Novels, Maps, Modernity

The Spatial Imagination, 1850–2000

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In memory of Stephen D. Bulson

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Introduction

Orienting, Disorienting the Novel

"Mais pourquoi parles—tu tout le temps de cette rue?"[1]
—Marcel Proust, *Du Côté de Chez Swann*

Orientation is one of literary realism's more familiar tricks. Many seasoned readers, if asked, would feel confident giving directions around their favorite literary city, town, or landscape, of naming "that street," as Marcel Proust's melancholic narrator does, to recall the location of a beloved character or event. In his unfinished *Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin points out that "there is a peculiar voluptuousness in the naming of streets."[2] This is particularly true when it comes to the street names that pop up in novels. They have a sensuous quality and possess that unique power to conjure up images of entire cities. Readers have grown accustomed to passing street signs as they read novels, but it's worth asking what they are doing there anyway? Always quick to take directions but slow to consider where they came from, readers tend not to think about what novels actually do to orient them in the first place.

Maps and novels have had such a long and prosperous relationship in large part because readers have treated fictional spaces like real ones. In fact, readers have been mapping novels for as long as they have been reading them. This might be because novels use space in a "qualitatively different" way from other literary forms.[3] They can have a dimension and depth, a thickness and interiority that epics, poems, and plays do not. In addition, the novel has contributed to the formation of a spatial imagination for centuries and has consistently brought the lore of faraway places, wherever they may be, to a wide variety of audiences around the globe. Nowadays, maps are a common feature in the reprints of classic novels published by Norton, Penguin, and Oxford University Press. They encourage professional and popular readers alike to locate novelistic cities, seas, towns, and landscapes cartographically.[4] Benjamin was right about street signs. They do have a

"peculiar voluptuousness." But there is something else he does not account for: their power to make readers feel oriented.

This introduction was written in the same spirit as its subject matter: it's intended to lay out the central arguments that will follow in the individual chapters. In the broadest sense, I am interested in examining how readers, novelists, and critics (though at a later stage) have used maps and guidebooks to make novelistic space intelligible from the mid nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth century. In particular, these maps and guidebooks enable us to understand a shift that took place between the periods we identify with realism and modernism. It is now somewhat of a critical commonplace that ways of representing the city and the world changed radically between Charles Dickens's London and James Joyce's Dublin and were shaped in decisive ways by empire, mass culture, technology, and urbanization. Though critics have been quick to look at techniques of spatial representation in the novel to explain what this shift involves, I concentrate instead on their effects, that is to say, their capacity to both orient and disorient readers. For what we find at this moment in the history of modernity, one out of many as Frederic Jameson reminds us, is that realist and modernist novels are built on this tension between orientation and disorientation.[5] Carefully placing dozens, sometimes hundreds, of topographical signposts throughout their novels, modernists broke radically from their realist predecessors, but they were not necessarily giving readers an oriented image of the world. Rather, they were involved in the more complicated process of making readers feel oriented in countries, cities, seas, and landscapes when they were not. This oriented disorientation of readers, as I'll explain, is precisely where we see the novel responding to many of the processes we identify more general with modernization and modernity (empire, urbanization, and technology). That, in effect, is what the space of the modern novel does: it makes readers confuse orientation with disorientation and feel like they are at home in the world when they are not. Georg Lukács had this idea in mind in his *Theory of the Novel* when he argued that the novel's fractured form is an expression of "transcendental homelessness," a symptom of the modern condition that readers can feel. It is a process heralded, he explains, by a "change in the transcendental points of orientation."[6]

Instead of demystifying this orientation effect on readers, critics have restricted their analysis to the way novelistic space rounds out characters or acts as a master signifier for reality. Though it is generally agreed that the realist novel brought with it an unprecedented taste for what Ian Watt calls "realistic particularity," critics regularly subordinate this "particularity" to the analysis of character.[7] Instead of figuring out how real geographical signposts orient and disorient readers, they emphasize that buildings, houses, streets,

and other ornamental details are another batch of those realistic touches that make fictional worlds seem plausible. In his essay on the "reality effect," Roland Barthes puts geographical signposts in his category of "useless details" common to Western narrative: "useless" because they are not integral to the narrative design, but useful because they produce a reality effect in readers.[8]

Literary maps provide a unique glimpse into how some readers have responded to this "reality effect," one that challenges the idea that signposts belong in the "useless details" category. For what we find with this little known genre of literary maps, which I'll discuss more fully in the following chapter, is a complicated process by which the representational space of the novel gets translated into the representational space of the map. Literary maps give readers something that novels do not: an image, a structure, a way to visualize form and narrative design. There were a lot of factors involved to make this union possible.

The mass-produced guidebooks of Karl Baedeker and John Murray paved the way for the literary guidebook and the literary map. In their attempts at comprehensiveness, Murray and Baedeker first began inserting literary references into their guidebooks to appease the literary minded traveler. The tourist in London with a Baedeker in hand, would be able to track down where various scenes from *David Copperfield* were set (The Strand), where Goldsmith wrote the *Vicar of Wakefield* (No. 6 Wine Office Court, Fetter Lane), where De Quincey wrote *Confessions of An English Opium Eater* (No. 4 York Street, Covent Garden), where Milton was born (Bread Street, 1608), where Shelley allegedly met his second wife, Mary Godwin (her mother's grave, Old St. Pancras's Church), and the bridge that inspired Wordsworth's "fine sonnet that begins 'Earth has not anything to show more fair'" (Westminster Bridge).

In his book on tourist culture in the nineteenth century, James Buzard notes that snatches of Byron's poetry were included in Murray's guides to Switzerland, the Rhine, and Italy and were meant to be read when a particular emotional response was called for.[9] Travel based on Byron's *Don Juan* (1820) and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (first two cantos published in 1819) achieved such popularity in fact that Murray published a pocket-sized collection of Byron's poems intended to accompany the appropriate Murray handbook: a "Murray for information, and a Byron for sentiment" as one traveler of the period put it.[10]

Neither the literary references in the Baedeker nor the potential for complementing one's reading with snippets of poetry was enough. Some still criticized them for not being literary. In 1907, James Muirhead, who began working for Baedeker at the age of twenty-five and helped compile the guides to London and Great Britain, imagined an "ideal" Baedeker:

> It is, however, highly desirable that he [Baedeker] should also be familiar with the geography of the world of poesy and romance in which most of us spend so much of our time long after classroom days are over. To many travelers the scene of Poor Jo's death is at least as real as the place where the Little Princes were smothered: and it would be a bold as well as a bad Baedeker who should conduct us through the Trossachs of Scotland without calling up the shades of Ellen and of Roderick Dhu. There are, I verily believe, many travelers to whom Lyme Regis is simply the place where Louisa Elliot sprained her ankle, and not at all the place where the Duke of Monmouth landed before Sedgemoor. The Wessex of Thomas Hardy, the Barchester and Allington of Anthony Trollope, have their devout pilgrims. He could pilot us safely from point to point in Rosalind's Forest of Arden would probably be hailed with at least as much enthusiasm as he who guides us through the Ardennes of the seven-day tripper from London; and there ought to be no forgiveness for the guidebook that allows us to pass through Verona without reminding us that it possessed a balcony as well as an ampitheatre. For the maker of guidebooks the opportunity of thus bringing the actual and the fancied worlds into contact is one of the most grateful parts of his task.[11]

Muirhead's dream of an ideal Baedeker was never realized. But there was a genre of literary guidebooks that filled a niche in the market, one that I'll discuss more fully in the subsequent chapter. Some expected them to complement the popular guidebooks already on the market while others expected a "literary Baedeker" for the wandering reader with very little time on her hands.[12]

Literary guidebooks had forces more powerful than Baedeker and Murray to contend with. It did not take long for publishers to realize that cities like Paris and London were changing too fast for them to keep up. It was partly because of this early obsolescence that the literary map came into being; it was a quick and cost-effective way to bring literary tourists where they needed to go. Maps could be updated quickly and cheaply, and it didn't really matter whether or not the original literary landmarks were still there in the real world: having them on the map was enough for the "reality effect" to work.

Locating fictional spaces on a map allows readers to transform fiction into practical knowledge. That explains why educators, learning from tourists and the guidebook companies, latched on to literary maps early on to teach students about literature, geography, and history simultaneously. A majority of the literary maps that survive from the first few decades of the twentieth century were primarily pedagogical tools.[13] J.G. Bartholomew's

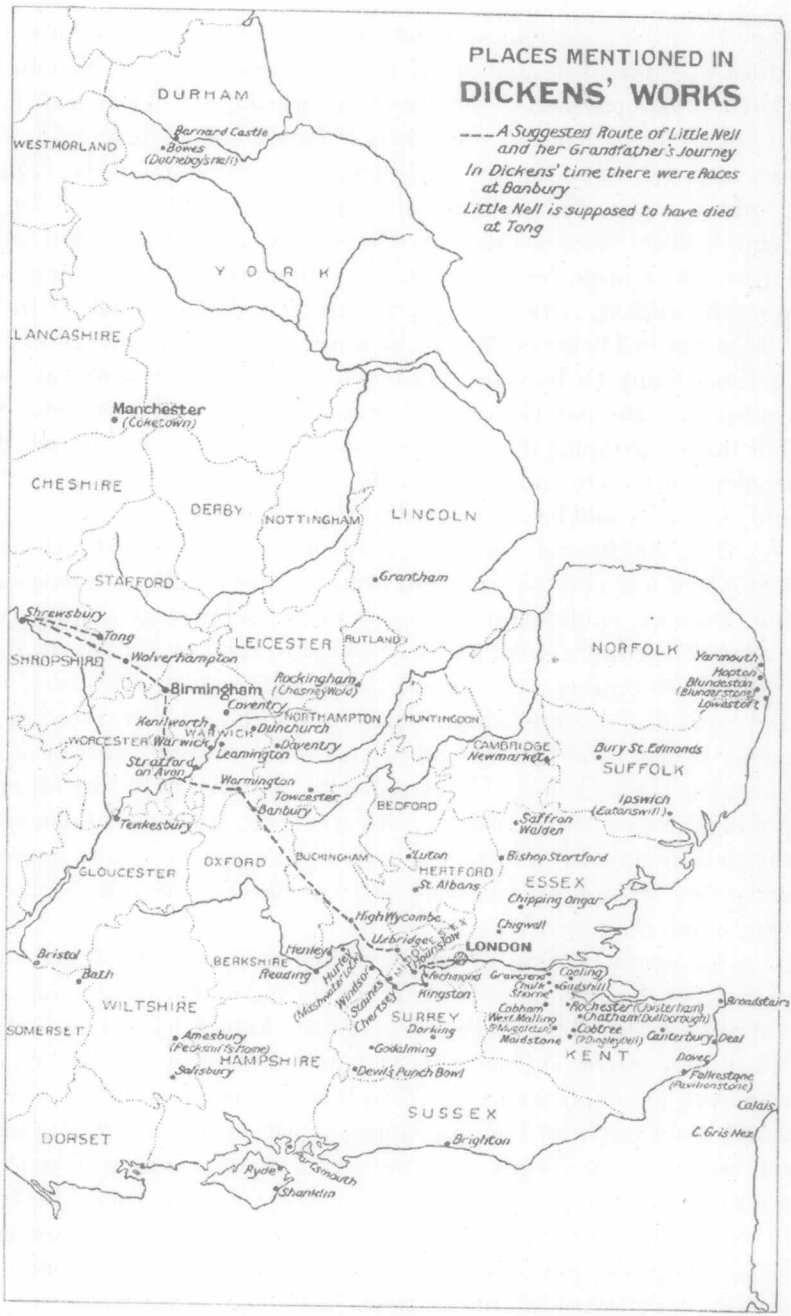

Figure 1. Places mentioned in Dickens' Works, 1912. From J. G. Bartholomew, *A Literary and Historical Atlas of Europe.*

more expansive geographical atlases to Europe, America, Asia, Australia, and Africa were meant to accompany the copious list of travel, fiction, poetry, drama, philosophy, and history books published in the "Everyman's Library." In his *A Literary and Historical Atlas of Europe* (1912) he appended thirty-two maps related to famous English authors—the route of the Canterbury pilgrims, George Eliot country, the land of Robert Burns and Sir Walter Scott, William Wordsworth's Lake District, and Dickens's London and many others. These maps, he assured readers in the preface, "serve as examples of what the student, carrying on the process, may do for himself."[14] In "Places Mentioned in Dickens's Works," he traces Little Nell's route from London to Tong (figure 1). By superimposing fictional plots on a map of England, readers were also participating in a more coded form of literary nationalism. The literary mapping that Bartholomew recommended was inscribed by an ideology of empire and the belief that geographical knowledge of "home" and "abroad" could be constructed by acts of plotting.

The educational end of literary mapping continued well into the 1930s, and it is a practice still with us today. The ambitious *Mapbook of English Literature*, published in 1936, was intended for geographically ignorant readers. The editors of the *Mapbook* compiled specialized maps for the environs of 19th century London, the Lake Country, Hardy's Wessex, Ireland, and Europe, and compiled nine maps tracing three different historical periods in England and London and divided them according to their literary or biographical associations. The cartographic approach to literary history, they promised, was a surefire way to learn about the "geographical background" of literature since so "few readers, even the most careful, have a map at hand while they are reading, and many place names referred to in books float in their minds unlocated."[15]

It's worth pausing to consider what this term "unlocated" actually means. For these editors and educators, an "unlocated" place name is worrisome indeed. It implies a lack of geographical knowledge and understanding. What I find interesting here is the very notion that maps are the best way for readers to locate place names. When literature is not sufficient to map the world, maps can help. The emphasis on a map-mediated form of geographical understanding suggests that the spatial representations in literature do not always work, especially with the inevitable passage of time. Literary maps in this instance make the space of the world and its literary representation legible. They can pin down Hardy's Wessex or 19th century London when they are in danger of entering a vague, "unlocated" nowhere.

Readers are not the only ones who have needed help finding their way around. When preparing the fourth edition of *The Life and Surprizing*

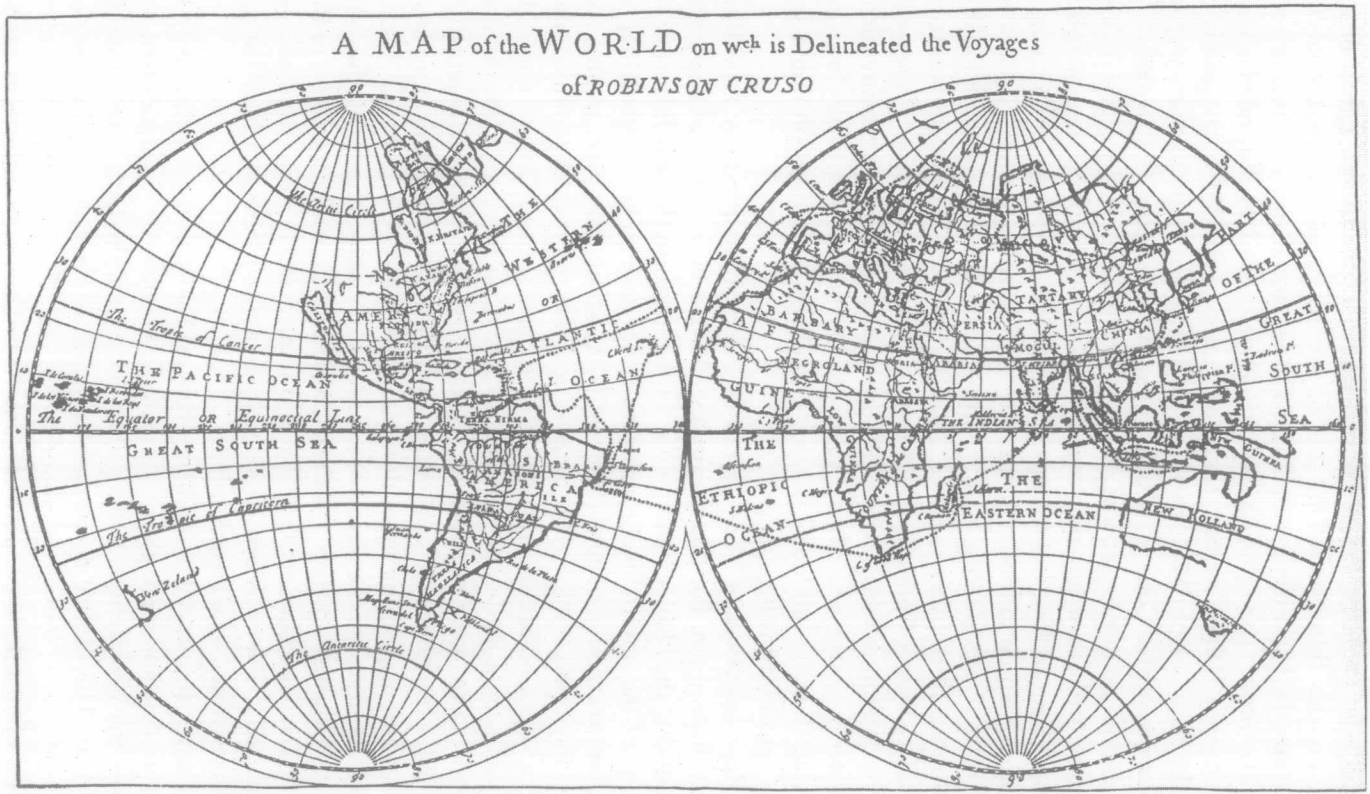

Figure 2. Map from *Robinson Crusoe,* 1719. From *The Life and Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe,* 4th edition.