

## MAPS AND VOYAGES IN JOHN DONNE'S POETRY

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What came first, the voyage or the map? For our age, a normal procedure is to do the research, make the trip, take the measurements, then record it all, complete with a grid to tell us how to measure the distances, calculate the directions. Maps in Donne's time offered some of this, but they also met other expectations, inherited from earlier assumptions about how the world *should* look. Maps based on speculation could inspire voyages of discovery. Voyages in turn could inspire the map-makers and these excite their viewers.

A relatively "modern" map, by Hondius around 1589, shows the route of Drake's voyage; it is up to date in illustrating his sea-discovery that there is open sea south of Terra del Fuego, shown on earlier maps as linked with a great southern land mass; but is also has its decorations of strange creatures, and its assumption that the unknown Terra Australis must make a nice balance on the left-hand side.

At its simplest, the map is the inferior record of a much more exciting reality, a mere hint of something better. Donne has moments of using the term this way. In *Elegy 18*, the foot is the map of the part a questing male seeks higher up the leg. But the map can offer more. In *The Good-morrow*, the lover, for whom love has made the 'little room an every where', says:

Let sea-discoverers to new worlds have gone,  
Let maps to others, worlds on worlds have shown,  
Let us possess one world, each hath one, and is one.

From one point of view, the sea-discoverers have a more thrilling time than map-viewers, but the map-makers and map-readers who never leave home can have the richer experience of the imagination as they imagine "worlds on worlds". For the speaker, these excitements are inferior to the present mutual possession

between the lovers — in part an experience of the mind as they find a way, similar to a map-making impulse, of comprehending and describing their own joys.

Donne (or his persona) tends to be the explorer without a map. When the lover's "roving hands" discover another's body, he is like the first voyager to arrive in the New World:

O my America! my new-found-land,  
My kingdome, safest when with one man man'd,  
My Myne of precious stones, My Emperie,  
How blest am I in this discovering thee.

In *Satire 3*, the journey up the hill to find Truth is an effort to discover as well as to climb, a contrast to the situation in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, where though the journey is hard, the Pilgrim has a route laid out before him:

... On a huge hill,  
Cragged, and steep, Truth stands, and hee that will  
Reach her, about must, and about must goe;  
And what the hills suddenness resists, winne so.

Poems, like maps, can mingle fact and fantasy. The tension between the "actual" and the imagined is acknowledged directly at the start of *Holy Sonnet 7*:

At the round earth's imagin'd corners, blow  
Your trumpets, Angels, and arise, arise  
From death, you numberlesse infinities  
Of soules, and to your scattred bodies goe.

For the sake of the scene, which he needs to imagine as part of the whole meditative activity, he foregoes the literal truth about the world; he is squaring a circle, so to speak, flattening a sphere, partly to fit with biblical descriptions of the Last Judgement, more importantly to have the grand scene before him. How exactly it is visualized is unclear, while having the dead rise, up in one visible mass means forgetting the implications of a spherical globe. Later in the poem, he refers to "this lowly ground", also an image that implies a cosmology with us on a flat space, the scene of Judgement a little higher, heaven higher again — and hell below. By this stage of the poem, however, he has moved away from the visual

emphasis, from the mighty spectacle, from the sweeping accumulations that offer shameless tautologies ("numberless infinities") and mighty lists. That process has done its work of concentrating the mind on Judgement, and on the many ways death can strike; the sestet has its different work of turning away from that to the need to repent before any of this happens. In turning away from that idea (i.e. Bring on the Last Day), the poem also turns away from the implicit map image to work in a different imaginative area, where the speaker is alone before his God, working to his own salvation, and where the strongest imagery is about the notion of sealing a pardon with the saving blood of Christ.

The swings in this poem are characteristic of the way Donne sees himself — and all of us — in a tension between being part of a cosmic pattern, something mappable, and in a unique position of responsibility for our own destiny. Maps may be useful if, as with the coinage metals used as analogy for suffering in *Meditation 17*, we know how to apply them. This leads us to the issue of interpretation and intermediaries.

*The Second Anniversary Of the Progresse of the Soule* concludes thus:

Since his will is, that to posteritie,  
 Thou should'st for life, and death, a patterne bee,  
 And that the world should notice have of this,  
 The purpose, and th'authoritie is his;  
 Thou art the Proclamation; and I am  
 The Trumpet, at whose voyce the people came.

Here, the deceased Elizabeth Drury becomes a pattern, something which others can imitate. In a blatantly extravagant poem, she represents the "idea of a woman" who is, in effect, a Christ-figure representing the best possibilities for humanity. The pattern or map is not readily accessible; just as a proclamation is useless without a reader and an audience, so too is an unviewed — or unlabelled — map. Here, the poet becomes the "trumpet", the prophetic voice, the interpreter who makes the words that carry the meaning of the otherwise inaccessible Proclamation. Here, Donne is more the interpreter than the adventurer; but public interpretation and celebration are seen earlier in the poem as

vitally necessary, the work for which he will eventually be rewarded:

Yet in this deluge, grosse and generall,  
Thou seest me strive for life; my life shall bee,  
To be hereafter prais'd, for praying thee.

*Goodfriday 1613. Riding westwards* offers an elaborate display of ideas based on travelling — this time, relatively sedately, on horseback in known territory. Travelling west becomes a symbol of departure from the contemplation of this great saving event of Good Friday. The poem cleverly works through the implications of its imagery to culminate in a plea for cleansing:

O thinke mee worth thine anger, punish mee,  
Burne off my rusts, and my deformity,  
Restore thine Image, so much, by thy grace,  
That thou may'st know mee, and I'll turne my face.

The possibilities of maps seem more stimulating to his imagination here than those of journeys. The poem starts with an elaborate play on the traditional map of the cosmos which is so frequent in Donne's poetry, at the close of *The Sunne Rising*, for example, this model has the earth in the centre, and a series of concentric spheres around it:

Let mans Soule be a Spheare, and then, in this,  
The intelligence that moves, devotion is.

Less obvious, perhaps, is a model that uses Christ as the sustainer of the universe, who can bring harmony to the spheres, or, almost literally, hold the whole world in his hands. I am thinking especially of an early map that has Christ's hands at the north and south of a round flat earth, his head thus being at the east:

Could I behold those hands which span the Poles,  
And tune all spheares at once peirc'd with those holes?  
Could I behold that endlesse height which is  
Zenith to us, and our Antipodes,  
Humbled below us?

*Hymn to God the Father* ("Wilt thou forgive") makes only brief use of the journey notion in mentioning the sin of fear that "I shall

perish on the shore", implicitly merging a classical image of crossing the Styx, and the Christian one of the Jordan. *Hymn to Christ*, however, is built on a reference to an actual sea-voyage:

In what torne ship soever I embarke,  
That ship shall be my embleme of thy Arke;  
What sea soever swallow mee, that flood  
Shall be to mee an embleme of thy blood.

An emblem, unlike a modern map, makes little attempt to represent a physical reality, but is an incentive to the mind to seek similarities and lessons — though this is not so far from the older notions of what a map can do. Here the images are rich traditional ones: the ark of Noah is important in Christian traditions as symbol of the Church that saves us from the flood of sin. Where the previous poem imagined a shore that ends the journey prematurely this side of the waters, this one imagines the voyage as over before the shore is reached. The effect of the poem is to provide an alternative interpretation of an unfinished voyage that sees it as complete in a more fundamental way, by providing the salvation that comes at the end of a life — for those embraced by the saving blood of Christ. The second stanza sees the voyage as an image of distancing, playing further on the imagery of saving blood:

I sacrifice this Island unto thee,  
And all whom I lov'd there, and who lov'd mee;  
When I have put our seas twixt them and mee,  
Put thou thy sea betwixt my sinnes and thee.

After this the voyage is now the journey to the underworld which can (as with the meeting of opposites in east and west) become the place of renewal as well as of decay:

As the trees sap doth seeke the root below  
In winter, in my winter now I goe,  
Where none but thee, th'Eternall root  
Of true love I may know.

In *Hymne to God my God in my sickness* many of the above issues are relevant:

Since I am comming to that Holy roome,

Where, with thy Choir of saints for evermore,  
 I shall be made thy Musique; As I come  
 I tune the Instrument here at the dore,  
 And what I must doe then, thinke here before.

I have mentioned the idea of poet/preacher — and mapmaker — as interpreter. In referring to himself as an instrument that is to be tuned prior to the great performance, he also anticipates the reminder that comes at the very end of the poem: he too has been an intermediary:

And as to others soules I preach'd thy word,  
 Be this my Text, my Sermon to mine owne.  
 Therefore that he may raise the Lord throws down.

Superficially, the reference to the Physician-Cosmographers in the second stanza seems dismissive, since they are stuck with observation and labelling while he makes the triumphant voyage of discovery, yet he has much in common with them as interpreter, as creator of the meaningful carefully-imagined record:

Whilst my Physitians by their love are growne  
 Cosmographers, and I their Mapp, who lie  
 Flat on this bed, that by them may be showne  
 That this is my South-west discoverie  
*Per fretum febris*, by these streights to die,

I joy, that in these straits, I see my West;  
 For, though their currants yeeld returne to none,  
 What shall my West hurt me? As West and East  
 In all flatt Maps (and I am one) are one,  
 So death doth touch the Resurrection.

The Latin label (meaning "through the straits of fever") could be a mild joke about medical practitioners' habit of putting elaborate names to ailments while they discuss the patient's symptom in incomprehensible language, but it also echoes the mapmaker's practice; and just as the identification of a new passage was valuable for those with an interest in subsequent voyages, so too is it important that this voyager's discovery might be revealed to others. This recalls love-poems like *The Canonization* and *A Nocturnal* inviting other lovers to learn from his experience, and

his great prose statement, in *Meditation 17*, affirming that "no man is an island, entire of itself".

Flat maps, we recall, are the inadequate representation of a globe; but they also allow imaginative scope, itself a great concern of this poem; towards the end, the hope for salvation depends, so to speak, on God's sharing in the imaginative jokes he proposes. He is both the map and the voyager on a one-way trip whose resolution and safety depends on an action by God. Why does he want to reassure himself about the harmlessness of his west? For the same reason as he needs to preach himself a sermon at the end. For this is a poem that keeps looking as though it has reached its satisfactory conclusion, but then responds to a different pressure, as if to acknowledge that its own conceits offer only a partial answer. What he knows about is sweat, being thrown down; the raising up, the glories of Resurrection are something hoped for — like the splendours of what awaited explorers after their voyage — but not truly known.

The fourth stanza considers three possibilities for home, and the ways to reach them:

Is the Pacific Sea my home? Or are  
 The Easterne riches? Is *Jerusalem*?  
*Anyan*, and *Magellan*, and *Gibraltar*,  
 All streights, and none but streights are wayes to them,  
 Whether where *Japhet* dwelt, or *Cham*, or *Sem*.

Jerusalem, approached by English ships through the Straits of Gibraltar, is a familiar symbol in Christian tradition, and a well-known destination. The others are more obscure. In *The Sunne Rising*, eastern riches image the lovers in bed; now they can represent eternal bliss. But how to reach them? The Straits of Magellan were well-known by now, but a hard voyage — also known by the start of the century was the possibility of going around the Horn, but that would spoil a good analogy. The route to the northern Pacific, symbolically a place of peace, and region of the riches of Cathay, was more elusive. The Elizabethans, and many successors, tried hard to find the north-west passage and the very existence of Anyan, now the Bering Straits, was a speculation that happened to be right. The stanza concludes with a general reference to another map-based reference, the notion of the descendants of Noah as inhabitants of the "known world", though

this too was looking obsolete in the light of discoveries of newer continents. As with imagery of the spheres, Donne easily uses traditional images when it suits; in this case, the stress is on a comprehensive survey of the world, a common humanity with all who descended from Noah.

Again the poem seems ready to end, but moves on, using a version of an old notion linking the tree of Adam with the Tree on which Christ died, and again echoing things shown on old maps:

We thinke that *Paradise* and *Calvarie*,  
*Christs Crosse*, and *Adams tree*, stood in one place;  
 Looke Lord, and finde both *Adams* met in me;  
 As the first *Adams* sweat surrounds my face,  
 May the last *Adams* blood my soule embrace.

So, in his purple wrapp'd receive mee Lord,  
 By these his thornes give me his other Crowne.

Integral to these moves is an older way of thinking about the world, used by St Paul and here renewed in the imaginative links proposed by the poet. But the ultimate imaginative link is to be made by God rather than man; he alone has the power to save, while the dying person can simply prepare and tune the instrument that can have its role in a harmonious whole.

So among the things reconciled in this poem are the maturer version of the brash youthful explorer, voyaging on real or imaginary seas or bodies with little need of the guidance of others, and the poet-preacher knowing his own role as guide and — at least briefly — seeing the worth of letting others make a record. In *The Canonization*, he says that "By these Hymnes, all shall approve/ Us, canoniz'd for love". Here too he is making a hymn to be approved in the sense he knew — not simply to be applauded, but to be put to the test and imitated. Both the final voyage, the act of dying well, and the poem that, so to speak, maps it, are a worthy part of his service, both to others' souls and to his own.

## REFERENCES

- 1 Quotations from the poems are taken from *The Poems of John Donne*, edited by H.J.C.Grierson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912; repr.1963). Prose quotations are from *John Donne. Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1959).