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**An Elizabethan voyage into the human body:
The Purple Island (1633) by Phineas Fletcher.**

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1. "Autoptic" experience

"[Phineas] Fletcher is a curiosity, a literary eccentric to be exclaimed about, deplored, or chuckled at as the spirit moves" (463). R. G. Baldwin's statement reflects the overall tone of most of the critical voices that have tackled the analysis of Phineas Fletcher's *The Purple Island* (1633), a poem in which the typical Elizabethan taste for allegory and anatomical imagery are encrusted around the insular version of the Spenserian body-house association. An eccentric rather than innovative poet, Fletcher never deserved more than "a line or paragraph in literary histories" (Langdale, 462): he is one of the marginal "conservative, practical, steady voices" (462) of seventeenth-century English poetry, and his major poetical work deserves only a brief mention for it is the final representative of what Thomas Healy calls

[...] one important facet of how scientific ideas and methods were involved with Renaissance English poetry, that of correspondence. (Healy, 341)

Despite its evident faults – anachronistic defense of Ptolemaic cosmology; hyperarticulation of Spenser's original body-house association; blind obedience to Galen's medical framework, to quote but a few of them – Fletcher's poem nonetheless occupies a unique position in Elizabethan literature, mainly by virtue of the anatomical dimension of its allegorism. Published in 1633, yet composed in 1609,

The Purple Island is in fact a textual surface that reflects with great clarity the revolutionary purport of Renaissance anatomy, which radically reformulated the bodily paradigm of the modern age. Fletcher's poem pertains to the tradition of literary anatomies not only because it is aimed, as stated by W. J. Courthope, to trace

[...] striking and novel resemblances between the anatomy of the body and the natural features of an island [...] conveying to the reader a scientific idea of its constitution by means of an elaborate picture of each thing to which it is linked (Courthope, 137-138),

but also because it offers a brand new systematic form of knowledge of the human body, one that is intrinsically anatomical because it is organized both spatially and visually.

In seventeenth-century Europe, the place where the anatomical fragmentation of the human body becomes systematic knowledge is the anatomy theatre: the strict organization of the space for dissection, the nearly religious nature of anatomical "ceremonies", and the massive recurrence of verbal as well as visual hints to the *memento mori* tradition, are the elements that most contributed to transform Renaissance anatomy into what Daniel Featley, author of one of the prefatory epistles of *The Purple Island*, defines as "autologie"¹⁽³⁾, a neologism clearly suggesting the idea of a poetic voyage of self-knowledge into the hidden recesses of the human body. If, in anatomy theatres, the transformation of the anatomized corpse into "the image of God, or his temple on earth" (Roger, 219) is made possible by the precise layout of physical space, in Fletcher's poem the vision of the human body is rigidly determined by its exact textual boundaries. In fact Fletcher is meticulous in defining the textual dimensions within which his "fantastic voyage" into the body takes place: the chronological background of Fletcher's voyage is May, a month traditionally associated with the concepts of natural rebirth and spiritual regeneration; from an ideological viewpoint, it reflects the typical Renaissance theory of correspondence; its medical background is essentially Galenic; last, its stylistic paradigms are essentially Spenser and Sannazzaro for pastoral poetry, Du Bartas for the so-called "divine poetry", and the Scriptures for the puritan psychomachy of the final cantos of the poem.

Through an extensive use of allegorism, *The Purple Island* offers a bodily icon that is the source of a truly *autoptic* vision, in the sense that it can be perceived by the eye, it is destined to the eye, and it represents the triumph of visual perception. "A place too seldom view'd, yet still in view" (I.34.3): this is how the poet describes the object of his poem, which promises to unveil the visual potential of a body that is, dialectically, "fair" (I.34.2), yet "most unknown" (I.34.7). The Fletcherian body is thus a place so intrinsically "visual" that it offers itself, much like a Vesalian "flayed man", in a sort of self-sacrifice to the observer's eye. This eye, however, must be properly educated in order to decode the dichotomic nature of the Fletcherian body, which seems to fatally attract both the eye, obliged to rely on analogy in order to lessen "the cognitive anxiety of discovery" (Hoffer, 41), and the language of poetry, which tries to rewrite the body through an obsessive accumulation of figurative details.

2. An ocular landscape.

The ocular perspective adopted by Fletcher in depicting the human body is far more than central: rather, it is almost absolute. Not even a single reference to hearing, smell, taste or touch can be found in the anatomical cantos of *The Purple Island*. This implies a drastic polarization of the ways in which the body is made an object of poetry. In this regard Fletcher's manipulation of the island metaphor is highly meaningful. By eliminating all the details of the actual voyage of discovery that precedes the direct experience of the human body, Fletcher discloses the metaphor of the island directly to the observer's eyes, presenting it as something unexpected, hence highly fascinating. Fletcher's island, unlike the lands that were the remote destinations of early modern voyages of discovery, can be reached "without long travel" (5), as expressed by Lewis Roberts, a professional voyager himself who appears among the authors of the poems contained in the preface to *The Purple Island*.

This does not mean that Fletcher's island does not share the trait of geographic remoteness with the typical "alien" lands of travel literature. However, rather than physical distance, what characterizes Fletcher's island is a strictly metaphorical distance, a kind of gnoseological alterity, which permeates the enchantment

produced by the vibrant and luxuriant corporeal landscape shown by the poet. The role of the reader is therefore not dissimilar to that assumed by Elizabethan explorers: for both of them the ecstatic contemplation of the beauty of landscape is not only a triumph of sight, but also the essential preliminary step towards the domestication and conquest of the unknown. According to Denise Albanese, there is a strong

[...] connection between encounter and observation, between the discovery of the new and the subjection of it to intense scrutiny (Albanese, 84-5):

which means that every experience of exploration of new lands is primarily and essentially *ocular*. The same concept is underlined by Wayne Franklin, who suggests that

[...] at the heart of the discovery narrative stands the ravished observer, fixed in awe, scanning the New World scene, noting its colors and shapes, recording its plenitude and its sensual richness (Franklin, 22).

From this viewpoint, the hyper-articulation of the original metaphorical nucleus of the poem – which most of the critics identify as one of the principal faults of Fletcher’s poetic project – and the subsequent profusion of visual details of anatomic origin, might well be the poetic equivalent of the rhetoric of “wonder, rapture, [...] haste of enumeration” (23) of Renaissance narratives of discovery and exploration.

However, the essentially visible nature of the human body does not imply that it is immediately legible. In fact the wilderness of bodily landscape needs to be inscribed within a set of precise norms that make it possible for the reader to decode its unknown geography. The image of the island serves this purpose perfectly: the insular metaphor is aimed both at multiplying the possible allegorical pathways stemming from the Spenserian body-house association, and at translating bodily geography into natural images that evoke the suspended landscapes of pastoral poetry, the timeless scenarios of utopian literature, and the narratives of discovery. In this sense, like Shakespeare’s island in *The Tempest*, Fletcher’s “little isle” (V.2.1) is not a real and realistically defined place; rather, it is a “playground for fantasy [...] not confined within the cage of literal meaning” (Cobb, 32), but constitutionally open

to disclose “the realm of imagination” (32). However, Fletcher’s island is not “an alien habitat, [...] an unchartered territory” (De Sousa, 449): unlike Prospero’s island, which is “fearful [and] disorienting” for its inhabitants because it has no “place names” (449), Fletcher’s somatic isle represents the natural playground for the linguistic capacities of its explorers; the landscape of Fletcher’s island is in fact so meticulously marked by fixed linguistic signs that the observer is naturally forced to call it “home” (I.34.6). So the accuracy of Fletcher’s medical terminology is not simply a benchmark for the author’s scientific expertise; it also corresponds to a precise aesthetic aim: to represent the body as a wild land that shares the same language as that of its colonizers. The accuracy of the anatomical lexicon in *The Purple Island* is therefore a foucaultian “art of naming”, a strategy by which the poet triumphantly colonizes the island, defines the rules and limits of its “predictability”, and lastly exorcises its wilderness, transforming it into an entity that can be linguistically determined, then recognized, and finally controlled.

Encapsulated within the island metaphor and marked by the language through which Renaissance anatomy colonized it, the human body becomes a map that, a universal chart that, as suggested by Peter Charles Hoffer, makes order

[...] out of the sensory chaos of novel locations [...] reducing vast spaces to measured relationships, [...] transform[ing] raw sensations into precise linearity [...], [thus becoming an] intellectualized mastery of the natural world (Hoffer, 45).

Such universalism makes it readable as if it were a geographic chart or, more generally, “an Index” (I.43.6), that is, a “vast abstract theoretical edifice[...],” which “[tries] to explain all the variable and mutable structures of the world” (Hooper-Greenhill, 91). This is a typical trend of Elizabethan literature, in which, as demonstrated by M. H. Nicolson, the microcosmic tradition acquires a specific cartographic connotation (Elizabethan poets frequently describe man not only as a neoplatonic “epitome”, but also as a “map” of the universe), maybe by virtue of the primary role played by Britain in the process of early modern discovery and conquest. Such a trend is shared, among others, by John Donne, who expresses the nature of the bond between the human microcosm and the universe through the images of the “index” and of the “book” in one of his well known sermons: “The

world is a great volume, and man the Index of that Booke; Even in the Body of man, you may turne to the whole world" (Donne, 67). The reader of *The Purple Island* is therefore invited to scrutinize both the physical body of man, which functions as a universal map reflecting the condition of the whole humanity, and the textual body, which adopts the words and images of poetry to express the divine matrix inscribed in the entire universe:

Look as a scholar, who doth closely gather
Many large volumes in a narrow place;
So that great Wisdome all this All together
Confin'd into this Islands little space;
(I.48.1-4)

3. Circularity, shapes, and volumes.

What first strikes the reader's attention in Fletcher's depiction of the human body is the poet's insistence on its circular quality. This is no wonder: as suggested by M. H. Nicolson "[...] no metaphor was more cherished by Renaissance poets than that of the circle, which they inherited from Pythagoras and ancestors" (47). The body in *The Purple Island* reflects

[...] that perfection which is found in Spherical Figure, which God hath also pourtray'd in all his works, which observe the same exactly or come as near as their use will permit; as is seen particularly in the fabrick of Man's Body, his master-piece, whereof all the original parts have somewhat of the Spherical or Cylindrical Figure, which is the production of a Circle.¹

But the circle is much more than a recurring metaphor in Fletcher's poem; it is something on which the poet insists obsessively. The observer's eye is continuously attracted to curves, circular shapes and spherical volumes. This is the case of the world itself, which the poet describes as spherical even *before* its actual creation: the creation of the world – hinted at as "undigested Ball" (I.39.3) or "earthly ball" (V.5.2) – is a pure emanation from the God's mind, the "first and last" (I.33.5), who

¹ Havers, George (ed.), *A General Collection of Discourses of the Virtuosi of France*, London, Thomas Dring & John Starkey, 1673.

circularly epitomizes the beginning and the end of the whole process of creation. The world is therefore a spherical island that floats in a geometrically circular universe: this is similar to the image suggested by Frances Quarles, author of one of the poems contained in the preface to *The Purple Island*, who describes the “vast circumference” of the earthly island as “yet but a rolling stone”(I.6).

Similarly, the bodily island reflects the circular shape of the universe, fragmenting it into infinite atoms. The role of the heart in the fabric of the body, for instance, is defined by a series of images linked to that of the sun, which is itself circular. Therefore, since the sun is “the great worlds heart”, the heart becomes “the lesse worlds light”; as “the lesse world [...]” floats “in the calm pacifick seas” (I.45.1) of the universe, it is in the “circling profluence” (IV.16.3) of blood that

This Citie, like an Isle, might safely float:
In motion still (a motion fixt, not roving)
Most like to heav'n in his most constant
moving:
Hence most here plant the seat of sure and
active loving. (IV.16.4-7)

The shape of the cervical region, which is “fram'd like heaven, spherical” (V.4.3), suggests its structural harmony as well as the nature of the bond that ties all its components, which coexist in “sure and acting loving”. Among the cranial bones, for instance, the pericranial bones “the citie round *embrace*” (V.11.2), while the double layer of skin surrounding them “all the Citie round *enlaces*” (V.11.5). Furthermore in the eye the corpus vitreum “girts the Castle with a close *embrace*” (V.30.6), while a tissue as “slight, and thinne” (V.33.1) as gossamer “round enwraps the fountain Cristalline” (V.33.4). These examples show that the principle of unity regulating the whole body is the purest kind of mutual love, which is physically mirrored by an endless embrace between all the parts, whose intersections make it possible for the body to live as a perfectly self-regulating organism.

The mutual combining of all parts also becomes a creative principle: in fact it is thanks to the endless intersections among its components that the body acquires its tridimensional shape. What is striking in this regard is that Fletcher persists in exploiting the ideal of circularity even when depicting the *volumes* of the human

body, whose tridimensionality is in fact suggested by continual references to arches and domes. In the middle of the cervical region, for example, “two caverns stand, made like the Moon half spent” (V.14.2); the intersection between the two gives birth to a

Third cave [...] his sides combining
To th’other two, and from them hath his frame
(V.16.3-4);

Such a cave is sustained by a dome made of “three fair arches” (V.16.6), and overlooks a valley “where two round hills sit in this pleasant dale” (V.18.3). These verses clearly demonstrate that almost every aspect of Fletcher’s anatomy of the human body is pervaded by the principle – both cosmological and philosophical – of circularity.

Regulated by the so-called “ocularcentrism” (Hoffer, 4) of discovery, the rounded shapes of Fletcher’s bodily geography reveal an infinite variety of colours and luminous reflections. The colour “purple” itself, explicitly hinted at in the title of the poem, contains a myriad different nuances: blood vessels, for instance, first described as “azure chanel” (II.9.3), become rivers that

[...] with luke-warm waters di’d in porphyry
hue,
Sprinkle this crimson Isle with purple-colour’d
dew
(II.10.6-7)

The “skie-like blue” of the blood system is juxtaposed to the “milky wave” (II.12.7) of the nervous one, whose channels are as opalescent as “lacteall stones which heaven pave” (II.12.6). Moreover, the imperial dignity of the liver, “the Isles great Steward” (III.8.1) is underlined by the hyperarticulation of colour reflections: red is the colour of the liver’s garments (“In purple clad himself” – III.8.3); of its palace (“His porphyre house glitters in purple dye” – III.8.2), and of the invigorating liquid oozing from its many fountains.

Though of primary importance, blood red is not the unique colour in *The Purple Island*. As previously suggested, many are the subtones that mitigate the intensity of

the reds. The most pervasive of them is the neutral nuance of white. This is the colour of the skin, whose "lilie white" (II.17.1) is so delicate that it seems almost transparent. Such transparency is not only aesthetically pleasing; it is also functional, because

The inward disposition detecteth:
If white, it argues wet; if purple, fire;
If black, a heavie cheer, and fixt desire;
Youthfull and blithe, if suited in a rosie tire.
(II.17.4-7)

The readability of the body enabled by its whitish external surface inspires a voyeuristic play of transparency, which frequently titillates the observer's erotic imagination. It is no wonder that in many stanzas of *The Purple Island* the body is, if not explicitly compared, at least powerfully associated to a female entity, which sexually provokes the onlooker:

As when a virgin her snow-circled breast
Displaying hides, and hiding sweet displaies;
The greater segments cover'd, and the rest
The vail transparent willingly betraies;
Thus takes and gives, thus lends and borrows
light:
Lest eyes should surfet with too greedy sight,
Transparent lawns withhold, more to increase
delight.
(II.8.1-7)

Fletcher's verses reveal the same dialectics of "possession and feverish sexual excitement" (Sawday, 28) as can be traced in the Elegy XIX by John Donne, where the female body is explicitly compared to a "new-found land" (27). The human body is therefore the object of authentic sexual desire, fostered by broken visions ("Thus takes and gives, thus lends and borrows light"), aroused by transparencies ("The vail transparent willingly betrays"), and fed by the hope of its eventual, yet constantly deferred fulfilment. Fletcher's bodily isle ensnares the observer by its far away, yet tangible vision ("this fair Isle, sited so nearly neare" - I.38.1), an alien ("forraine home" - I.34.6), yet homely land ("a strange, though native coast" - I.34.6): a sexually attracting *terra incognita*, whose colonization requires the same "complex of anxiety,

voyeurism, [and to which] attractions can be traced in many “texts and images of early contact between European and Native” (Hart, 81).

4. A political *exemplum*

The body has traditionally always been described as something whose integrity must be defended against possible intrusions. From this viewpoint it is clear that one of the reasons why Renaissance anatomy was so revolutionary is that it gave full visibility to the human body by overcoming most of the physical and cultural boundaries that made it an “inviolable” entity. In coherence with the paradigm of impenetrability, the body in *The Purple Island* is “constructed around one overriding principle: it must be defended”. This explains why the anatomical cantos of the poem are so full of images of “battlements, moats, strategically placed mountains and so forth” (Healy, 345): they strongly defend the body from the dangers of possible external aggressions; but, be it noted, they do not keep the reader-anatomist’s eye from peering into it. In other words, as suggested by William Harvey, author of *De Motu Cordis* (1628), itself one of the most revolutionary among early modern anatomical treatises, the human body, though constitutionally impenetrable, is “permeable to vision” (Wilson, 71). The purple island

[...] in three regiments,
By three Metropolies is jointly sway’d;
Ord’ring in peace and warre their governments
With loving concord, and with mutuall aid:
The lowest hath the worst, but largest See;
The middle lesse, of greater dignitie:
The highest least, but holds the greatest
soveraigntie.

(II.14.1-7)

Of these three “metropolies” (i.e. the belly; the thorax; the cranium)

Deep in a vale doth that first province lie,
With many a citie grac’t, and fairly town’d;
And for a fence from forrain enmitie,
With five strong-built walls encompass
round;
Which my rude pencil will in limming stain;
A work more curious.

(II.15.1-6)

The constant menace of external attacks makes their perfect harmony dangerously fragile. To reduce the danger of foreign invasions they are surrounded by “five strong-built walls”, namely “the skinned, the fleshy panicle, and the fat, [...] the muscles of the belly-peece or the inner rimme of the belly” (II.15.4n). Similarly the city of Hepar stands on a hill, which grants it a position of “ocular” supremacy over the entire region of the belly. Nevertheless Hepar itself needs to be defended: this is the reason why it is characterized by

[...] sure barres, and strongest situation;
So never fearing foreiners invasion:
Hence are the walls slight, thinned; built but for
sight & fashion.

(III.5.5-7)

Moreover, the primary importance of the heart within the body implies an extremely complex system of defense: besides common barriers (skin and muscles), the heart can rely on “another Guard” (IV.4.2)

Built whole of massie stone, cold, drie, and
hard:
Which stretching round about his circling arms,
Warrants these parts from all exterior harms;
Repelling angry force, securing all alar’ms.

(IV.4.4-7)

Together with the sternum, other organic barriers that protect the heart are: the muscles of breath, which are described as a “Guard, both for defence, and respiration” (IV.10.2-3); the “border-city” of the midriff, which

[...] like a balk, with his crosse-built wall,
Disparte the terms of anger, and of loving
(IV.11.3-4);

and the pleura, a

[...] peculiar wall,

The whole precinct, and every part defending
(IV.14.1-2).

Sheltered by this complex system of walls and fortifications,

Kerdia seated lies, the centre deem'd
Of this whole Isle, and of this government:
If not the chiefest this, yet needfull'st seem'd,
Therefore obtain'd an equall distant seat,
More fitly hence to shed his life and heat,
And with his yellow streams the fruitfull Island
wet.

(IV.15.2-7)

But disruptive menaces might be external as well as internal: in fact the bodily microcosm is in constant danger of intestinal perturbations. From the city of Hepar, for example, stem “three pois'nous liquours” (IV.15.1), whose streams must be carefully regulated to avoid

The cloudie Isle with hellish dreeriment
Would soon be fill'd, and thousand fearfull
rumours:
Fear hides him here, lockt deep in earthy cell;
Dark, dolefull, deadly-dull, a little hell;
Where with him fright, despair, and thousand
horrors dwell.

(IV.18.3-7)

However, imbalance is only a theoretical threat: the efficient cooperation among the defense systems of the body reduces the risk of mutiny, allowing the island to float “in the calm pacifick seas” (I.45.1). Fletcher's island is therefore not only a self-sufficient organism: it is also an *exemplum* of political stability, communitarian cohesion, and benefic harmony. As such, it is also a somatic “utopia”, a

[...] perfect society where social cohesion and the common good are not imperilled by individual appetite (Davies, 19).

The political implications of Fletcher's allegory are striking: while depicting the anatomy of the human body in all its medical details, the poet also offers a political

paradigm of cohesion and stability to England, itself a *real* island, described by the poet Thomas Crashaw as a

[...] glad Isle [...]
Blest earth heuens bright Epitome,
Circled with pure refined glory (5-13).

The intersection between these two “insularities” – England as a real island; Fletcher’s as a metaphorical one – gives a strictly political value to the poet’s allegorical anatomy. The contemplation of the perfect self-sufficiency that characterizes the life of the physical body leads Fletcher to condemn those

Vain men, too fondly wise, who plough the
seas,
With dangerous pains another earth to find;
(I.36.1-2).

The desire to add

[...] new worlds to th’ old, and scorning ease,
(I.26.3)

is violently execrated by the poet because it is doubly dangerous: on the one hand it contradicts the implicit belief that insularism is a synonym of stability and peaceful coexistence; on the other the discovery and possession of “farre distant worlds”, defined as “needlesse sweating” (I.38.6) by the poet, leads men to self-oblivion (“You never find your selves; so lose ye more by getting” - I.38.7). Therefore

Let others trust the seas, dare death and hell,
Search either *Inde*, vaunt of their scarres and
wounds;
Let others their deare breath (nay silence) sell
To fools, and (swoln, not rich) stretch out their
bounds
By spoiling those that live, and in wronging
dead;
That they may drink in pearl, and couch their
head
In soft, but sleeplesse down; in rich, but
restlesse bed.

Oh let them in their gold quaff dropsies down;
Oh let them surfets feast in silver bright:
While sugar hires the taste the brain to drown,
And bribes of sauce corrupt false appetite,
His masters rest, health, heart, life, soul to sell.
Thus plentie, fulnesse, sicknesse, ring their knell:
Death weds and beds them; first in grave, and
then in hell.

(I.26-7)

Fletcher contrasts the disruptiveness of colonial *hybris* with a vision of integrity that finds its fulfillment in the “Island fair” (I.34.2):

Let me under some *Kentish* hill
Neare rowling *Medway* ‘mong my shepherd peers,
With fearlesse merrie-make, and piping still,
Securely passe my few and slow-pac’ d yeares:
While yet the great *Augustus* of our nation
Shuts up old *Janus* in this long cessation,
Strength’ning our pleasing ease, and gives us sure
vacation.

(I.28)

The insular metaphor of the body thus sustains an ideal of stability and evasion (“sure vacation”) which is both private, because it is rooted in the autobiographical experience of the author, and public, because it is only defending its own organic insular self-sufficiency that England will be able to maintain its status as God’s “Viceroy” (I.44.5). What emerges from the “fantastic voyage” into the hidden geography of the human body accomplished by Phineas Fletcher is therefore the idea that in the Elizabethan age the human body is a problematic icon, an improbable organic whole where a complex variety of interrelated discourses – subjective, scientific, poetic and politic – can coexist and influence one another.

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¹ All quotations from *The Purple Island* are taken from: Fletcher, Phineas, *The Purple Island*, online version, Renaissance Editions, University of Oregon, 2003 (weblink: <http://www.uoregon.edu/~rbear/island/pintroduction.html>)