

## ROUNABOUT

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IN THIS WHIMSICAL PIECE, **PETER BENZ** DRAWS A PARALLEL BETWEEN THE HUMBLE ROUNABOUT AND THE PROMISED LAND OF ANCIENT FOLKLORES.





Royal Ascot



Renfrew Road



Ladenburg



Kowloon Tong

*“If you want to build a ship, don’t drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work and give orders. Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.”*

– Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Wisdom of the Sands*

The Blue Flower is one of the central motifs of nineteenth century European Romanticism, first introduced by German poet Novalis (1772–1801) in his unfinished novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. It stands for a somewhat undefined, yet most powerful yearning for an unreachable ideal, be it an object, person or state of mind. It is the nature of the Blue Flower that it may well not even exist; yet the longing for it grows so powerful, it

will drain the yearner of any happiness and drag him into a quest that can easily cost him his mental or spiritual sanity or even life – and therefore makes for a good story.

Why exactly was a blue flower chosen as a symbol remains unclear. It may simply be a reference to a small flower with blue petals known in Europe as the Forget-me-not; it could represent a rather codified allegory for the Virgin Mary, who is traditionally

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depicted in a blue overcoat; or it could have a personal metaphor for Novalis’s beloved fiancée who died at very young age.

In any case – as is the way for many a symbols – after its introduction to the canon, the Blue Flower developed

its own history, re-emerging in a variety of arts and media over the time, often – as may be expected – in the context of a young man desperately longing – purely platonically of course – for a young woman who is beyond his social reach. Most notably, the Blue Flower was rather



Fotan



Hok Tau

well received in Japan, where it recently had a couple of appearances in Japanese manga, usually in a context of psychedelic drugs.

Obviously motifs like the Blue Flower are fairly common throughout human history and cultures: the Golden Fleece, the Holy Grail, the Ark of the Covenant and so on are objects that inspire – for a variety of reasons – great longing. Yet they can only be

obtained by worthy aspirants, of which there are naturally not many, if any.

But it is not objects alone that may develop such a mythical aura; places also have this power. The Blue Flower supposedly grows somewhere in the south, in the “Land of the Blue Flower”; thus inspiring the great Goethe to search for it in Italy. The biblical Garden of Eden would also be such a place, but more earthly places like Atlantis (ancient Greece), the Land of Cockaigne (medieval France), El Dorado (Colombia), Shambhala (Himalayas), or Mount Penglai (China) would also be on this list.

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France



Schaffhausen



Cheung Kong Temple

What all these places have in common – apart from their ideal nature and impossibility as a destination – are the very sketchy descriptions of their actual appearances. All of these places are usually described as beautiful, peaceful, golden, or plentiful; often they are associated with the states of mind of their inhabitants – well nourished, deeply satisfied, happy – but what they really look like remains unsaid.

The few characteristics that are mentioned, however are surprisingly similar: many of these mythical places are imagined to have a circular, concentric ground plan, often emphasised by some special feature in its centre such as the Tree of Life, the Fountain of Youth, or a Golden Palace. Almost all of these places are described as islands, if not in a sea, then at least in the sense of an island of lushness within an otherwise harsh environment. And of course, this island in all cases is surrounded by not just an ordinary sea, but by exceptionally dangerous waters – monster-infested, with strong currents and

high waves ... after all, inaccessibility is the whole point of the place.

It may come as a surprise, yet the urban equivalent for these mythical places is the humble roundabout, that traffic island we all have come across somewhere, but have never set foot on.

In my hometown, a pair of rabbits had been abandoned on such a roundabout close to the city centre. Within the shortest time, that roundabout was known as “Bunny Island,” that is until the point when the rapidly expanding rabbit population started becoming a traffic hazard and was systematically made extinct – not unlike Atlantis.

Thinking about it, the correlations are quite apparent: the round shape, the slightly raised curbs, as if floating on the tarmac, the traffic roaring around it, the lack of any access. Even the vegetation of roundabouts is often particularly lush as the municipal services can't be bothered to keep it under close watch all the time.

True, not many people yearn to be on a roundabout, there are not many reasons why one would want to be. After all roundabouts are usually mostly empty, except for the occasional hideous sculpture dropped there by some well-meaning city-beautifier. They are surrounded by heavy traffic, they are probably loud, clouded in fumes, and are exposed to any kind of heavy weather. They offer no distraction, no entertainment.

Yet ... roundabouts do have the potential to be the Eye of the Storm: in the midst of turmoil, they are havens of remoteness, close, yet so far; completely obvious, but secluded; totally defined in their entity, but still ambiguous as spaces. In a more spiritual way, roundabouts are spaces thrown back onto themselves. They have no reason to them, except to be there. Roundabouts are the ultimate contemplative space and I am truly convinced:

If ever there was – or will be – a Blue Flower it would surely grow on a roundabout – and for that reason will most likely go unnoticed by mankind. ■