

“The West Pole Observer”
Chapter 1

Introduction to The West Pole.

Hidden in Plain Sight.

I will not be the first one going on a journey to a place that does not exist. In fact, hundreds before me traveled somewhere non-existent and even came up with a word for it – they called it ‘discovery’. Do you know that one of the meanings of Old French *descovrir* was to ‘betray and reveal someone’s secrets’? The history of this planet was moved by an army of professional betrayers, sailing in storms, dragging their feet through thick mud, hunting for places they could unveil, pin down and proudly put on a map. Soon enough the Earth was almost naked, with no places ‘covered’ to hide the secrets, and only rare bushy patches shading its most intimate parts.

If you want to hide something, put it in plain sight.

Official science assumes that Earth has two poles: the North Pole and South Pole. They are accompanied by their shadow twins – Northern and Southern Magnetic Poles – with which the poles should not be confused. Ever since the early Pythagoreans conceived Earth as a spherical celestial body that rotates around its axis, philosophers needed to imagine the poles too. Otherwise, where would the axis puncture the hard shell of the planet? And although the poles seem to us as indispensable and obvious as continents, seas and oceans, they, in fact, are surrounded by the sufficient amount of paradoxes to be considered an utter mystery rather than a common knowledge.

The first paradox of the Poles is that almost two thousand years passed between the moment humans had imagined them and the first time they actually set foot on one of the poles. However, during this long period, the imaginary status of the poles did not undermine their geographical supremacy. They were not only present on the maps, but also served as a major coordinate for geographical systems, the point where all the meridians, stud with beads of toponyms, lines and hatches, meet and tie into a tight and pretty belly button of the planet.

The second paradox of the poles is that although cartography requires precision and exactitude, the position of the poles were never fixed. Following the Earth axis that oscillates in constant motion, the poles float and wander in a slow dance called *Chandler wobble*. However, to soothe their anxieties the scholars came up with fixed positions for cartographic poles and nailed them down, at least on paper.

The third and, certainly, not the last paradox of the poles is that while being on the Pole you are neither present in any particular part of the world, nor are you present in any of the existing time zones. The visitors of the pole are free to set the time themselves.

The utter ambiguity of the poles did not prevent (but rather encouraged) many men from losing their lives during numerous attempts to reach and conquer the poles. Nor did it prevent the poles from finding their way to every atlas hanging on every wall of every geography class room of every school on planet Earth. The history of the poles proves the determination with which human beings decide to believe in something they've never seen.

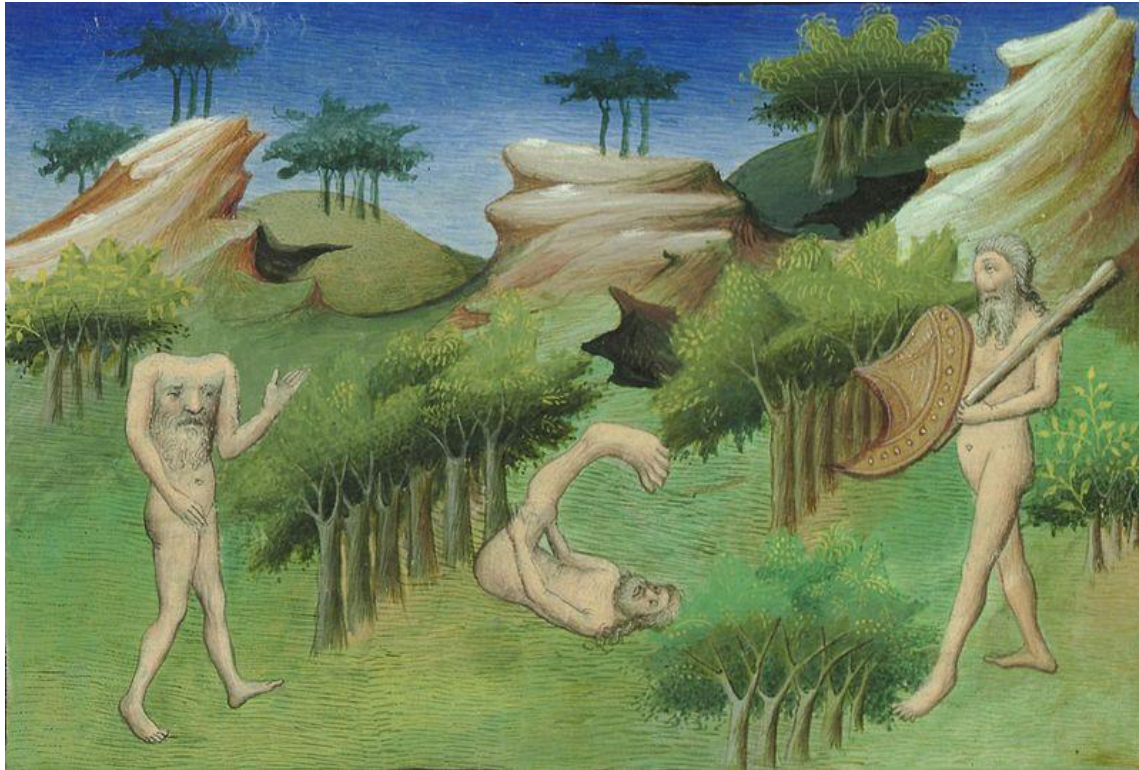
I still remember the first and only time I was put into a state of hypnosis. The therapist asked me to close my eyes and murmured: "You now enter hypnosis, the space where anything can be anything". Now I think that the poles must be the sites of collective geographical hypnosis. Their constant oscillation, both physical and metaphorical, creates the liminal space. It is the gap between the reality of human presence on one of the poles and the fiction of a map designating the approximate location of a pole that actually does not correspond to the 'real' one. When falling, accidentally or intentionally, in this liminal, in-between space, people can easily disappear. The remnants of some expeditions to the poles were never found or found hundreds of kilometers away from their ultimate destination.

I believe that the poles are the perfect disruptors of the geographical order. As the utter rebels against exactitude, they still remain one of the major constants of geography. My fascination with the poles makes me think about them constantly, imagine them and eventually, I know, will push me into a trap that I myself have set.

On the Importance of Having (keeping) Secrets.

The Age of Discoveries had unveiled too many secrets. The darkness of the Medieval Western mind populated distant lands with monstrous, bizarre creatures: sciapods, jumping on their giant single feet; headless blemmyes staring at you with a pair of eyes fixed in the middle of their chests; mouthless astomies feeding on scents of flowers. All of them and many more vanished, killed by the sheer power of sight. Columbus was disappointed to report that he had observed no monsters on his overseas travels. However, he found something that was far more precious: lands full of valuable resources that could be sliced, chopped, cut, grinded and extracted. He saw it with his own eyes! The secrets

were betrayed again. Discoveries kill monsters (just to give rise to new ones).



Livre de merveilles, Paris, circa 1410.

This and other paintings were accompanying the West Pole archive as clippings and postcards. Here and further the names of the original works are provided by the editors.

Seeing the landscape soon was equal to *knowing* it. Maps became the primary source of geographical knowledge – they informed the gaze and shaped the understanding of how the world is built. Europe was on the top and in the middle of the world and that was only natural! With every next expedition the maps were elaborated even more, so they could provide the most detailed impression of a landscape to a person back home. Maps severed from landscape could be rigorously studied in the peaceful solitude of a study. Thus, the cognition of the world was happening mainly in the heads, not in the fields. Instead of looking at

the world, scholars looked at their maps. This inward, atomized gaze shaped Western geography as we know it. It relies on images and observation, it trusts maps and reason, it respects borders and eliminates gray areas and white spots.



The Geographer, Johannes Vermeer, 1668–1669.

The desire to ‘look into’ the landscape and to control it by this look, led to the invention of multiple prosthetic eyes. They help to transcend space and to see details of landscapes as remote from humans as other planets.

*I wonder – if humans have seen it all,
is there anything left to be discovered?*

A discovery of this sort could be a challenging exercise in developing the capacity to see beyond what’s already there. The poles came to my

mind first when I tried to think of something that has not yet been discovered. Certainly I'm not speaking here about THE poles, the ones you will see on the pages of an atlas if you open it right now. I'm speaking of the places that possess the same paradoxical qualities and character as the poles do. They oscillate, they are open for interpretation, their landscape refuses to be fully defined and will never be entirely comprehensible. I refer to them as the sites of collective geographical hypnosis.

The West Pole, for example. You could say that there simply is no such thing. The abundance of books, films, monuments and provincial museums devoted to the pioneers of North and South Poles, seems to prove that two of those places must exist somewhere on the very top and very bottom of our blue marble. At the same time, not a single book or a museum has The West Pole plaque hanging next to their entrance. No one has ever *seen* the West Pole! However, I want to remind you of the paradox of the poles: to be 'there' they don't even have to be there.

I do believe that the West Pole should be somewhere out there, oscillating between North and South, ever changing and always vacant for fantasies, absurd theories and attempts of those who wish to believe in it. Simply put, the West Pole exists for those who want it to exist. It can be anywhere.

Am I going to be another lost soul in search of the pole? Do I want to betray and unveil another secret with my *dis*-covery? No, not at all. I just want to know the secret, not reveal it. I will leave it masterfully hidden in plain sight, where everyone can see it.



West Pole Landscape..

I first recognized its presence on one of the images I took while cycling through the national park of a country I will refer to as “N.” I was mesmerized by the weird, otherworldly beauty of the landscape I photographed. Yet other people looking at it, especially those who have lived in N. for all of their life, seemed puzzled by my fascination. They were persuaded that what I looked at was merely a desolate landscape with scarce shrubs scattered on tops of artificially shaped hills. They claimed: “There is simply no nature in N!”

That’s when I thought for the first time – the West Pole must be here, right in front of me. The liminal space, the paradox. It could only be sensed but never seen. I wondered if the land of N. that was measured in great detail and investigated far and wide, masterfully constructed and terraformed, could still hide secrets?