The Mapmaker's Conundrum

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A few years back, when Google's various cartographic apps became ubiquitous, discussion groups were flooded with accounts of strange anomalies. Buildings, streets or, on occasion, entire cities disappeared; coastlines and mountain ranges warped; highways kinked and buckled; giant lacunae sprung up, sinkholes yawning from innocuous fields and deserts. The cause, of course, was glitch-ridden software and faulty collating techniques. But to dismiss this as a uniquely twenty-first-century phenomenon, a digital quirk, would be to overlook an essential feature of all maps: namely, that they don't work, and never have. Pick up any textbook on cartography, and the very first paragraph will invariably remind you that the Earth is spherical but paper is flat; and, as J. A. Steers points out in his 1927 *Introduction to the Study of Map Projections*, just 'as it is impossible to make a sheet of paper rest smoothly on a sphere, so it is impossible to make a correct map on a sheet of paper'. Maps are not *copies*; they are *projections*, 'means' (Steers again) 'of representing the lines of latitude and longitude of the globe on a flat sheet of paper'.

Now, this is where the problems start. Projections are not neutral, natural or 'given': they are constructed, configured, underpinned by various — and quite arbitrary — conventions. When drawing up a map, a cartographer must choose between zenithal, gnomonic, stereographic, orthographic, globular, conical, cylindrical or sinusoidal modes of projection — each of which brings with it as many disadvantages as benefits. In world maps drawn using Mercator's projection, the one that served as the standard in atlases for centuries, the equatorial areas pan out fine, but the map starts to distend enormously as it nears the polar regions, stretching Greenland out until it looks bigger than Africa. The poles themselves cannot be represented at all: to depict these you must rotate the image round through ninety degrees — the Transverse Mercator projection does this — but then another pair of points (on the equator) undergo infinite distortion and become invisible. Another option is to replace Mercator's projection with a polar gnomonic one — but this merely makes the rest of the world distend and drop off the horizon.

No wonder, then, that artists from Leonardo and Dürer to Boetti and Ruscha have been fascinated by maps: the cartographer's problem is the draughtsman's problem, the problem of perspective. Holbein understood this perfectly. In his famous painting The Ambassadors, two statesmen stand surrounded by cartographic paraphernalia: globes, a torquetum, a quadrant and so on. Yet occupying the space between the two men on the carpet is a proto-Googlish blur, an anamorphic zone in which the entire image goes all 'wrong'. As visitors to London's National Gallery discover, when they move round to the painting's side, this zone resolves itself into the image of a skull, which looms into focus at the very moment the men and their instruments melt away into an imbroglio of random marks. Thus Holbein confronts us with the futility not only of wealth and status, but also of perspective itself: beyond a certain limit, both are doomed to formlessness, to vanishing — to the skull and, by extension, to death.

Melvile's Polynesian harpoonist Queequeg seems to understand this too. Already covered in a cosmic tribal map (his entire body is tattooed with curves and lines that form 'a complete theory of the heavens and the earth'), he copies this same map onto a coffin lid — or rather, since his body

is curved, lanky and generally three-dimensional while the coffin lid is flat, he projects it. Once more, it's death, or its marker, that provides the surface across which this map-projection finds its form. Readers of Moby-Dick will recall that the coffin makes a comeback at the novel's end, when, after the Pequod's wreck, it provides Ishmael with a life raft upon which to float, effectively conveying the text of Moby-Dick to us (had Ishmael, our narrator, not survived, there'd be no narrative to hear, no book to read). This harks back to the novel's opening vignette, a short description of an archivist who, with a handkerchief 'mockingly embellished with all the gay flags of all the known nations of the world … loved to dust his old grammars; it somehow mildly reminded him of his mortality'. Once more, a global cartographic motif (flags and nations) joins one of death (dust and mortality); and, just as Queequeg's tattoo-map is also a synecdoche for knowledge in its entirety — it is, Melville informs us, 'a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth' — so this man's dusty action, the purveying of lexicons and dictionaries, stands in for the bearing of all archives, of all books. The entire domain of literature, it seems, is tied up in the question of the map.

Moby-Dick is, of course, a political novel, concerned as it is with the trajectories of global commerce, zones and strata of dominion and power. And, to state the even more obvious, The Ambassadors is a political painting: what are Holbein's figures doing if not carving up the continents and oceans into dominions, empires? Mapping always, at some level, involves violence. The recent work of Eyal Weizman on Israeli military strategy gives countless examples of Arab territories being bulldozed, ploughed through and reshaped until they conform to the occupier's cartographic vision. Brian Friel's 1980 play Translations paints the Maps Section of the British Army as the real villains of the Irish occupation, since in anglicizing local names they voided the landscape of its history and legends. Yet if maps serve the oppressor, they can also play a role in the armoury of the oppressed. For every 'official' map, there are two, five, twenty possible counter-maps. In the Surrealist world map of 1929, countries are reallotted sizes concomitant with their importance to the overall Surrealist project. England, consequently, disappears, as does America (with the exception of Alaska), while Mexico, Peru and Easter Island assume giant proportions. The Situationists, for their part, redrew the map of France, replacing French names with Algerian ones. In instances like these, map-making, far from fixing a reality, becomes a wild proliferation of alternative ones, of possible worlds each one as faulty and fantastic as the next…

And yet, explicitly or not, all maps carry with them a certain claim: that this one is somehow truer than the others with which it competes; that it depicts a territory in a more subtle, penetrative, intimate or nuanced way. The fantasy that lies behind cartography is that of seeing space deeply, totally and really — either from its outside or else from some buried, hidden inner vantage point that commands all sightlines and allows no enclave, pocket or aporia to elude its visual field and slink away into the dark. This is the fantasy of Kafka's molelike creature in The Burrow, who, having charted every chamber, passageway and trapdoor of his large and sprawling subterranean territory, realizes that even this is not enough: he has to go outside the burrow, and observe this entire world from just beyond its borders (which, of course, lays him vulnerable to the very predators he built the burrow to avoid). This is also the pathology that afflicts Fred Madison in David Lynch's masterpiece Lost Highway, leading him to break into and film his home and, ultimately, himself, from beyond the boundary line of both of these — an act, of course, that is both physically and ontologically impossible, that can, and does, lead only to psychosis.

Cartopsychosis: I propose that this is the truth not only of geography but also of identity tout court — that is, of Being. We live in the gaps: the oblique, morphing interzones between perspectival regimes that themselves are anything but stable; the mangled and unkeystoned buckle-fields where grids unravel into random strings; regions whose real capitals and landmarks are Novaya Zemlya, Fata Morgana, Hillingar and Castles-in-the-Air; a territory whose true north, or

degree zero, if it could be shown (which it can't), would take the form of a kind of pregnant invisibility. Which is why, for me, the only genuinely accurate map ever drawn is the one Lewis Carroll gives us in The Hunting of the Snark. Addressing his crew (all of whose titles, as though to emphasize their status as Beings, start with the letter B), the vessel's Bellman rhetorically — and brilliantly — asks:

> What's the good of Mercator's North Poles and Equators,
>
> Tropics, Zones, and Meridian Lines?' So the Bellman would
>
> cry: and the crew would reply, 'They are merely conventional
>
> signs!'

The Bellman then pulls out — four whole decades before Malevich, it should be noted — a piece of paper, white as an albino whale, on which precisely Nothing is depicted. And the crew erupts in jubilation: no cartographic fools, they understand the huge importance of the document they've just been gifted:

> 'Other maps are such shapes,
>
> with their islands and capes!
>
> But we've got our brave captain to thank'
>
> (So the crew would protest)
>
> 'that he's bought us the best —
>
> A perfect and absolute blank!'