

« All flat maps, and I am one » : Cartographic References in the Poems of John Donne

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As A. E. Nordenskiöld reminds us, the maps, connected with the oldest editions of the *Geography* of the second century Alexandrian astronomer, mathematician and geographer Claudius Ptolemaeus, known as Ptolemy, "constitute the prototype of almost all geographical atlases, published since the discovery of the art of printing"¹. For a modern viewer, it is often hard to imagine cartographers using anything but the cartographic alphabet inherited from Ptolemy, with, for instance, the Ptolemaic orientation placing the north above and the east to the right. As Nordenskiöld goes on to notice, the method of denoting boundaries between lands and seas, mountain ranges, rivers and towns, used in old manuscripts of Ptolemy's work and in his oldest printed editions is still followed by cartographers today, with only slight variations. Yet, he objects, if we compare our atlases, on the one hand with the maps of Ptolemy, and on the other hand with most medieval maps not influenced by the work of the Alexandrian geographer, we will find this cartographic alphabet to be at times as conventional and arbitrary as that of the primarily symbolic and dogmatic *Mappae mundi* produced in the West during the Middle Ages.

Despite minor variations, most of those Medieval maps belong more or less indirectly either to the Macrobian or to the Tripartite or Noachid traditions². Macrobian maps were named after

¹ A. E. Nordenskiöld, *Facsimile-Atlas to the Early History of Cartography* (New York: Dover Publications, 1889 ; 1973), p. 1.

² For an example of a map related to the Macrobian tradition, see the woodcut made after John of Holywood's 13th-century manuscript and reproduced in R. V. Tooley's *Landmarks of Mapmaking* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1968 ; 1976), p. 14. For an example of a Tripartite or Noachid map, see the earliest printed world map, in an edition of Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiarum* (Augsburg : Günther Zainer, 1472), reproduced in David

the Roman geographer Aurelius Macrobius, who lived at the end of the 4th and the beginning of the 5th century. His *Interpretatio in Somnium Scipionis* contains, besides essays on different metaphysical and cosmographical topics, some geographical speculations in the second book, the meaning of which was explained by means of a map. Macrobius considered the (spherical) earth to be divided by the ocean-currents into a series of more or less inhabitable zones or belts (five, or subsequently seven). The equatorial zone which separates the northern and southern hemispheres he considered to be a sea which heat made impossible to cross, while the extreme cold of the north and south poles rendered those areas equally inhospitable in his view. Those three areas (equatorial sea, north and south poles) were seen by Macrobius as well as by many medieval authorities after him as the home of many monstrous races (one-eyed Cyclops, one-footed Sciopods, dark-skinned Ethiops, Blemmyes bearing their heads in their chests, diminutive Pygmies, monstrous Giants, etc.) whose physical and consequently moral difformity was to be imputed to the extreme quality of the climates in which they dwelled.

The Tripartite or Noachid maps, also known as T-O maps, are so named after their diagrammatic shape, which shows a circular, O-shaped ocean in which is inserted the letter T corresponding to the three continents of the ancient world linked together. A variation on the same associates the letter T with the three great waterways well-known to the Ancients, i.e. the Mediterranean sea, the Nile and the river Tanais (modern Don). Though pagan in origin, Tripartite maps conveniently fitted in with Church teaching and the belief in a division of the world after the Flood between the three sons of Noah (hence the name Noachid): Japhet getting Europe, Cham or Ham receiving Africa, and Shem inheriting Asia. The letter T in these highly edifying but not very realistic *Mappae mundi* was also fraught with symbolic meaning, as its form recalled a cross, i.e. Christ's cross. And indeed, in most of these maps, Jerusalem, where Christ was crucified, was placed right at the intersection of the three branches or continents. These maps also greatly challenge our usual, Ptolemaically-received orientation, as the top position in them is usually given to the east, where a graphic representation of the Garden of Eden is frequently placed. Such is the case for one of the most famous examples of a T-O map, i. e. the Hereford Cathedral map, drawn between 1275 and 1317

Woodward (ed.), *Five Centuries of Map Printing* (Chicago and London : University of Chicago Press, 1975), p.9.

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by Richard of Haldingham³. Circular in form, with the east at the top, it shows representations of Paradise, the Last Judgment, the Pillars of Hercules and numerous biblical and other legends. Jerusalem is in the center.

The rediscovery of ancient Greek and Roman texts and maps in the Renaissance (following the fall of Constantinople in 1453), the discovery of America by Christopher Columbus in 1492 and the subsequent exploration of the new continent and the South seas by Vespucci and others, leading to Magellan's circumnavigation in 1521, gradually supplant this medieval world vision and ultimately result in the birth of modern geography as we know it. To Italy belongs the honour of being the first to revive an interest in classic geography, with Ptolemy's *Geographia* being first printed in Bologna (1477)⁴, and then in Rome (1478), Florence (1482) and Rome again (1490). In the century and a half that follow, European geographical atlases keep the Ptolemaic frame, but gradually add to it by integrating new geographical data and do away with the picturesque but unscientific monsters of the medieval maps to progressively adopt less allegorical, more scientific standards. Maps belonging to this period of transition interestingly blend fact and fiction, inherited legends and new discoveries. A good example of such a phenomenon is provided by Simon Grynaeus' atlas of 1532 included in an edition of Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographia universalis*⁵. Here, the eastern coast of the American continent is sketched most accurately, following the latest finds of the European discoverers of the time, while the rest of the continent is still a huge blank, waiting to be explored and charted. The monstrous shapes and wonders of many medieval maps are still there in the shape of naked, cannibal races, Scythian warriors, an elephant and two basilisks, yet these legends are removed from the centre and pushed back to the margins of the atlas.

The geographical atlases of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries well reflect a fascinating syncretic effort in front of the scientific discoveries of the time, an effort which is by no means limited to voyagers and cartographers. For history-makers and mapmakers as well as for their armchair-travelling contemporaries, the old beliefs recede but slowly, while new data is adapted so as to coexist with, and as much as possible fit in a received world picture.

³ Reproduced in R. V. Tooley, *Maps and Map-Makers* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1949; 1970), p. 9.

⁴ Reproduced in *Landmarks of Mapmaking*, p. 51.

⁵ Reproduced in Nordenskiöld, plate XLII.

Written mostly in the last decade of the sixteenth century and the first two decades of the 17th century, the poetic works of John Donne well illustrate this conceptual *discordia concors*.

Let us take as a first example one of the last poems written by Donne, "Hymn to God my God, in my Sickness", composed either during one of the poet's serious illnesses in 1623 or alternatively shortly before his death in 1631⁶. Here the poet compares himself, as he lies on his sick-bed, or possibly his death bed, to a flat geographical map studied by his physicians who are compared to cartographers: "my physicians by their love are grown / Cosmographers, and I their map, who lie / Flat on this bed" (ll. 6-8), and later "In all flat maps (and I am one)" (ll. 14).

The cartographic tradition drawn on in this poem clearly bears the trace of the medieval T-O shaped maps corresponding to the division of the world between the three sons of Noah, who are named here: "Whether where Japhet dwelt, or Cham, or Shem." (l. 20) The T-shaped form of the continents with the symbolic reference to the crucifixion of Christ is also recalled here with the body of a dying poet lying with his arms wide open: "We think that Paradise and Calvary, / Christ's Cross, and Adam's tree, stood in one place; / Look Lord, and find both Adams met in me." (ll. 21-23)

Yet for all its symbolic Noachid and Christian background, Donne's cartographic imagery has room for the latest scientific contributions. Newly discovered territories are directly named here: "is the Pacific Sea my home?" (l. 16), "Anyan, and Magellan, and Gibraltar" (l. 18)⁷. And if this metaphorical map is a flat one — "In all flat maps (and I am one)" — it is solely for the sake of commodity, as this flat shape actually stands for an acknowledged and accepted spherical reality: "west and east / In all flat maps (...) are one" (ll. 13-14).

In modern maps what is figured at the extreme left is understood to be immediately adjacent to what is to be found at the extreme right. The poet adopts and adapts this idea to his situation by taking into account all the symbolic weight of the west and east — the west being where the sun sets, and thus metaphorically associated with death, while the

⁶ Edition used for this and all other quotes from poems by Donne: *John Donne. The Complete English Poems*, ed. A. J. Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971; 1996).

⁷ Anyan is possibly a deformation of Annam, which was believed in Donne's day to be located on a strait dividing America from Asia. See Smith's note on this in his edition, p. 665.

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east is where the sun rises, a place diversely evoking resurrection and the siege of earthly Paradise: "As west and east / In all flat maps (and I am one) are one, / So death doth touch the resurrection." (ll. 13-15) Thus new discoveries are made to serve an age-old purpose, as the poet tries to surmount his fear of death and annihilation with the rational, scientific assurance that west and east, death and life are one and the same according to the new discoveries.

With this assurance, he is ready for his voyage of exploration, even if he knows his journey will lead him to death in dangerous straits — "this is my south-west discovery / *Per fretum febris*, by these straits to die" (ll. 9-10) — just as Magellan, the circumnavigator after whom Magellan's Strait was named, actually never finished his circumnavigation. He died in the South Seas on the way back while his one remaining ship was brought back to Europe by his faithful lieutenant Sebastian El Cano.

Although drawing extensively on a medieval tradition, as well as on modern cartographic discoveries, Donne in this poem, as well as elsewhere in his poetry, does not seem so much interested in geographic exploration as in an exploration of the Self, with its fear of death and hopes of salvation. Here as well as in many other poems, Donne is not taking sides in a scientific debate on the old and the new, but using both sides for a reflection on the Self, which constitutes the great subject of his poetry. "I am a little world cunningly made," he writes in his *Holy Sonnet 5*. For him the macrocosm or larger universe appears mostly interesting as a source of imagery to convey ideas on the microcosm or the lesser universe of human body and mind.

At times, this complex, syncretic imagery leads him to what John Carey calls "conceptual corners"⁸, i. e. unnaturally composite images or meeting places for contraries, as in the famous opening lines of *Holy Sonnet 7* : "At the round world's imagined corners, blow/ Your trumpets, angels". If the world is viewed as round, how can it have corners? This is a beautiful, typically metaphysical poetic conceit, i.e. an intricate metaphorical figure which makes an ingenious comparison between two apparently incongruous things or concepts. The reference is possibly to the above-mentioned transition maps, in the vein of Grynaeus's map, with an ovoid projection of the world at the center, surrounded by marginal figures and gloss on a rectangular (cornered) sheet of paper. In many of these maps, the margins are

⁸ John Carey, *John Donne : Life, Mind and Art* (London and Boston : Faber and Faber, 1981 ; 1990), p. 247.

occupied, either by picturesque images of the wonders of the world, or by winged images of blowing figures, alternatively representing the different winds or heads of angels sounding a trumpet so as to remind us that the end of the world is nigh⁹. This second version is probably the one from which Donne draws his apocalyptic image: "At the round world's imagined corners, blow / Your trumpets, angels".

Back to the idea of voyaging and discovering, one must not forget that in the context of the Great Voyages, exploration went hand in hand with claiming and taking possession. A central image in relation to this occurs in "A Valediction : of Weeping", in Donne's *Songs and Sonnets*. The image here is that of a cartographer pasting sheets of paper corresponding to bits of maps on a round ball so as to make a terrestrial globe : "On a round ball / A workman that hath copies by, can lay / An Europe, Afric, and an Asia, / And quickly make that, which was nothing, all" (ll. 10-13). The image here is that of a blank, empty surface which is little by little filled by man's activity shaping and controlling it. The poet likens this image to his beloved's tears at his departure, as the world is reflected in her transparent, round-shaped tear-drops. Here again, Donne's conceit appears first and foremost as a conceit of the Self. The tear-drop has no interest in itself, just as the round, blank ball used by the cartographer has no interest *per se*. The object gains meaning thanks to the powerful hand of the explorer or cartographer adding to it the latest discoveries of his mind. Likewise, the tear-drop shed by the beloved is mostly used by the poet as a pretext, a mere mirror reflecting the surrounding world in general, and the poet standing by her side in particular: "Draw not up seas to drown me in thy sphere, / Weep me not dead." The image here is mostly centred on the Self and the prospect of self-annihilation in a falling tear-drop, rather than on the beloved and the fact that she is crying.

The idea of exploration as a preliminary for possession appears very topical in England in the last decades of the sixteenth century with the beginning of the colonizing attempts of the English in America. Indeed, the first temporary settlements in Virginia appear in the 1580s, while Guiana is explored with a view to a possible future settlement by Walter Raleigh in 1595. These colonizing efforts incidentally result in an abundant travel literature in which new territories are frequently likened to female bodies to explore and possess. Such is the case with the very choice by Raleigh of the name "Virginia", referring both to a virgin territory and to Elizabeth I, the

⁹ For examples of these, see Nordenskiöld's plates XXXI, XXXIII and XLIV.

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Virgin Queen of England in whose name the territory was claimed. This is not a new phenomenon. There are many earlier examples of that in the history of travel, with such names as the Amazon, named after those legendary ferocious females supposedly inhabiting there according to Raleigh and other voyagers. Another example would be provided by Columbus's famous letter to his royal patrons, the Spanish Catholic kings, in which he likens the new continent to a female body. In his account, the protruding Brazilian coast is likened to a woman's breast, and Columbus locates the earthly paradise on a point corresponding to the nipple¹⁰. In other words, right from the start, the New World portrays itself as a locus for European male fantasies of the female body, both in terms of what is to be enjoyed in it (Virginia) and of the difficulty of its conquest (Amazon). Both possibilities seem to be taken into account by Walter Raleigh in his conclusion on Guiana: "To conclude, *Guiana* is a Country that hath yet her Maidenhead."¹¹

Donne's *Elegy* 19, "To His Mistress Going to Bed", keeps a trace of these fantasies. Yet, if in the works of the explorers and in travel literature, it is the new land which is likened to a female body, here the poet inverts the analogy for his own purpose, since this time it is the female body which is likened to new territories : "O my America, my new found land, / (...) My mine of precious stones, my empery", he exclaims when dis-covering (taking the cover off) the body of his mistress (ll. 27 and 29). The anaphoric repetition of the possessive "my" foregrounds the male fantasy of absolute domination over this body: "My kingdom, safeliest when with one man manned" (l. 28).

In this image, as well as in geographical reality, exploration and domination present themselves as two faces of the same activity, best brought together in the symbolism of a seal set on a map. In the Renaissance, it was customary for explorers to carry maps on which they charted new territory by giving it a name and marking it by means of their own seals. A monarch's seal was equally set at the bottom of the royal patent delivered to the explorer undertaking discovery and colonization in the King or Queen's name. A trace of both functions of the seal is to be found here, first in the image of the

¹⁰ Quoted by Harry Levin, *The Myth of the Golden Age in the Renaissance* (London : Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 183.

¹¹ Sir Walter Raleigh, *The Discovery of the Large, Rich and Beautiful Empire of Guiana*, in *Selected Writings*, ed. Gerald Hammond (Manchester : Carcanet, 1984), p. 120.

poet's mistress presented as a queen licensing exploration: "Licence my roving hands, and let them go / Before, behind, between, above, below." (ll. 25-26). Yet by the end of this section in the poem, the poet is no longer claiming this newly explored territory in anybody else's name, but in his own name: "Then where my hand is set, my seal shall be." (l. 31)

The image here is that of the explorer/master taking possession of the female body, no longer by her licence and permission, but by his own authority. The choice of the garments and trinkets taken off by the mistress in this process of discovery appears quite significant in relation with this exercise in domination and self-assertion. Indeed, luxury items such as the lace ("Unlace yourself", l. 9), the watch ("this harmonious chime", l. 9), and especially the "coronet" (l. 15) worn by the lady denote an obvious social rank, and this strip-tease appears as a pinnacle, both of worldly and of erotic success on the part of a despotic lover ordering an apparently high-ranking but submissive woman to undress. This is a recurrent idea in many of Donne's love poems, even in the most celebratory ones chanting mutual love but never forgetting hierarchy: "She is all states, and all princes, I," he concedes at best in "The Sun Rising" (l. 21).

If in *Elegy* 19 Donne mostly associates voyages of discovery with prospects of infinite gain and riches ("My mine of precious stones, my empery", l. 29), elsewhere in his poetry he considers another, less rejoicing side of such voyages as a source for his imagery, especially in those images drawing on the topical, disastrous northern expeditions of the 1570s during which Martin Frobisher and others vainly sought a north-west passage to China in the Canadian far-north¹². The image is used in Donne's *Satire* 3, a poem concerned with both the necessity and the difficulty of finding the true Church, a crucial question for the Catholic-born, yet gradually estranged young Donne going through an agnostic, free-thinking period before an uneasy conversion to Anglicanism sometime in the 1590s. In this poem, Donne compares the path of righteousness leading to God to one of those highly dangerous northern enterprises so as to show how difficult it is to keep a constant course on this way: "Hast thou courageous fire to thaw the ice / Of frozen north discoveries?" he asks (ll.21-22). Here the light and fire of true faith are used to counter the

¹² See the account of Frobisher's three northern expeditions in Richard Hakluyt, *The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation*, ed. Ernest Rhys (London: J. M. Dent, 1926), vol. V, pp. 131-170.

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hardships of the world on a way which nevertheless stays open to discovery.

The image of the frozen north seas reappears in another poem equally fraught with geographic imagery, "The Good Morrow", in the *Songs and Sonnets*. Here the poet compares his face and that of his beloved to two hemispheres (as in a stereoscopic world map) forming an ideal world – a world which has no room for the hardships of the frozen north, a world on which the sun never sets: "Where can we find two better hemispheres / Without sharp north, without declining west?" (ll. 17-18)

Here, as elsewhere in Donne's poetry, and most notably in "Hymn to God my God" with which we started this reflection on Donne's cartographic imagination, we notice that one of the key features of the poet's exploitation of cartographic images is his reduction or contraction of those images. If it is true that geographic imagery is one of the most recurrent ones in Donne's poetry, it is equally true that more often than not, when the poet uses a cosmic image, he uses it about a chamber, a bed, a body, as in "A Nocturnal upon S. Lucy's Day" in which we witness this process of contraction in the first stanza. Here, in the short span of just nine lines, we move from a cosmic level, with "The sun is spent" (l. 3), to the level of the earth, with "The world's whole sap is sunk" (l. 5) and "The general balm th'hydroptic earth hath drunk" (l. 6), before ending with the limited perspective of a bed: "to the bed's-feet, life is shrunk" (l. 7). Similarly, the dramatic situations created by Donne are almost always enclosed within a world focalized on a confined space, such as a chamber, a bed which can alternatively be a death-bed as in the examples of "Hymn to God" or "A Nocturnal" in the above-quoted passage, or more optimistically a love-bed as in the conclusion of his "Sun Rising" in which the poet rhetorically addresses the sun: "Shine here to us, and thou art everywhere; / This bed thy centre is, these walls, thy sphere." (ll. 29-30)

The title "An Anatomy of the World", given to the first section of the *First Anniversary* (written in 1611 on the occasion of the first anniversary of the death of young Elizabeth Drury), presents itself as an epitome of this double interest. Indeed, for all its cosmic imagery denouncing the vanity of universal knowledge, experience and scientific discovery, the poem remains above all an "anatomy", that is to say primarily a study, not of the vast world, but of a dissected anthropomorphic body. Here, as in "Hymn to God my God",

the map to be read and deciphered is a humanized body and the poet's interest remains focused on the human dimension of the universe.

All in all, Donne's poetry denotes an undeniable familiarity with the scientific discoveries and debates of the time. Donne as well as other metaphysical poets participates in a general mood of exploration by adopting and adapting scientific references in the imagery of their poems. This mood of exploration is equally reflected in many an ontological question in Donne's poems, especially in the incipits of several of his *Holy Sonnets*: "Thou (i. e. God) hast made me, and shall thy work decay?" (HS1), "Why are we by all creatures waited on?" (HS12), "What if this present were the world's last night?" (HS 13) Yet, as Robert Ellrodt reminds us, "Donne's 'metaphysical poetry' is not a 'philosophical poetry': it never is the exposition of a system."¹³

For all Donne's interest in and frequent recourse to hyperbolically universal, cosmic imagery, leading one critic to call him a "Copernicus in poetry"¹⁴, his poetry is not a celebratory one chanting scientific progress, exploration and the discovery of the world. If Donne maps out the imagination and dramatizes a world in his poetry, it is not a world in itself, but mostly, again in Robert Ellrodt's words, a "world-for-the-self"¹⁵.

¹³ Robert Ellrodt, *Seven Metaphysical Poets: A Structural Study of the Unchanging Self* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 122.

¹⁴ Anonymous, quoted by Carey, p. ix.

¹⁵ Ellrodt, p. 125.