It is true that the Azores have always aroused the interest of many travelers and have been the object of a large number narratives of different types. As recently as 2020, Maria das Mercês Pacheco attested to this fact in her anthological book *Viajantes nos Açores. O olhar estrangeiro sobre as ilhas desde o século XVI / Travelers in the Azores. The Islands as seen by Foreigners since the 16th Century*, which covers a period extending from the 16th to the 21st century and brings together excerpts from dozens of authors who toured the Azores and wrote about the islands. Despite this prolific literary production on the Azores, there are relatively few works about the archipelago written in the first quarter of the 19th century, as Susana Serpa Silva mentions in her preface to Briant Barrett's travelogue (Barrett 2017, 11-12). One will only find Jean Gustave Hebbe's texts (1802), Thomas Ashe's writings (1813), William H. Prescott's letters (1815-1816), John Webster's description (1821) and Caroline Pomeroy's diary (1824). Briant Barrett visited seven of the nine islands of the Azores at the beginning of the 19th century (he did not go to Corvo and Flores due to transportation problems) and lists "improving his health" as the reason for his trip (Barrett 2017, 124). However, it is curious that he hardly mentions this subject matter throughout his narrative and, in the end, readers are left in the dark about the beneficial impact of the trip on his health. More than a vacation, this trip feels like a field expedition, as defined by Christopher K. Brown in the *Encyclopedia of Travel Literature*: "travel, at its core, may not be as we think of it—a vacation—but rather a serious activity that is filled with adversity, difficulty, and discomfort: in short, travel is a sort of work" (Brown 2000, vii).

This chronicle is divided into three parts: the first is about the discovery and history of the Azores; the second is a description of the islands he visited, and the third discusses the Portuguese laws, population and society. He only makes use of his travel notes in the second and third parts, as the first part deals with historical aspects that range from the discovery of the archipelago to the accession to the throne of the Braganza dynasty. Barrett researched several historical sources, including the classical works of the Azorean historiography, such as *Saudades da terra* (16th century) by Gaspar Frutuoso, *História Insulana* (18th century) by Father António Cordeiro, and *Crónicas da Província de São João Evangelista das Ilhas dos Açores* (17th century) by Friar Agostinho de Mont'Alverne.

One of the singularities of this narrative lies in the fact that the author opts mainly for an exhaustive and rigorous description of what he observes, although some of his remarks do not exactly correspond to reality. We should note that travel reports are always imbued with subjectivity, as they depict a personal portrayal of a given space. Readers must be aware of this issue to avoid mistaking a representation for reality:

travel literature can never be objective. These texts are always a representation of a perception, and as such, there is a significant element of subjectivity contained within them. As hard as some of these stories try to be documentary-style reports, they can never succeed in fully capturing the objective phenomena. In reading these texts we must resist the temptation to view them as anything more than an individual's take on a very complex world. (Brown 2000, vii)

If we consider that the identity of a region or nation includes both political factors (state, territory and constitution) and socio-cultural factors (language, religion, ethnicity, history, myths and art),² we can see that Barrett draws a very complete picture of the identity of the Azores Archipelago in its various components: territory (landscape, climate, fauna and flora), history, governance and law, economy, religion, customs and traditions, and character traits of the Azorean population.

2 We have expanded on this in Gil 2015, 67-90.

Territory (landscape, climate, fauna and flora)

Briant Barrett's attention is mostly focused on the details related to the territory. He covers the different islands but does not elaborate on the harder to reach areas, such as Nordeste on the island of São Miguel. Valleys and volcanoes, watercourses, lakes, fauna and flora, everything is the object of the author's detailed attention that reflects his vast scientific knowledge. Moreover, Barrett's travelogue also bears witness to his refined research on the Azores Archipelago in its various dimensions. For example, we notice the thoroughness of his descriptions when he arrives in Vila Franca do Campo, as he is awestruck by the scenery before him:

When we reached the top of the mountain Monte da Gaiteira, I turned around and was dazzled by one of the most beautiful landscapes imaginable. / Vila Franca, its port and islet seemed to be under my feet. The surrounding mountains were covered with trees right up to the top. There was silence everywhere and we could only hear the birds singing at dusk, the wind blowing in a slight breeze through the trees and the water murmuring down the streams feeding the immense Atlantic with tiny drops. / Nothing that lay before me could compare with what I had seen before. Not even the lakes of Westmoreland and Cumberland could match the majestic beauty of this panorama! / The descent from the Gaiteira was easier than the climb, and on reaching the base, I mounted my faithful and humble companion. / At the foot of the aforementioned mountain, we passed through a narrow valley completely covered by pumice. Heather was rooted in it and no other vegetation could be seen. But even this plant looked weak in the volcanic landscape of the valley; although it grew on the slopes of the mountain, its trunk could be eight to ten feet high and a foot thick, making it a very useful small shrub. The valley was about one mile long". (Barrett 2017, 128-129)³

This descriptive passage features a number of distinctive elements that we can find throughout Barrett's travelogue: the detail he employs when mentioning biological and geological elements, measurements, and distances; the use of the superlative ("one of the most beautiful landscapes imaginable"), which he repeats when he is before other Azorean landscapes; the interweaving of visual, auditory, and tactile sensations, which provide the scenery with enormous verisimilitude; and the comparison with places that were familiar to him

3 The slash indicates a new paragraph. Quotations from Barrett's travelogue have been translated back into English, as we could not get access to the English original.

(“the lakes of Westmoreland and Cumberland”) as a way of underscoring the beauty of what he sees on his tour.

Isolation is one of the Azores’ identifying factors, and Barrett mentions the national government’s neglect of the archipelago several times. However, the author does not fail to point out that the distance from the major centers also has a positive side: the peaceful island life far from the wars that ravage various parts of the planet (Barrett 2017, 68). The author equally recognizes the proverbial geostrategic location of the Azores Archipelago, as it is located in a privileged place halfway between North America and Europe, “an attractive position for all naval powers” (*Ibidem*, 332). According to Barrett, this location has several advantages, including the possibility of docking warships, controlling the surrounding ocean, repairing and supplying ships, dismantling piracy, easily attacking and/or repelling attacks from South America, and receiving products from the American continent (*Ibidem*, 332-333).

Barrett, therefore, brings together the dual nature of island territories, that of their isolation and simultaneously of their openness to the world, where one can find a sense of plenitude and a sea open to all horizons. This is, after all, one of the identifying features of an island: its ambivalence and paradoxical nature (Meistersheim 2006, 503).

History

History is another component of the regional identity mentioned by Barrett. The historical identity of the Azores appears in the first part of his travelogue, beginning at the time of the discovery of the Azores. Barrett draws on Gaspar Frutuoso, Agostinho de Mont’Alverne and António Cordeiro to detail the various stages the region went through from its discovery to the Restoration period. In the very first pages of his chronicle, he provides the reader with a superlative tribute to the great promoter of the Portuguese Discoveries, Prince Henry the Navigator:

this voyage [of the discovery of the Azores] is **the greatest navigation effort** that Europe will ever be able to boast of and, considering the state of navigation in the West at the time, **the most daring of any voyage**; no less than 300 leagues of the continent were crossed. Prince Henry’s genius included a plan to invent the means to complete it. The world owes the astrolabe to this Prince; Columbus would later reach the western hemisphere; however, more than sixty years before him, Prince Henry had already broken the spell that had limited the world by

crossing half of the vast Atlantic and obtaining the necessary means of navigation. The misfortune is that Prince Henry's **daring** but no less fruitful conceptions have been overlooked and forgotten by the world due to the great splendor associated with Columbus's most famous voyages. However, without diminishing the rightful merit of the Genoese, may the world not deny the **lovely Prince** the applause that **his genius and perseverance** deserve (Barrett 2017, 26-27, emphasis added).

This encomiastic narrative takes on an almost epic tone, with abundant superlatives highlighting the navigators' courage ("the most daring voyage") and profuse references to the "genius" and "perseverance" that make Henry the Navigator superior to Christopher Columbus, despite being overshadowed by the latter. Briant Barrett's admiration for the Portuguese navigators resurfaces when he narrates the voyage to Terceira Island, during which he was impressed by the Azorean sailors' indifference to bad weather that only made them hold still and say their prayers ("it's one of the things that most impresses an Englishman", Barrett 2017, 167). Additionally, during the turbulent voyage between Faial and Graciosa, the author is amazed by the skill, experience and dexterity of the boatmen who captained the vessel: "Another huge wave approached us, looking like a mountain of water, which made me think it was the end. Alert, the helmsman saw it coming and steered the boat obliquely towards it. We climbed it with the speed of a rocket, without letting in a single drop of water" (*Ibidem*, 197). The Portuguese way of building boats is also praised by Barrett, who says that the Portuguese calkers do their job "as perfectly as in any other part of the world, so that even the English are amazed at the way they securely and skillfully calk the cracks" (*Ibidem*, 200).

His recognition of the history of Azores also includes repeated references to the archipelago's geostrategic usefulness in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. This is mentioned, for example, in connection with the Philippine rule of Portugal:

These islands were a useful acquisition for Philip, whose ministers and successors recognized their value. The armadas coming from Spanish America usually got reunited here on their way back to Europe not only to stock up on water, provisions, etc. but mainly to wait for the armada arriving from Spain, which usually accompanied them on the final leg. (Barrett 2017, 60)

According to Barrett, while the Kings Philip of Spain ruled Portugal, the Azores “benefited from this connection that the Motherland had never given them” (Barrett 2017, 64) and then fell into oblivion with the Braganza dynasty.

Governance and law

The third part of his travelogue is devoted to a summary of the legislative evolution of Portugal from the time of King Afonso Henriques. Barrett describes synthetically, reign by reign, the legislative innovations that each monarch implemented, demonstrating a deep understanding of this subject matter.

His references to the Portuguese mode of governance are recurrent throughout the whole narrative and are, above all, vehemently critical of the central government’s abandonment of the Azores Archipelago:

The first pleasure of the senses was followed by some sad thoughts, and from the bottom of my heart, I lamented the cruel policy that imposed the depopulation of such a charming and fruitful place in order to please the greed and add to the profit of a dissatisfied race in the torrid and unhealthy climate of Portuguese America (Barrett 2017, 78).

This place that the author describes as a paradise was forgotten by those responsible for national policy and depopulated by emigration to Brazil. The misery the people were plunged into shocks Briant Barrett. For example, when he visits the island of Santa Maria, he notices that its products are used to supply mainland Portugal, while the locals pay for essential goods high prices that their economic situation cannot afford.

Economy

Many of his observations about the Azorean economy concern the products cultivated and manufactured on the various islands. Corn, wheat, barley, lupins, oranges, grapevines, taro and bananas are among the agricultural products that he highlights. As for livestock, he mentions pig, goat, sheep and cattle raising (the latter in smaller quantities, which contrasts with the current situation). Finally, in terms of manufacturing, textiles (linen) and pottery on the island of Santa Maria stand out. One of the major problems that Barrett singles out is that the islanders live in misery, while the products are exported, a reality that he strongly criticizes.

Religion, customs and traditions

The providential spirit of the Portuguese people is one of their traits that emerges in this chronicle. The Portuguese put their destiny *in God's hands*, as Antero de Quental would say, and hope that Divine Providence will solve their problems. As anthropologist Jorge Dias writes in his essay “Os elementos fundamentais da Cultura Portuguesa” (literally, “The Fundamentals of Portuguese Culture”), “the Portuguese like to make vague projects—castles in the air—that they do not intent to materialize. But deep inside they hope that somehow things will miraculously happen” (Dias [1990], 155-156).

Consequently, religion also plays a significant role on the Azorean Islands both in day-to-day life and in the numerous festivities honoring the Holy Spirit and the so-called Popular Saints. Barrett notes that, when in danger, sailors face it serenely and simply say their prayers (Barrett 2017, 195). The traditional worship of the Holy Spirit is naturally one of the topics that Briant Barrett addresses. While chronicling his visit to Graciosa Island, he describes in detail the coronation of two Emperors of the Holy Spirit and the traditional soups, as well as the origin of this tradition (*Ibidem*, 205-208). He does so not without censoring the profane side of these festivities that involves drinking, dancing and singing, “ending the day with scenes that are so degrading and shocking to religion, morality and decency” (*Ibidem*, 207).

Other points of interest for Barrett include the Franciscan convents (he views these friars as active, “respectable” and “well guided”, Barrett 2017, 310) and the Jesuit presence in the archipelago. He goes on to condemn the expulsion of the Jesuits decreed by the Portuguese government, as he deems it one of the reasons for the spread of ignorance on the islands (*Ibidem*, 310-311). He also criticizes the Feast of St. John, celebrated on the island of Terceira since the foundation of the House of Braganza, (*Ibidem*, 178) for the bullfights that “torment a lot of unhappy cattle” and cause the animals to suffer (*Ibidem*, 179). For Briant Barrett, this is further proof of the ineptitude of the Portuguese Government, which uses festivals to distract people from what is important: “An arbitrary Government that has to encourage performances and traditions to entertain minds, preventing people from devoting their time to more serious things” (*Ibidem*, 180).

Society and character traits of the people

Traveling means coming into contact with different people with their own habits and character traits. Therefore, it is not surprising that Briant Barrett makes a number comments about the character of the inhabitants of the Azores

Islands—some positive and others negative—but all resulting from his experiences and on-site observations. He recognizes their work ethic and friendly hospitality but was disappointed by their rudeness and backwardness in some areas, something that was even noticeable in the way they neglected their clothing, personal hygiene and houses (Barrett 2017, 94-95). The backwardness that Barrett observes on the different islands has a culprit that is clearly identified by the author—the Central Government, which casts these islanders into oblivion and disregard in a clear sign negligence and abandonment:

Our islanders have, therefore, continued to live closed in on themselves, because they have no incentive to develop or obtain a common culture... Do not disregard them, my dear reader, because based on our experience, we can prove that wherever there is a coarse, crude and ignorant nation the fault lies with its government and not with its people. (Barrett 2017, 99-100)

He laments the ignorance of the population at many points but does recognize their good character: “it would be less than honest to conceal the fact that the great ignorance of all classes was the real cause of their moral degradation despite their excellent natural temperament” (*Ibidem*, 92). Their low level of literacy actually leads Barrett and his friend Custódio to devise a “Lancaster education plan” (*Ibidem*, 92) which would have been implemented in the Azores. However, due to disputes among clergymen, the plan never saw the light of day.

Another topic that draws the author’s attention is the role and situation of women in this island society. In most of the islands (except Faial and Terceira, according to the author), women are the “number one slave of the family” (*Ibidem*, 97) whom they must take care of, and are excluded from socializing with those outside their domestic sphere. They are only allowed to attend church accompanied by their husbands. Once they become adults, their destiny is limited to two possibilities: marriage or the cloister of a convent. Many are, in fact, forced to take vows even against their own will, a situation that shocks Barrett.

Despite *Relato da minha viagem aos Açores 1812-1814* being an eminently descriptive narrative, we have seen that Briant Barrett often gives his opinion on what he experiences. The author goes beyond the usual idealized perception of the islands, and occasionally delivers a negative assessment of the Azores, especially when he mentions the poor living conditions of the archipelago, for which the author holds the Government of Portugal responsible, as previously

mentioned. But this chronicle is also filled with praise for the Azores Islands, especially their natural beauty and some aspects of the islanders' character. Despite noting that locals are sometimes lazy, ignorant (but willing to learn) and rude, Barrett nevertheless recognizes that they are benevolent to foreigners, friendly, helpful, civil and kind (Barrett 2017, 331).

Comparison with England

Travel literature often includes a comparison between the place visited and the traveler's country of origin. In the confrontation with the Other, with what is different, the discourse will naturally discuss what brings the two spaces together and what separates them. Two distinct national identities end up meeting, and this encounter contributes to a better understanding of each one of them. Throughout his travelogue, Briant Barrett invokes his native country, England, in connection with what he experiences and observes on the Azorean Islands. He does not display any sense of civilizational or cultural superiority towards Portugal, despite him censoring the way the islands are governed, the lack of literacy, the character of some Azoreans, the use of agricultural techniques he deems inadequate for the Azorean soil, etc. Barrett also does not shy away from criticizing his fellow countrymen—for example, their unacceptably arrogant behavior towards the islanders. Although he points out that the Azoreans are a bit rude, Barrett considers them to be generally polite, and even the lower classes are superior in “appearance” and “politeness” when compared to their English counterparts (Barrett 2017, 102).

The weather is one of the elements that Barrett deems to be better in the Azores than in England. Upon arriving on the island of Santa Maria in good weather, the sea looks calmer than the River Thames, “the weather was so mild that even the surface of the River Thames in summer was no match for this mirror-like sea in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean” (*Ibidem*, 69-70). On the island of São Miguel, the author finds it strange that boatmen go barefoot in February, which would have been unbearable in England's freezing weather (*Ibidem*, 86).

Briant Barrett ends the narration of his journey through the Azores expressing his esteem and respect for the Portuguese people; he also reveals that his observation resulted in an admiration for the land and the people and in a concern for the development of this “charming portion of the globe” (*Ibidem*, 337). Therefore, he wishes that the Azores receive “education” to fight ignorance, “a different system of government” and “a change in the laws” in order to

make the Azorean society more egalitarian, more enlightened and with better living standards (Barrett 2017, 332). Despite the negative aspects highlighted throughout his travelogue, the reader realizes that Barrett considers the possibility of this archipelago having another sovereignty (possibly England, Spain, France or America), which is why he regrets that his chronicle might “excite the greed of strangers for the possession of these islands” (*Ibidem*, 332).

This is not just the author’s tour of seven islands of the Azores; it is a journey that recognizes the identity of a territory that is very different from his country of origin, that is forgotten by its government in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, and that is far removed from the great wars of his time. More than a tourist, Barrett is a traveler—someone who experiences otherness and is changed by it. As Luís Romano writes, “In an idealized adventure, travelers may also change themselves; tourists only seek a relaxing break, preserving their distance from the other” (Romano 2013, 36). Barrett immerses himself in island life, admires the beauty and shows empathy towards poverty. He is a traveler who does not remain at a distance but who actually experiences the places he visits from the inside, as Michel Onfray defines it in *Theorie du voyage. Poétique de la géographie*:

Traveling supposes less of a missionary, nationalistic, Eurocentric and narrow spirit and more of an ethnological, cosmopolitan, decentered and open will. A tourist compares; a traveler separates. The former stays at the door of a civilization, touches a culture lightly and is content to perceive its froth and to apprehend its epiphenomena from afar, as a committed spectator, militant of their own rootedness. The latter seeks to enter an unknown world, with no prior intentions, as a disengaged spectator, seeking neither to laugh nor to cry, neither to judge nor to condemn, neither to absolve nor to cast anathemas, but to grasp it from the inside, which is to understand it, according to etymology. (Onfray 2009, 42)

Brian Barrett, the traveler, seems to have an agenda: he wants his travelogue to have effective repercussions both inside and outside of Portugal, so he ends it by addressing his considerations to the Crown of Portugal and the “Council of Ministers of other countries,” as he says on the last page of his narrative (Barrett 2017, 337). He does not intend to showcase an exotic location; he aims—and succeeds, despite some inaccuracies—to understand from the inside the reality of the Azores Islands at the beginning of the 19th century.

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