

Atlas of the European novel

1800-1900

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See, my son,
time here turns into space

RICHARD WAGNER, *Parsifal*

1. 'General, you make use of maps...'

An atlas of the novel. Behind these words, lies a very simple idea: that geography is not an inert container, is not a box where cultural history 'happens', but an active force, that pervades the literary field and shapes it in depth. Making the connection between geography and literature explicit, then – mapping it: because a map is precisely that, a connection made visible – will allow us to see some significant relationships that have so far escaped us.

Such a literary geography, however, can refer to two very different things. It may indicate the study of *space in literature*; or else, of *literature in space*. In the first case, the dominant is a fictional one: Balzac's *version* of Paris, the Africa of colonial romances, Austen's redrawing of Britain. In the second case, it is real historical space: provincial libraries of Victorian Britain, or the European diffusion of *Don Quixote* and *Buddenbrooks*. The two spaces may occasionally (and interestingly) overlap, but they are essentially different, and I will treat them as such: fictional space in the first two chapters of the book, and historical space in the third one.

Still, the distinction between the two spaces does not affect the research method, which is the same everywhere, and is based on the systematic use of maps. Of maps, I mean, not as metaphors, and even less as ornaments of discourse, but as analytical tools: that dissect the text in an unusual way, bringing to light relations that would otherwise remain hidden. A good map is worth a thousand words, cartographers say, and they are right: because it *produces* a thousand words:

it raises doubts, ideas. It poses new questions, and forces you to look for new answers.

Maps, then, as intellectual tools. But in what sense? Thus Charles Sanders Peirce, in 1906:

Come on, my Reader, and let us construct a diagram to illustrate the general course of thought; I mean a System of diagrammatization by means of which any course of thought can be represented with exactitude. 'But why do that, when the thought itself is present to us?' Such, substantially, has been the interrogative objection raised by more than one or two superior intelligences, among whom I single out an eminent and glorious General.

Recluse that I am, I was not ready with the counter-question, which should have run, 'General, you make use of maps during a campaign, I believe. But why should you do so, when the country they represent is right there?'

And after a brilliant exchange where the eminent General is thoroughly routed, here are Peirce's conclusions:

Well, General [...], if I may try to state the matter after you, one can make exact experiments upon uniform diagrams; and when one does so, one must keep a bright lookout for unintended and unexpected changes thereby brought about in the relations of different significant parts of the diagram to one another. Such operations upon diagrams, whether external or imaginary, take the place of the experiments upon real things that one performs in chemical and physical research. Chemists have ere now, I need not say, described experimentation as the putting of questions to Nature. Just so, experiments upon diagrams are questions put to the Nature of the relations concerned.¹

Questions put to the form of the novel, and its internal relations: this is what my maps try to do. And they really often felt like so many experiments: some easier, some harder, and all of them reeming with variables that I kept changing and changing (which characters should I map? which narrative moments? which elements of the context?) until I felt I had found a good answer. An answer, an image – a *pat-tern* that made me see a book, or a genre, in a fresh and interesting way: and whose clarity, I soon realized, was directly proportional to the simplicity and abundance of the data on which it was based. The

¹ 'Prolegomena to an Apology for Pragmatism', *The Monist*, 16, January 1906, pp. 492–3.

'experiment' succeeded, in other words, thanks to abstraction and quantification: consistent, wide series, where the final significance of a form was always greater than the sum of the separate texts. It's one of the frontiers of critical work: the challenge of quantity – of the 99 percent of all published literature that disappears from sight, and that nobody wants to revive. This enlargement of the literary field, produced by the internal logic of geographical inquiry, took me entirely by surprise: the new method was demanding new data – but those data did not exist yet, and I was not sure how to find them, and the present book takes only a few steps in the new direction. But it's a wonderful challenge, for all cultural historians.

In the meantime, what do literary maps allow us to see? Two things, basically. First, they highlight the *ortgebunden*,² place-bound nature of literary forms: each of them with its peculiar geometry, its boundaries, its spatial taboos and favorite routes. And then, maps bring to light the *internal* logic of narrative: the semiotic domain around which a plot coalesces and self-organizes. Literary form appears thus as the result of two conflicting, and equally significant forces: one working from the outside, and one from the inside. It is the usual, and at bottom the only real issue of literary history: society, rhetoric, and their interaction.

And here I will stop, because theoretical promises – *qua* promises, not *qua* theoretical – annoy me enormously. In this book, clearly enough, the method is all.³ But for precisely this reason, it has to be

² The expression is Reiner Hausner's, 'Kunstgeographie – Aufgaben, Grenzen, Möglichkeiten', *Rheinische Vierteljahrsblätter*, XXXIV, 1970, p. 58.

³ In the course of time, several people have asked me why on earth did I want to *make* maps, instead of analysing those that already exist. Did I really not understand that a map is a text just like any other – and ought to be treated as a text? and didn't I see that here lay its greatest appeal, for literary critics? I understood, I saw – I also read several studies that took maps as one of their objects: John Gillies on Shakespeare (*Shakespeare and the Geography of Difference*, Cambridge University Press, 1994), J. Hillis Miller on Hardy (*Topographies*, Stanford University Press, 1995), Anne McClintock on King Solomon's Mines (*Imperial Leather*, Routledge, London 1995), Lawrence Lipking on Milton (*The Genius of the Shore: Lycidas, Adonais, and the Poetics of Nationalism*, PMLA, 1996). But what can I say, maps don't interest me because they can be 'read' more or less like a novel – but because they change the way we read novels. The real challenge, for me, is there.

tested in earnest: across the research as a whole; in its capacity (or not) to change the articulation of the literary field, and the nature of interpretive problems. And the judge, as always, is the reader.

2. 'But we have no artistic atlases'

The idea for this work came to me by sheer chance, from a sentence in Braudel's *Mediterranean*⁴ that kept coming to my mind during a long car journey in the summer of 1991: we don't have artistic atlases, we don't have artistic atlases, we don't have *literary* atlases ... So – why not try to make one?

In the following years, I devoted to this idea almost all of my time. I studied geography as I had not done since my school years; conducted experimental seminars at Columbia; convinced twenty literary historians to form an editorial committee, which met for two intense days of discussion, in December 1992, thanks to the hospitality of Maristella Lorch, and the Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in the United States; finally, I wrote a long, detailed research project. But I am not gifted in these things, the National Endowment for the Humanities wasn't convinced, the editorial board dissolved, and the atlas vanished from sight. But I still liked the idea, and continued on my own. I narrowed the field to the only area I know something of, which is the nineteenth-century European novel (with a rapid leap backwards to the Spanish picaresque), and this book is the result. Half methodological manifesto, half pragmatic example; interesting, hopefully; and a real pleasure to write. But my hope is that it may restart the wider enterprise of a Historical Atlas of Literature.

⁴ The cultural waves that the Baroque unfurled upon Europe were probably more deep, full and uninterrupted than those even of the Renaissance [...]. But how are we to chart their expansion, their tumultuous foreign adventures, without the indispensable maps that no one has yet constructed? We have museum catalogues, but no artistic atlases ...? (Bernard Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 1949, California University Press, 1995, p. 835.)

In the meantime, I also made the humbling discovery that I was far from the first to have had such a good idea. The possibility of 'a literary-historical atlas of Italy', for instance, had already been sketched by Carlo Dionisotti – the author of *Geografia e storia della letteratura italiana* – in an article of 1970.⁵ And in fact, a little research uncovered quite a few of such atlases: the first one, J.G. Bartholomew's *Literary and Historical Atlas of Europe*, had been published as early as 1910 (and reprinted often until 1936); in 1964, it had been the turn of a *Guide littéraire de la France*; in 1973, Michael Hardwick's *Literary Atlas and Gazetteer of the British Isles*; in 1979, David Daiches' *Literary Landscapes of the British Isles: A Narrative Atlas*; then the *Atlas zur deutschen Literatur*, in 1983, edited by Horst Dieter Schlosser; the *Grand Atlas des Littératures*, in 1990, edited by Gilles Quinsat and Bernard Cerquiglini; and finally, in 1996, *The Atlas of Literature*, edited by Malcolm Bradbury.⁶ All quite different, and all written (a fact I find a little hard to believe) as if in total ignorance of each other's existence; but all with one thing in common: maps play in them a wholly peripheral role. Decorative. There are quite a few of them, by all means, especially in the more recent books: but they are colorful appendices, that don't intervene in the interpretive process; at times, they even show up at the end of the text – when the discourse is over, done with.

As readers must have already guessed, this in my view is a mistake. Placing a literary phenomenon in its specific space – mapping it – is not the conclusion of geographical work; it's the *beginning*. After which begins in fact the most challenging part of the whole enterprise: one looks at the map, *and thinks*. You look at a specific configuration – those roads that run towards Toledo and Sevilla; those

⁵ 'Cultura regionali e letteratura nazionale in Italia', *Lettere Italiane*, April–June 1970, p. 134.

⁶ *A Literary and Historical Atlas of Europe*, Dent, London 1910; *Guide littéraire de la France*, Hachette, Paris 1964; *Literary Atlas and Gazetteer of the British Isles*, Gale Research, Detroit 1973; *Literary Landscapes of the British Isles: A Narrative Atlas*, Paddington Press, New York 1979; *Atlas zur deutschen Literatur*, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, München 1983; *Grand Atlas des Littératures*, Encyclopaedia Universalis, Paris 1990; *The Atlas of Literature*, De Agostini, London 1996. An *Atlas of Western Art History* has also recently been published (John Steer and Anthony White, eds, *Facts on File*, New York 1994).

mountains, such a long way from London; those men and women that live on opposite banks of the Seine – you look at these patterns, and try to understand how it is that all this gives rise to a story, a plot. How is it, I mean, *that geography shapes the narrative structure of the European novel*.

I think of the maps in this *Atlas* as points of departure, then: for my reflections, as well as yours (a good map should allow for more than one line of thought); and also for the (many) captions which sketch a further array of interpretive paths: towards a text, a critical idea, a historical thesis. Coordinating these intersecting, verbal-visual discourses has not always been easy; the rhythm may be rough, uneven. But I like to think that even so (and even, alas, with all the mistakes that are certainly present) this book may turn out to be *useful*: an adjective that I had never dreamt of applying to myself – and of which I have now grown extremely proud.

If the book really is useful, the credit should go first of all to Serge Bonin. After having directed a work which is a wonder of complexity and rigor – the *Atlas de la Révolution Française* – Bonin has been graceful enough to offer his help to a total amateur like myself; has discussed in detail every single map of the book; has suggested improvements, alternatives, solutions that would never have occurred to me (and that I have followed as often as possible). Bonin has taught me to think with the instruments of cartography; wonderful, like learning another language. And he has convinced me to shun the cheap pleasures of color for the jansensistic clarity of black and white. To say that I am grateful, is a colossal understatement.

I am also grateful to David Kastan and Martin Meisel, who in 1992, at Columbia, came up with some funds without which who knows whether the project would ever have started; and it certainly wouldn't have gone very far without the generous and intelligent help of the research librarians of Columbia, NYU, the Map Division of the New York Public Library, and the Società Geografica Italiana. In the last few years, I have also presented small parts of this work in several American and European universities; my thanks to all those

who have discussed with me in those occasions, and during my classes at Columbia; and also to Irene Babboni, John Brenkman, Keith Clarke, Joe Cleary, Margaret Cohen, Robert Darrton, Ernesto Franco, David Lipscomb, Sharon Marcus, Michael Martin, D.A. Miller, Christopher Prendergast, and James Raven. And then, those with whom I have exchanged ideas during the entire span of the project: Perry Anderson, with his passion for large frescoes, and the intense seriousness that is so peculiarly his; Carlo Ginzburg, who has made fun of my project for years, like those movie coaches that have to wake up a lazy boxer; Francis Mulhern, who has explained to me in detail what worked, and what didn't, and why; Beniamino Placido, who has introduced me to books I would have never known; and Teri Reynolds, who opens my eyes every day to the many bizarre possibilities that are the best thing work and life have to offer.

In retrospect, Braudel's influence on the genesis of this book had been prepared by several previous readings. Kristin Ross' book on Rimbaud, for instance, *The Emergence of Social Space*, with its reflections on the relationships between geography and the literary imagination; or the work of Fredric Jameson, who has always 'seen' culture in spatial terms – be that the double plot of *The Betrothed* or Chandler's Los Angeles, the *Geopolitical Aesthetics*, postmodern 'cognitive mapping', Greimas' semiotic square, the rise of the Japanese novel... Further back in time, I can see Marco D'Eramo showing me Bourdieu's maps of *Sentimental Education* (and I am really struck, but unsure what to do with them). Further back still, a summer night in London, in the mid 1970s, staying up to read from beginning to end Perry Anderson's *Considerations on Western Marxism*: and in the very first pages, that describe the territorial distribution of Marxist thinkers, I suddenly see how geography may explain the history of culture (but then, to really understand it, I must wait twenty years). And finally, much further back, the most important scene of all, which must have taken place on a Sunday morning towards the end of the 1950s, in Rome: four large marble maps of the Mediterranean, walled into the bastion that encloses the

Forum, in *Via dei Fori Imperiali*; and my father, who explains to me what they mean. This book was begun on that day.

Chapter 1
The novel, the nation-state