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Literary Cartography: Space,
Representation, and Narrative

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**Literary Cartography:
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In his magisterial *Theory of the Novel*, Georg Lukács contrasts the closed or integrated civilization of the epic world and the fragmented, modern world of the novel. The former hails from that "happy age" when "the starry sky is the map of all possible paths [...] The world is wide and yet it is like a home" (29). This sense of being at home, of a harmony between one's innermost self and the cosmos, obviates the need for philosophy, according to Lukács. "For what is the task of philosophy if not to draw that archetypal map?" (29). On the other hand, the modern condition, whose representative form is the novel, is marked by a split between interior and exterior, a thoroughgoing sense of disorientation; it is "a world abandoned by God," and is characterized by a "transcendental homelessness," a feeling of *angst* that

Heidegger would associate with the *unheimlich*, usually translated “uncanny” but which (of course) also means “un-home-ly” as Heidegger makes clear in this line from *Being and Time*: “In anxiety one feels ‘uncanny’ [*unheimlich*]. [...] But here ‘uncanniness’ also means ‘not-being-at-home’ [*das Nicht-zuhause-sein*]” (Heidegger 233). This uncanny homelessness implies a spiritual and a physical sense of being lost (or “not at home in the world”). The age of the novel thus requires a map, a figurative way to connect one’s self to one’s world. And that is precisely what the novel becomes, a cartographic practice in which the writer produces a figurative or allegorical image of the world and one’s place in it. Literary cartography.

Fredric Jameson famously proposed cognitive mapping as a strategy for dealing with the problem of situating oneself within a complex and seemingly unrepresentable social totality. Jameson uses the term specifically in connection to the postmodern condition, globalization, and late capitalism, but it is clear that his model is not limited to these areas; indeed, Jameson has conceded that “cognitive mapping” is a modernist strategy and “code word” for a new kind of class consciousness. Jameson’s model, although derived from Kevin Lynch’s *Image of the City* and Althusser’s revised notion of ideology (as an imaginary

solution to real problems), is largely rooted in a theory of narrative: narrative as a socially symbolic act, to use his own formulation in *The Political Unconscious*.

Jameson's discussions of figuration and allegory makes this plain enough, but - extrapolating from Jameson (and others) - I would argue that *narrative* itself is a form of mapping. Narrative is a fundamental way in which humans make sense of, or give form to, the world. In that sense, narrative operates much as maps do, to organize the data of life into recognizable patterns with it understood that the result is a fiction, a mere representation of space and place, whose function is to help the viewer or mapmaker, like the reader or writer, make sense of the world. Literary cartography, as I call it, connects spatial representation and storytelling. If narrative has always been a way of orienting ourselves, both in the relatively stable semantic universe of Lukács's closed civilizations or in the Quixotic modern world where the center does not always hold, then - in an era of globalization - the cartographic function of literature may be even more essential to the individual and collective reconquest of the *Lebenswelt*.

In his handsome little book, *Maps of the Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer*, Peter Turchi compares all writing to mapmaking, but he is especially interested in

the ways that creative writers “map” their world. “To ask for a map is to say, ‘Tell me a story’” (11). Storytelling is indeed a way of mapping, of orienting oneself and one’s readers in space, in an intelligible array. The figural use of the verb “orient,” which once meant “to turn towards the east,” is itself a sign of the interplay between writing and mapping. The storyteller, like the mapmaker, determines the space to be represented, selects the elements to be included, draws the scale, and so on. In producing the narrative, the writer also produces a map of the space, connecting the reader to a totality formed by the narrative itself. In a sense, all storytelling is a kind of mapping.

It is not necessary that this literary cartography be limited to the modern or postmodern world, although the conditions arising from modern or postmodern developments might make a more expressly cartographic project more desirable (or even necessary). As Lukács notes, “The epic gives form to a totality of life that is rounded from within; the novel seeks, by giving form, to uncover and construct a concealed totality of life” (60). That is, the integrated civilization of the epic could be mapped as well, but it was viewed as a relatively complete map, a world-picture that made sense. Modernity, at least as

understood by this tradition, occasions a breakdown in the sense-making systems that had come before. For instance, Foucault notes how the Renaissance episteme crumbles in the era of *Don Quixote*, which stands at the threshold of modernity.

Don Quixote is the negative of the Renaissance world; writing had ceased to be the prose of the world; resemblances and signs had dissolved their former alliance; similitudes have become deceptive and verge upon the visionary or madness; things still remain stubbornly within their ironic identity: they are no longer anything but what they are; words wander off on their own, without content, without resemblance to fill their emptiness; they are no longer the marks of things; they lie sleeping between the pages of books and covered with dust. [...] The written word and things no longer resemble one another. And between them, Don Quixote wanders off on his own. (47-48)

The breakdown in legibility in Foucault's analysis might be likened to the spatial confusion attending the world that no longer makes inherent sense.

Undoubtedly, the ancient world knew spatial confusion and disorientation as well. It's hero is, after all, Odysseus, who wanders lost and confused for ten long years.

But, notwithstanding the wanderings of individual mariners, the ancient world had a wholeness or closed-ness (in Lukacs's view) that made it inherently "mappable" in the minds of its people, whether through metaphysics, politics, or geography. As Jameson notes in his reading of Joyce, "*The Odyssey* [as the ur-text of *Ulysses*] serves as a *map*" ("*Modernism*," 64), a closed Mediterranean universe in which all the necessary features are charted in advance; the experience of reading becomes the same as map reading - including, I might add (*pace* Joseph Frank), due respect for the *spatial form* of the work. With the modern condition, in contrast, the totality is not given; narrative does not simply reveal the space, like naively mimetic maps tried to do. Rather, modern narrative - and the novel is the modern narrative form *par excellence* - must project and construct a totality that is not given.

Jameson's digression on cartography in his original "*Postmodernism*" essay is instructive in this regard. From the precartographic itineraries of individual travelers, ancient maps were often merely "diagrams organized around the still subject-centered or existential journey of the traveler, along which various significant key features are marked - oases, mountain ranges, rivers, monuments, and the like" (52). The medieval discovery of the compass and the

use of instruments like the sextant introduce a new dimension: "the relationship to the totality [...] At this point, cognitive mapping in a broader sense comes to require the coordination of existential data (the empirical position of the subject) with unlived, abstract conceptions of the geographic totality" (52). Finally, with the development of the globe and the Mercator projection, "representational codes" intervene to disrupt the practices of "naively mimetic conceptions of mapping," as "it becomes clear that there can be no true maps (at the same time it becomes clear that there *can* be scientific progress, or better still a dialectical advance, in the various historical moments of mapmaking)" (51-52).

Returning to "narrative" *per se*, then, one might also trace advances from the straightforward "truth-telling" testimony of individual eyewitnesses based on their (necessarily limited) empirical evidence to a broader conception of the individual's relationship to the unlived totality, and eventually to a conception of representational art itself, which must explore other fictional, perhaps fanciful, techniques in order to achieve its aims. With Mercator's distorted map, the exaggerated representation of space (for instance, making Greenland as big as South America) serves the practical purpose of

helping to navigate the actual space better, particularly with respect to determining longitude (the great terror of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century navigation). "True maps" of the old, mimetic sort, are less useful. Of course, all maps are fictions; even Borges's fabled imperial cartographers, who made a map coextensive with the space it purported to represent, were unable to create "true maps." But with modern cartography, the fictions may also be necessary to the functionality.

In literary narrative, the writer maps the world in a similar manner, often coordinating the existential data of the individual writer's or protagonist's experience with the unknowable and seemingly unrepresentable (social) totality. For example, elsewhere I've noted how Melville developed his literary techniques in *Moby-Dick* partly in response to his frustration over the limitations of his personal narrative form in such early works as *Typee* or *Redburn*. "Truth," for Melville required a different approach, one grounded precisely in geography - in representing "spaces that before were blank." The artful presentation and representation of "true places" requires a projection beyond the bounds of simpler testimonial writing.

Projection, in literature as in cartography, allows one to make sense of, or give form to, a world in order to make it legible. I think here of Oedipa Maas's line in Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*: "Shall I project a world? If not project then at least flash some arrow on the dome to skitter among constellations and trace out your Dragon, Whale, Southern Cross. Anything might help" (81-82). As this suggests, a *constellation* - imaginary lines drawn among stars to make sense of the skies (Lukács's "starry sky is a map"?) - is another apt figure for this narrative process, one which Walter Benjamin has also employed in his work on the Baroque.

If the writer is a mapmaker, the mapmaker is also a writer. In *La géocritique mode d'emploi* (or "A User's Guide to Geocriticism"), Bertrand Westphal and his research team emphasize the inter-relations of writing and geography, using the term "geocriticism" to label a set of critical practices involving the spaces of literature, real and imagined. As Westphal puts it [and I translate],

Literary space, in the end, is a real, material, geographical place, imagined and represented by language. The vocation of geocriticism is to interpret the manifestations of this spatial imagination, at the intersection of geography and

literature. Geography is a form of writing as the suffix “-graphy” attests. It acts on different modes of the same discourse of space, the great difference being that the referent of the geographer is supposed to be real, whereas that of the writer is fictitious or functions as such. Geography is also a *discourse* of space; through its thought and speech, it creates or invents spaces by describing and differentiating them. It is a mode of understanding the human cosmos, of appropriating the world through language” (x).

A geocritical approach to narrative is not quite the same as recognizing the ways in which narrative is a fundamentally cartographic activity, but recognizing the ways in which narrative and spatial analyses overlap is helpful.

A number of critics have been investigating such matters in recent years. My discussion of literary cartography owes much to Jameson’s work, especially his project of cognitive mapping, but focusing particularly on the way in which *narratives* project and represent spaces. Postcolonial critics have long been involved in what Edward Said called, in *Culture and Imperialism*, “a geographical inquiry into historical experience” (7), making up for the lack of traditional criticism: As Said complains, “most

cultural historians, and certainly all literary scholars have failed to remark the *geographical* notation, the theoretical mapping and charting of territory that underlies Western fiction" (58). Franco Moretti's work on the *Atlas of the European Novel* in the nineteenth century has revealed how, for instance, the Paris of Balzac or the London of Dickens is mapped in those works. And Moretti's more recent use of narrative maps to chart the development of novelistic chronotopes offers an interesting - if somewhat bizarre - new way to perform literary history. Eric Bulson, in his *Novels, Maps, Modernity: The Spatial Imagination, 1850-2000*, examines how writers used actual maps and guidebooks in developing new literary techniques as foundation for realist, modernist, and postmodernist orientations. And so on. Literary criticism, history, and theory are becoming much more interested in the ways in which space and narrative interact.

An approach to narrative that addresses or emphasizes its literary cartography thus enables us to ask different questions, explore different territories of culture. I believe, with Jameson, that the postmodern condition makes such an approach all the more desirable or necessary, since the hyper-hurly-burly of a world in which whole economies can be threatened by the click of a mouse makes the

representation of the global, social space both less feasible and more necessary than ever. As in other epochs, narratives will be ways in which such a mapping will happen, and a criticism (perhaps *geo-criticism*) oriented to that end will be best suited to read the new maps produced.

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