

## The Poet As Map-Maker: The Cartographic Inspiration and Influence of Elizabeth Bishop's "The Map"

New Year's Eve of 1934 found Elizabeth Bishop recuperating from the flu. Out of her isolation, the recently orphaned 23-year-old created "The Map." Inspired by a map's depiction of the North Atlantic, Bishop's exquisite poem alludes in part to the "seashore towns" and coastal waters of her childhood home, Nova Scotia. A seminal twentieth-century poem about maps, Bishop's "The Map" has inspired a host of other map-poems since it opened her Pulitzer prize-winning collection, *Poems: North & South—A Cold Spring*, in 1955. My paper, the third in a series advocating the use of poetry in the teaching of geography, will attempt to elucidate Bishop's masterpiece and introduce the map that, I believe, inspired her poem. The paper also will present two works influenced by "The Map": Howard Nemerov's "The Map-Maker on His Art" (1957) and Mark Strand's "The Map" (1960). Linking these three acclaimed American poets even further is their recognition of an intimate and explicit connection between poets and cartographers.

**Keywords:** Poetry about Maps, Map/Geography Education, Poets as Cartographers

Maps have inspired poets since the 8th century BCE when Homer sang about Achilles' shield, the first verbal description of a cosmological map in classical literature (*Iliad* 18.483-607; cf. Aujac 1987, 131-32). Although poetic descriptions of maps can be traced through every period, especially the Early Modern, the twentieth century is unique in its range, quality, and sheer number of poems about maps. In the first third of the century alone, no fewer than five pre-eminent poets used maps as their subject or theme. Thomas Hardy, whose books often include a map of South Wessex (i.e., Dorset, England), composed "The Place on the Map" about a pivotal moment in an affair: "the map revives her words, the spot, the time" (Hardy [1914] 1930, 918). G.K. Chesterton began his parody of the British Empire, "Songs of Education, ii: Geography, Form 17955301, Sub-Section Z," with the famous lines (Chesterton 1927, 86):

The earth is a place on which England is found,  
And you find it however you twirl the globe round;  
For the spots are all red and the rest is all grey,  
And that is the meaning of Empire Day.

Robert Frost produced "A Brook in the City," in which he bemoans the fate of a brook, imprisoned now in an urban "sewer dungeon" and remembered only by him and a few "ancient maps" (Frost [1921, 1922/24] 1969, 231). Marianne Moore created "Sea Unicorns and Land Unicorns," a celebration of the mythical beasts that once graced maps (Moore [1924] 1967, 77-79). And two years before attempting suicide, Laura Riding ended "The Map of Places" in despair: "All is known, all is found./ Death meets itself everywhere./ Holes in maps look through to nowhere" (Riding [1928] 1980, 87).

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Then, in 1935, Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979) published “The Map.” A classic in its own right, “The Map” is one of the *seminal* twentieth-century poems about maps and map-makers. Bishop recognized the importance of her poem and used it to open several works, including her 1955 collection *Poems: North & South—A Cold Spring* (Bishop 1955). After that volume won a Pulitzer Prize in 1956, “The Map” immediately inspired at least four other American poets to create their own map-poems. African-American poet Gloria C. Oden (b.1923) wrote two as a tribute to Bishop: “A Private Letter to Brazil” (1956-57), referring to the country where Bishop was living at the time, and “The Map,” a critique of the Rand McNally world-map that once hung on Oden’s livingroom wall (1961)<sup>1</sup>. Howard Nemerov (1920-1991) contributed “The Map-Maker on His Art” (Nemerov 1957). May Swenson (1913-1989) composed “The Cloud-Mobile,” a poem about map-shaped clouds, which first appeared in her *Cage of Spines* (1958), then in her collections of verses for children, *Poems to Solve* (1966) and *The Complete Poems to Solve* (1993; see Haft 1999, 36-38). And Mark Strand (b.1934) completed his own poem “The Map” in 1960 (Strand 1963 and 1964).

Since space prevents examining each of these here, my paper will focus on Bishop’s masterpiece and two of the poems it influenced, Nemerov’s “The Map-Maker on His Art” and Strand’s “The Map.” The poems by Oden and Swenson pay more overt homage to Bishop, whom they regarded as a mentor and friend, respectively (Redding 1978; Knudson 1993, 69-76 and 95). With Nemerov and Strand, Oden shares Bishop’s understanding of the map-maker’s art—its imaginative power and limitations, its technical achievement and arbitrary nature. Because Oden also critiques the map as overtly political, her poem awaits analysis in my study of ideological map-poems. For now, Nemerov and Strand take center stage since they follow Bishop in recognizing an intimate and explicit connection between poets and cartographers.

Bishop’s recognition was revolutionary. According to poet Lloyd Frankenberg, an early reviewer of “The Map” (Frankenberg 1949, 333):

*“The exact craft of the cartographer is perhaps least associated, customarily, with our ideas of poetry.”*

The exact craft of the cartographer is perhaps least associated, customarily, with our ideas of poetry. By showing us how human the map-maker’s decisions have to be, and how imaginative our reading of a literal map, the poem prepares us for poetry’s exactitudes. It demolishes prejudice without alluding to it.

Bishop’s sensitivity to art may have led her to associate poets with map-makers. Over a year before she composed “The Map,” Bishop had begun painting watercolors (letter of 22 October 1933: Bishop 1994, 9), some of which became book jackets for her collections (see Bishop 1996; Parker and Brunner 2000). Even more telling is her attempt—as a poet—to emulate Vermeer, the Dutch artist famous for his photographic eye and penchant for maps. After poet/critic Randall Jarrell praised *Poems: North & South—A Cold Spring* in his review for *Harper’s*, Bishop responded (letter of 26 December 1955: Bishop 1994, 312):

I still, from the bottom of my heart, honestly think I do NOT deserve it—but it has been one of my dreams that someday someone would think of Vermeer, without my saying it first, so now I think I can die in a fairly peaceful frame of mind any old time, having struck the best critic of poetry going that way . . .

Strand and Nemerov also have an artist’s perception. Strand not only

received a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Yale but has written three books about art, including one on Edward Hopper (Strand 1994), to whom his poetry has been compared (Hamilton 1996, 525). As for Nemerov, he once confessed, "My vocation as a grownup has to do with making pictures" (Nemerov 1965, 80). Poetry's relationship to painting is explored in many of his poems, like "Vermeer" ("Taking what is, and seeing it as it is . . ."), "The World as Brueghel Imagined It," "Still Life II," and "The Painter Dreaming in the Scholar's House," the latter inspired by his affinity to Paul Klee. In his essay "On Poetry and Painting," Nemerov argues that, while writing diverged from painting long ago, there remains "one instance" in which their "immense powers" have fused. For him that "one instance" turns out to be

the making of maps, charts, diagrams, blue prints . . . where the representation of the visible, at which painting is supremely capable, is accomplished in parallel with the strict and abstract syntax of writing able without modification of its own nature to transmit an infinite variety of messages, which is the supreme contribution of writing language (Nemerov 1971, 107).

Nemerov adds, "Might this somewhat elementary compound of writing and painting have still some way to go in the world?"

Since the 1980s, Brian Harley and other cartographic historians have been indebted to Erwin Panofsky, who published his ground-breaking *Studies in Iconology* in 1939, shortly after Bishop composed "The Map," and his *Meaning in the Visual Arts* in 1955 (Harley 2000). According to David Woodward, co-editor of the monumental *History of Cartography* Project (Woodward 1992, 122):

We can trace Harley's application of post-modernist approaches to maps back to his adoption of Erwin Panofsky's art historical analysis of layers of meaning in art images. The deepest layer—which Harley argued had all but been ignored in map history—consists of those latent iconographical meanings that reveal the basic social, religious, or philosophical attitudes of the maker.

The poems by Bishop, Nemerov, and Strand also resemble the maps they describe in revealing the most basic attitudes of their authors and culture.

One of our cultural assumptions is the art/science dualism. Used uncritically, it implies that "science" is progressive and primary, "art" immutable and secondary. Such stereotypes not only denigrate art (as "aesthetics, intuition, creativity") at the expense of science (as "rationality, reason, analytical, objective")—and *vice versa*—but also obscure their similarity "in attempting to envision and understand complex ideas, theories, and data" (Krygier 1995, 8-9).<sup>2</sup> By showing what poets and map-makers have in common, Bishop, Nemerov, and Strand bridge such artificial divides. This paper will unlock their secrets and offer—for the first time—what may be the cartographic inspiration for Bishop's "The Map."

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ELIZABETH BISHOP'S "THE MAP" (1935)

Land lies in water; it is shadowed green.  
 Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges  
 showing the line of long sea-weeded ledges  
 where weeds hang to the simple blue from green.  
 Or does the land lean down to lift the sea from under,  
 drawing it unperturbed around itself?  
 Along the fine tan sandy shelf  
 is the land tugging at the sea from under?

The shadow of Newfoundland lies flat and still.  
 Labrador's yellow, where the moony Eskimo  
 has oiled it. We can stroke these lovely bays,  
 under a glass as if they were expected to blossom,  
 or as if to provide a clean cage for invisible fish.  
 The names of seashore towns run out to sea,  
 the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains  
 —the printer here experiencing the same excitement  
 as when emotion too far exceeds its cause.  
 These peninsulas take the water between thumb and finger  
 like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods.

Mapped waters are more quiet than the land is,  
 lending the land their waves' own conformation:  
 and Norway's hare runs south in agitation,  
 profiles investigate the sea, where land is.  
 Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors?  
 —What suits the character or the native waters best.  
 Topography displays no favorites; North's as near as West.  
 More delicate than the historians' are the map-makers' colors.

New Year's Eve of 1934 found Elizabeth Bishop in her New York City apartment recuperating from the flu and examining a map that depicted—at the very least—the North Atlantic from Canada to Scandinavia. What emerged was "The Map," the poem that launched her career when it appeared in the anthology *Trial Balances*, introduced by poet Marianne Moore (Winslow 1935, 78-79). "The Map" later opened Bishop's first book, *North & South* (1946; Houghton Mifflin Poetry Award winner) as well as her Pulitzer Prize-winning *Poems: North & South—A Cold Spring* (1955), her *Complete Poems* (1969; National Book Award winner, 1970), and the definitive *The Complete Poems, 1927-1979*. (Copyright © 1979, 1983 by Alice Helen Methfessel. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC.)

Nineteen-thirty-four had been particularly memorable for the twenty-three-year-old Bishop. She met Marianne Moore, her mentor and life-long friend; she graduated from Vassar College; and she learned of her mother's death. Elizabeth had not seen her mother since 1916, the year her mother finally lost her sanity following her husband's unexpected death just months after the birth of their only child. Orphaned in all but name, Elizabeth was raised by a succession of relatives. Her happiest times—vividly recalled toward the end of her life in *Geography III* (1976)—were the childhood years and subsequent summers she spent with her mother's parents in the Canadian Maritime province of Nova Scotia. "The Map" alludes to her youthful geography not only in its focus upon coasts, peninsulas, and "seashore towns" but in its naming of areas directly north of Nova Scotia: Newfoundland and Labrador, whose Atlantic coastal waters

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have long provided fish for the Inuit. In an interview shortly before her death in 1979, Bishop credits her maternal family with the wanderlust that enabled her to create "The Map" (interview with Alexandra Johnson, quoted in Monteiro 1996, 10):

My mother's family wandered a lot and loved this strange world of travel. My first poem in my first book was inspired when I was sitting on the floor, one New Year's Eve in Greenwich Village, after I graduated from college. I was staring at a map. The poem wrote itself. People will say that it corresponded to some part of me which I was unaware of at the time. This may be true.

On the last day of 1934, Bishop found inspiration in a map that reflected her past and presaged her future. In 1935, the same year that "The Map" was published, Bishop took the money she had inherited from her father's wealthy relatives, and, for the first time, crossed the Atlantic for Europe (Travisano 1988, 25; Bishop 1994, 28 and 30). Bishop traveled abroad from 1935-37. Although she bought her beloved house in Key West, Florida a year after her return, it was not until settling in Brazil in 1951 that Bishop regularly spent more than a few seasons in any one place.

"The Map" mentions several types of physical and cultural features found on small-scale reference maps of the world—bays, peninsulas, mountains, towns, cities, countries. Otherwise, Bishop's poem provides little detail. Nowhere in the poem does Bishop identify the map that inspired her masterpiece. Instead, there are three place-names, a sprinkling of colors, and a possible allusion to the map's glassed surface; an indication that the map may have decorated her apartment, or that she was peering at it through a lens. Whatever its role in Bishop's decision to travel, the map as transformed into "The Map" is not a practical guide for ascertaining distance or direction. Instead, Bishop focuses on the more abstract relationships between geographical space and artistic representation, map and map-maker, map-maker and poet, and, ultimately, poet/map-maker and reader.

"Land lies in water." From the very beginning of her first stanza, Bishop is an astute map-reader. A map can make landmasses resemble floating islands, detached and supported by the sea. But the "shadowed green" of the mapped coastal waters in contrast to the "simple blue" of the sea reminds her that land extends below the surfaces of water and map. Diving into the third dimension implied by such "shadows," Bishop pictures in words the "sea-weeded ledges" of kelp that the map can only suggest, then explores what the map obscures altogether—the land extending below the oceans. "Or does the land . . . lift the sea from under?" she wonders in the second half of the first stanza. Perception, she implies, is a matter of perspective. Later Bishop suggests that the map reverses some natural balance between active sea and passive land: "Mapped waters are more quiet than the land is . . ."

From mid-first stanza on, land dominates the foreground of her poetic map and becomes increasingly animated as it "leans," "lifts," "draws," "tugs," "takes," "runs," and "investigates" the ever more "quiet" sea (Parker 1988, 78). Deprived by the map of its currents and wind, the sea appears buffeted by wave-like coastlines. This does not mean that the map that inspired "The Map" failed to present land-water forms clearly nor that the poem necessarily alludes to what was known at the time about the ocean (see *Mercator's World* 1998). Instead, land and sea have become symbolic of all spatial relationships on maps: at any given minute, each reader determines what is foreground and what is background (Wood

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1992, 140). By shifting perspective and juxtaposing the conflicting realities of map image and actual geography, Bishop creates a poem that interprets both. As Howard Nemerov observed in his review of Bishop's *Poems: North & South—A Cold Spring* (Nemerov 1955, 180):

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She chooses a subject in which art and nature, as it were, compare themselves to one another, or stand in such a relation that a remark about one is a remark about the other.

Like any map or person's observation of nature, "The Map" is one of any number of possible interpretations of the same "facts". The title's specificity becomes a paradox (Rotella 1991, 206).

There is perhaps no more seemingly transparent record of geographical reality than a well-drawn reference map. With its mathematical projection, scale of distance, and subdued colors, the map conveys an appearance of unimpeachable scientific truth. Bishop, however, understands that maps—like poems—are constructions of the human mind: they mirror culture and civilization, not the world. No matter how anonymous in appearance, every map reflects its map-maker, or rather a host of map-makers, living and dead, who have contributed to the formulation, standardization, and transmission of the cartographic conventions their society takes for granted. With these rules, map-makers reduce the distances and complexities of geography to create a map's comprehensible scale and selection of "facts."

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Yet legibility and aesthetics make their own demands. Consider Eduard Imhof's recommendation to other map-makers: "On small-scale maps which usually have a dense series of places and names, *place all names of coastal places on the ocean*" (Imhof 1975, 133, emphasis mine). However scrupulously map-makers may depict the land's profile and its varied features, the convention of labeling these overrides the usual rules of proportion and scale: "The names of seashore towns run out to sea, / the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains." As Denis Wood observes in his provocative *Power of Maps* (Wood 1992, 123):

In the map image, entire words and arrangements of words are given iconic license, generating a field of linguistic signs best likened to concrete poetry. Letters expand in size, increase in weight, or assume *majuscale* [*sic*] form to denote higher degrees of importance.

Conventions of coloration are particularly arbitrary. There is nothing factual about making Labrador "yellow," or about representing the sea, at all times and in all places, as either "quiet" or "simple blue" (Ehrensward 1987). In fact, a palette of "simple blue" and coastal "green" is completely inadequate for representing the silt or rapids of individual "native waters."

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Far from condemning map-makers, however, Bishop considers them kindred spirits for their powers of observation, technical expertise, and artistry. Throughout her career, Bishop shared her experience of geographic space, especially of places near the sea. She returned to the map as a metaphor in her poems "Florida" (1939), "Roosters" (1941), and "Song for the Rainy Season" (1960).<sup>3</sup> She designed the book jacket of her final volume, *Geography III*, to resemble "an old-fashioned schoolbook" (letter of 24 Dec. 1975: Bishop 1994, 602) and prefaced the collection with an epigraph from James Monteith's *First Lessons in Geography* (Monteith's Geographical Series, A. S. Barnes & Co., 1884). To these works and others, she brought her famous "eye," which enabled her to describe what she saw with the

apparent detachment and objectivity of a map-maker (Leibowitz 1977, 7; cf. Estess 1977, 1983).

Like a responsible cartographer, Bishop avoids cluttering her image with too much information. Bishop satisfies her reader's expectation of geographic detail yet maintains clarity through her selection and ordering of the features on her verbal map. She communicates ideas by employing a formal structure with its own elements and conventions (rhythm, meter, and rhyme). The brevity of Bishop's poem and the simplicity of her language allow the piece, like a map, to be taken in quickly by the eye. She frames her poem, not with a map-maker's neat line, but by enclosing the longer unrhymed middle stanza within the conspicuously rhymed *a b b a* pattern of the first and final stanzas. Inside this frame, she creates the poem's most vivid images—the poet's answer to the map's pictorial quality. "We can stroke these lovely bays, under a glass as if they were expected to blossom,/ or as if to provide a clean cage for invisible fish." And, "These peninsulas take the water between thumb and finger/ like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods."

Bishop's identification with map-makers is obvious in the last quatrain. Yet the lines themselves are tantalizingly ambiguous:

Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors?  
—What suits the character or the native waters best.  
Topography displays no favorites; North's as near as West.  
More delicate than the historians' are the map-makers' colors.

Bishop speaks for poets, historians, and cartographers by implying that all must describe what they see as accurately as possible, yet how each sees is conditioned by a range of individual and cultural experiences. Countries' boundaries are as arbitrary as their mapped colors; in both cases it is human beings, not scientific logic, that have determined the "suitability" of these features. Yet a map gives these features the same acknowledgment, the same aura of permanence and objectivity, as features from the physical environment. As if to emphasize this point, Bishop denies authorial omniscience to the map-maker and herself by punctuating her poem with unanswered questions: "Shadows, or are they shallows?" "Are they assigned, or can the countries pick their colors?"

Equally open to interpretation is the statement "Topography displays no favorites; North's as near as West." If the map that inspired Bishop's poem was a small-scale reference map of the North Atlantic or, more likely, of the world, then "topography" seems an imperfect word at best: its associations with small areas and the representation of relief was commonplace even when Bishop wrote "The Map" (*Webster's New International Dictionary* 1933). But there are other possibilities. Bishop may have chosen "topography" because it implies both verbal description and graphic portrayal of a "place" (*topos*). Since "-graphy" derives from the Greek verb "to express by written characters" as well as "to represent by lines drawn" (*Greek-English Lexicon*, 1968, s.v. *grapho*), the derivation of "topography" enables Bishop to articulate the ways poets—like/as map-makers—portray place. Bishop also plays with the definitions of "topography." One of these, "the determination of the position of the various parts and organs of the body" whether human or animal (*New English Dictionary* 1888-1928), corresponds to the poem's reading of coastlines and countries as "profiles" or "hares" as well as its underlying exploration of physical intimacy (e.g., Harrison 1993, 42-46; see below).

But if Bishop intends "topography" to mean the "surface configuration of the earth" (McKnight 1984, 525; cf. *Webster's New International Diction-*

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ary 1933), then favoritism—it is true—has little or no place. Because of the earth’s sphericity, furthermore, one can set off from any point on the globe and, under the (admittedly) ideal circumstances of comparable terrain and weather, travel in a given time-period the same distance in any direction. But the statement “topography displays no favorites” becomes questionable if “topography” refers to the *mapping* of the earth on a flat surface, especially the mapping of such a large area as the North Atlantic (see *Multilingual Dictionary* 1973, 278, s.v. “topographic map”). Once a map-maker endeavors to translate so much space onto a two-dimensional map, the process of flattening the earth’s spherical shape distorts the original shape, area, distance, or direction in some regions. To minimize such distortions, cartographers must show “favoritism”. Faced with a startling variety of projections, they are forced to choose the mathematical grid that best “suits” the given area and the map’s intended use.

Until now, no one has suggested what map may have inspired Bishop, let alone its projection. Her only hint is an enigmatic statement made in an interview four decades after she wrote “The Map” (1976 interview with J. Bernlef, quoted in Monteiro 1996, 66):

*“The Map” had to do with a red map. There was nothing particularly noteworthy about it, but I was attracted by the way the names were running out from the land into the sea.*



Figure 1: “Cartography of the World 1921.” Detail of Plate 1, “Mapping of the World,” in *The Times Survey Atlas of the World*, London: *The Times*, 1922. This central map, measuring approximately 6 3/4” x 11 1/4”, was prepared at the Edinburgh Geographical Institute under the direction of John George Bartholomew. The *Times Survey Atlas of the World* was a landmark atlas with a general index of over 200,000 names and one hundred maps reflecting national surveys, explorers’ reports, and the territorial redistributions obtained by the 1919 Peace Conference in Paris. (This digital file image was supplied by David Rumsey of the David Rumsey Collections, <http://www.davidrumsey.com>. His stunning online collection of privately owned maps utilizes cutting-edge software and features thousands of maps scanned at very high resolution.)



Intriguingly, a “red map” opens *The Times Survey Atlas of the World* (1922), the culminating achievement of John George Bartholomew (1860-1920), third scion in the prestigious John Bartholomew family of map-makers and publishers (Snyder 1993, 256; Gardiner 1976, 53 and 63-64). Titled “Cartography of the World 1921,” this thematic map shows how well the earth was mapped at that time (Figure 1). As the legend explains, several colors indicate the types of maps existing for various regions. A deep brick-red denotes “accurate trigonometrical surveys”; slanted lines of brick-red mean “less detailed” surveys; dots of brick-red imply “fairly reliable general maps”; yellow indicates “sketch maps”; and white is labeled “unmapped” to highlight an absence of maps. Since “Cartography of the World 1921” touts cartography’s current sophistication, much of the mapped surface appears in red—particularly areas bounding the North Atlantic (Figure 2).<sup>4</sup> And while we cannot expect any map to match Bishop’s poetic description exactly, “Cartography of the World 1921” does picture a yellow Labrador, a sea dominated by “simple blue,” and place-names running conspicuously out to sea.<sup>5</sup> More important, the map is not “particularly noteworthy.” The reason Bishop did not overlook the map entirely is that it appears as the atlas’ first plate, at the center of a page filled with maps showing the earth imperfectly represented in earlier periods (Figure 3). How appropriate if Bishop’s inspiration turns out to be a map about maps.

Although “Cartography of the World 1921” may be the one Bishop remembered, however vaguely, she had only to flip to the next page of the atlas to find a truly beautiful map, the “World Bathy-Orographical” (Figure 4). As its name suggests, this thematic map showcases ocean depths and mountain heights, so much so that “profile” views above and below the world-map compare the depth of sea with the height of land at various latitudes. Fourteen shades of subdued blue-greens and browns make the “World Bathy-Orographical” more attractive than any of its other incarnations in John Bartholomew atlases (e.g. two in 1890; one each in 1909, 1917, and 1924). The map epitomizes J.G. Bartholomew’s famous “sensitivity to colour harmony” (Gardiner 1976, 31). With its delicate colors, its aura of conveying the most up-to-date scientific knowledge, and its emphasis on the relationship between sea and land, “World Bathy-Orographical” is—I believe—the second, unacknowledged, inspiration for “The Map.” After five years of perusing twentieth-century maps and atlases published before 1935, I submit that Bishop conflated two adjacent maps opening the most highly regarded and exquisite English-language atlas published between the World Wars.<sup>6</sup>

Like all the maps in *The Times Survey Atlas*, the red map and “World Bathy-Orographical” were prepared by J.G. Bartholomew’s Edinburgh Geographical Institute. Yet they do not have the same projection. Although *The Times Survey Atlas* names neither, a look at J.G. Bartholomew’s *Library Reference Atlas of the World* (1890) confirms that “World Bathy-Orographical” uses the Mercator Projection and that other world-maps employ Gall’s Stereographic Projection, the very one used on “Cartography of the World 1921” (Snyder 1993, 163; cf. 109). What makes the Mercator

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Figure 2: Detail of “Cartography of the World 1921,” showing the area bounding the North Atlantic. With the obvious exception of Labrador, much of eastern North America and most of Europe appear in red or shades of red, thus proclaiming the accuracy of maps available for those areas. Great Village, home of Bishop’s maternal grandparents, is located fifty miles north of Halifax (Nova Scotia) at the eastern end of the deeply indented bay. (This digital file image was supplied by David Rumsey of the David Rumsey Collections, <http://www.davidrumsey.com>.)

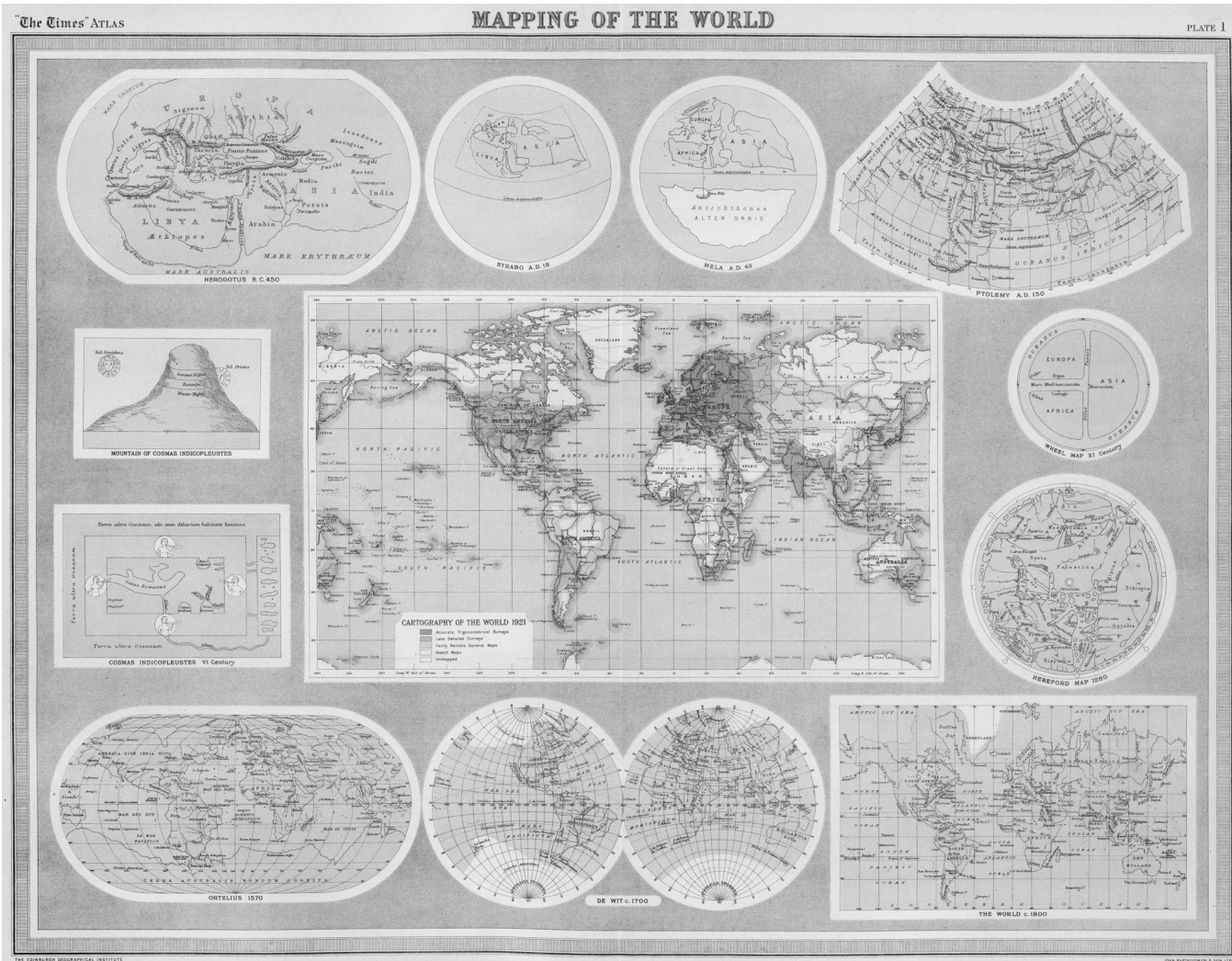


Figure 3: "Mapping of the World." Plate 1 in The Times Survey Atlas of the World, London: The Times, 1922. The map measures approximately 16 1/4" x 21". (This digital file image was supplied by David Rumsey of the David Rumsey Collections, <http://www.davidrumsey.com>.)

Projection relevant here is not how it revolutionized navigation charts, although an earlier bathy-orphographical map is called "Mercator's Chart" (see J.G. Bartholomew, *Cassell's Atlas*, 1909, Pl.2). Rather, it is that the Mercator Projection stretches scale and area to such an extent that at 60° North Latitude—roughly the location of the Scandinavian city of Oslo, Norway—mapped distance is twice that at the Equator, where the scale remains true, and area is four times as great (Greenhood 1964, 126; Robinson, et al. 1978, 156). Yet, despite its distortion of the higher latitudes, the sixteenth-century Mercator Projection remained the most popular world-map projection during Bishop's early years; not until the 1930s and 1940s were its limitations on small-scale maps widely recognized in the United States (Schulten 2000, 14; cf. Monmonier 1995, 16-19). As for "Cartography of the World 1921," in 1855 James Gall had attempted to lessen the north-south exaggeration of the Mercator Projection by making his scale accurate at 45° North and South Latitudes. Yet, because it distorts shape, Gall's Stereographic Projection has its own problems. At 60° North Latitude, a place to the west of a point on the ground will appear farther away *on the map* than a place the same distance to the north of that point (see Snyder 1993, 149 and fig. 3.37).



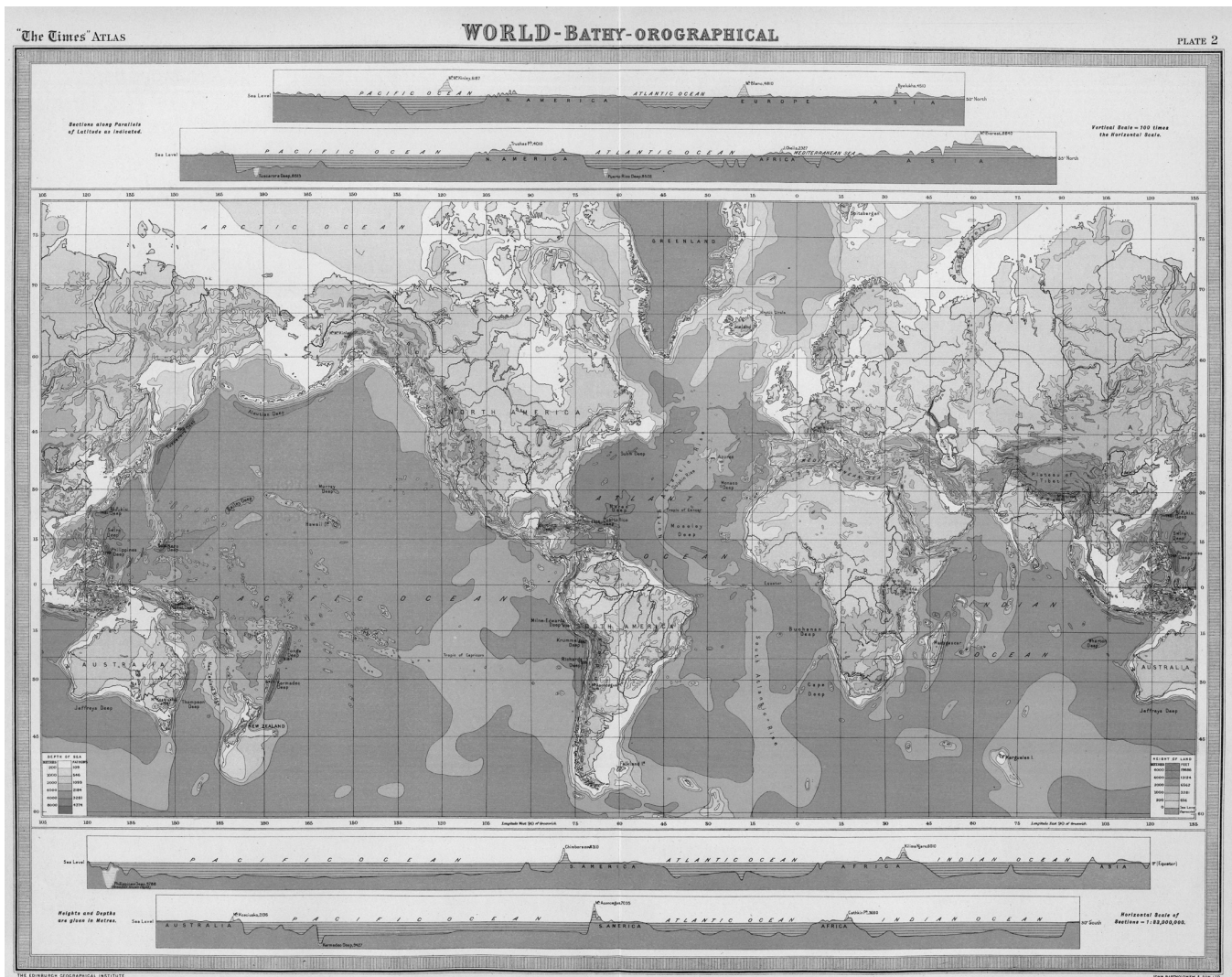


Figure 4: "World Bathy-Orographical." Plate 2 in *The Times Survey Atlas of the World*, London: *The Times*, 1922. Measuring approximately 16 1/4" x 21", "World Bathy-Orographical" was prepared at the Edinburgh Geographical Institute under the direction of John George Bartholomew. The map's vertical scale is one hundred times greater than its horizontal. (This digital file image was supplied by David Rumsey of the David Rumsey Collections, <http://www.davidrumsey.com>.)

All of which means one of two things. Either Bishop's statement "Topography displays no favorites; North's as near as West" is as ironic as her previous line "what suits the character or the native waters best." Or it indicates that Bishop—like most people—did not recognize the inevitable limitations of *any* map projection.

"More delicate than the historians' are the map-makers' colors." Bishop's distinction between historians and map-makers in her final line has nothing to do with differences in observation, record-keeping, judgment, or even strict adherence to "fact": history is no less prone to fiction-making than cartography. Yet readers astute enough to detect in a history text the underlying interests of its author are often unaware that every map, as Denis Wood says, "embod[ies its] author's prejudices, biases, partialities, art, curiosity, elegance, focus, care, attention, intelligence, and scholarship" (Wood 1992, 23). And Brian Harley contended as recently as 1990 that historians seldom study maps precisely because they regard them as scientific and transparent "mirrors" (Harley 1990, 3-4). Bishop does not make this mistake. Instead, she considers historians' ways of

*"Either Bishop's statement . . . is as ironic as her previous line . . . Or it indicates that Bishop—like most people—did not recognize the inevitable limitations of any map projection."*

communicating their interpreted “facts” (“colors”) to be less “delicate” than map-makers’.

In choosing the word “delicate,” Bishop epitomizes her responses to the map as well as her hopes for the poem it inspired. Both are not only “subdued,” “fragile,” and “exquisitely sensitive,” but also “possess subtle craftsmanship” and “give pleasure” (*New English Dictionary* 1888-1928; *Webster’s Dictionary* 1933). Coupled with her recognition of the art inherent in every map, Bishop’s final words remind us of what philosopher and poet George Santayana wrote in *The Sense of Beauty* (Santayana [1896]/1936, 158):

*“In choosing the word ‘delicate,’ Bishop epitomizes her responses to the map as well as her hopes for the poem it inspired.”*

A map is not naturally thought of as an aesthetic object . . . The mind is filled either with imaginations of the landscape the country could really offer, or with thoughts about its history and inhabitants. These circumstances prevent the ready objectification of our pleasure in the map itself. And yet, let the tints of it be a little subtle, let the lines be a little delicate, and the masses of land and sea somewhat balanced, and we really have a beautiful thing; a thing the charm of which consists almost entirely in its meaning, but which nevertheless pleases us in the same way as a picture or a graphic symbol might please. Give the symbol a little intrinsic worth of form, line, and color, and it attracts like a magnet all the values of the things it is known to symbolize. It becomes beautiful in its expressiveness.

Years after Bishop penned her famous conclusion to “The Map,” a 1948 draft of a letter provides insight into her distinction between historian and map-maker:<sup>7</sup>

*“A map is not naturally thought of as an aesthetic object . . . The mind is filled either with imaginations of the landscape the country could really offer, or with thoughts about its history and inhabitants.”*

A sentence in Auden’s *Airman’s Journal* has always seemed very profound to me—I haven’t the book here so I can’t quote it exactly, but something about time and space and how “geography is a thousand times more important to modern man than history”—I always like to *feel* exactly where I am geographically all the time, on the map,—but maybe that is something else again.

Near the end of her life, Bishop acknowledged, “Most of my poems are geographical, . . . and most of the titles of my books are geographical, too: *North & South*, *Questions of Travel*, and . . . *Geography III*.”<sup>8</sup> Some critics even regard the poem’s final line as programmatic for Bishop’s entire writings; a confession, they argue, to what would become her lifelong preference for geography over history.<sup>9</sup>

Whatever preference Bishop reveals in “The Map,” it is not one of place over people. Contemplating a map devoid of the life-forms studied by geographers, Bishop imagines that she sees plants, animals, and people. Canadian bays appear to “blossom” and “provide a clean cage for invisible fish,” Norway becomes a “hare,” “profiles investigate the sea,” and the Scandinavian peninsulas resemble “women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods.” So animated is the interdependence of land and sea as to symbolize the give-and-take of human relationships and emotions. In his study of Bishop’s notebooks, Brett Millier discovers the inspiration for the lines “The names of seashore towns run out to sea,/ the names of cities cross the neighboring mountains” (Millier 1993, 77; cf. 57 and Bishop 1994, xi and 9):

Months earlier, Elizabeth had written in her notebook: “Name it friendship if you want to—like names of cities printed on maps, the word



is much too big, it spreads all over the place, and tells nothing of the actual place it means to name." When she first began working on the image, Elizabeth was contemplating the nature of her attachment to Margaret Miller, and that undefinable emotion is invested in the poem as well. The astonishing cool of the lines, "the printer here experiencing the same excitement/ as when emotion too far exceeds its cause" disguises the fact that Elizabeth is working here at the heart of all that mattered to her personally and poetically.

Bishop relates to geography by the "feel" of a place on a map. Once again, the poet allies herself to cartographers who, in addition to their other skills, have been draftsmen, colorists, and printers. "The Map" not only alludes to these facets of the map-maker's craft but ascribes to land the sensation of touch. For Bishop, as for Denis Wood, "maps are about relationships," whether among landscapes (e.g., towns, countries, waterways) or between map and map-reader (Wood 1992, 139, 132). Cartographers communicate with map users most obviously through the lettering they apply to their maps (Dent 1993, 280). Like map-makers/printers overrunning "names" on the map, Bishop reaches out to readers in her evocative lines "experiencing the same excitement/ as when emotion too far exceeds its cause." And she uses the first person only once in "The Map"—to encourage her readers: "We can stroke these lovely bays . . ." For Bishop, in the end, the peculiar "truth" of any map derives from its marriage of science and art, scale and perspective, map-maker/poet and reader. "The Map" enriches us all through the delicacy of Bishop's observations and her recognition that not all questions have answers.

*"For Bishop, . . . maps are about relationships, whether among landscapes (e.g., towns, countries, waterways) or between map and map-reader."*

HOWARD NEMEROV'S "THE MAP-MAKER ON HIS ART" (1957)

After the bronzed, heroic traveler  
Returns to the television interview  
And cocktails at the Ritz, I in my turn  
Set forth across the clean, uncharted paper.  
Smiling a little at his encounters with  
Savages, bugs, and snakes, for the most part  
Skipping his night thoughts, philosophic notes,  
Rainy reflexions, I translate his trip  
Into my native tongue of bearings, shapes,  
Directions, distances. My fluent pen  
Wanders and cranks as his great river does,  
Over the page, making the lonely voyage  
Common and human.

This, my modest art,  
Brings wilderness well down into the range  
Of any budget; under the haunted mountain  
Where he lay in delirium, deserted  
By his safari, they will build hotels  
In a year or two. I make no claim that this  
Much matters (they will name a hotel for him  
And none for me), but lest the comparison  
Make me appear a trifle colorless,  
I write the running river a rich blue  
And—let imagination rage!—wild green  
The jungles with their tawny meadows and swamps  
Where, till the day I die, I will not go.

Howard Nemerov's "The Map-Maker on His Art" first appeared in *The New Yorker* on 30 November 1957. The following year, the poet included this slightly revised version in his fourth collection of verse, *Mirrors & Windows* (1958); and, two decades later, in the *Collected Poems of Howard Nemerov* (1977), which won the 1978 National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize. (Reprinted courtesy of Mrs. Howard Nemerov, for the estate of Howard Nemerov.)

Like so many other pieces in *Mirrors & Windows*, "The Map-Maker on His Art" is about the art of poetry and the need for some sort of framing device—mirrors, windows, television screens, maps, or poetry itself—to mediate between the mind and the world's insane variety (Bartholomay 1972, 91). In "The Map-Maker on His Art," Nemerov assumes the persona of a map-maker, whose masterful blend of science, technical skill, and artistry can transform a blank piece of paper into a unique creation that delimits and orders the world it reflects. But Nemerov's map-maker is also a poet. With his "fluent" pen, he "translates" journeys into his "native tongue" and "writes the running river a rich blue."

This affinity between poet and map-maker owes much to Elizabeth Bishop's "The Map." It is no coincidence that Nemerov composed "The Map-Maker on His Art" within two years of reviewing her Pulitzer Prize-winning collection *Poems: North & South—A Cold Spring* for the journal *Poetry* (Nemerov 1955). But Nemerov's poem is far more masculine than Bishop's. Whereas she feminizes "The Map" with lines like "these peninsulas take the water between thumb and finger / like women feeling for the smoothness of yard-goods" (Parker 1988, 57), Nemerov explicitly compares his map-maker persona to another man, the "heroic traveler" whose notes he translates into his map/poem. Like Bishop, Nemerov plays with the imaginative possibilities and limitations of the map-maker's art. Yet his gentle self-mockery—as well as the influence of other sources besides Bishop—make the poem entirely his own.

Just as the poet memorializes his subject, Nemerov's map-maker ensures that the journey of the heroic traveler is known and reproducible. In our high-tech society, television has almost entirely usurped the poet's traditional role of entertainer and transmitter of culture. Yet television leaves a patina of slick commercialism even on the exploits of "the bronzed, heroic traveler" it idolizes. Nemerov's map-maker, caught up in same ambivalence of packaging the traveler's route in a way that makes it "common and human," uses his "modest art / [to] bring wilderness well down into the range / of any budget." Recognizing his importance to the "heroic traveler," the map-maker reveals the smugness of the armchair explorer who experiences unusual places vicariously, but without his subject's expense, loneliness, or danger. The map-maker assumes the mantle of scientific reason to ignore most of the traveler's personal, and therefore irrelevant, reflections. "The instruments of science," Nemerov would later assert in his *Poetry and Fiction*, "have as their aim the creation of an objectivity as nearly as possible universal in character" (Nemerov 1963, 15). The map-maker treats the traveler as if he were as alien as the wilderness, and even boasts about having to "translate his trip / into my native tongue of bearings, shapes, / directions, distances."

That Africa is the locale of the traveler's adventure is implied by the Swahili word "safari" and the poem's offhand reference to "savages." Fifteen years before Nemerov composed his poem, Beryl Markham—the well-known aviatrix from England and East Africa—published her acclaimed autobiography, *West with the Night*, about life in Africa (1942). In it, she praises the map for keeping us from being "alone and lost," then criticizes its sublime indifference (245-46):

"Nemerov's poem is far more masculine than Bishop's."

"Recognizing his importance to the 'heroic traveler,' the map-maker reveals the smugness of the armchair explorer who experiences unusual places vicariously, but without his subject's expense, loneliness, or danger."

Yet, looking at it, feeling it, running a finger along its lines, it is a cold thing, a map, humourless and dull, born of calipers and a draughtsman's board . . . This brown blot that marks a mountain has, for the casual eye, no other significance, though twenty men, or ten, or only one, may have squandered life to climb it. Here is a valley, there a swamp, . . . ; and here is a river that some curious and courageous soul, like a pencil in the hand of God, first traced with bleeding feet.

Here is your map. Unfold it, follow it, then throw it away, if you will. It is only paper. It is only paper and ink, but if you think a little, if you pause a moment, you will see that these two things have seldom joined to make a document so modest and yet so full with histories of hope or sagas of conquest.

Like Markham, Nemerov understands the courage and adventure behind the map. But whereas she sees only a draftsman producing the image, Nemerov recognizes an artist as well. By the 1950s, map-makers were making large-scale maps of Africa with the help of aerial photographs supplemented by triangulation and height control (Stone 1995). Although Nemerov had flown for the Canadian and American forces during the World War II (Labrie 1980, 11 and 135), "The Map-Maker on His Art" hints at none of the technological advances in cartography made possible by the airplane or the war. (See Robinson et al. 1978, 5 and 98ff.). This is not surprising, since Nemerov did not consider photography an art, although such a sentiment may seem strange coming from the brother of noted photographer Diane Arbus (Nemerov 1965, 81-84). Instead, like a painter or a poet, Nemerov's map-maker transforms documentary materials with only pen, ink, and paper.

But even if his tools are old-fashioned, Nemerov's alter-ego knows his craft and designs his map in such a way as to inspire others to retrace the traveler's journey. He keeps his visual images simple, since map readers tend to find such images more memorable (Arnheim 1976, 9). Understanding that the critical eye relishes contrasts (Robinson et al. 1978, 285), he chooses a bold palette and exuberant style to complement his "bearings, shapes, / directions, distances." As a map-maker, he uses colors conventionally—blue for water, green for vegetation, tan for drier areas (Robinson et al. 1978, 312). Yet he recognizes that his unnaturally changeless hues are, as Denis Wood observes, "metaphors proclaim[ing] the map as *ideal* (or at least hyperbole), at once an analogue of [the] environment and an avenue for cultural fantasy about it" (Wood 1992, 122). And so his blue is "rich"; his green, "wild"; and his tan, "tawny," like lions on the African plains. As eminent cartographer Arthur Robinson reminds us, "One can be taught a craft (i.e., the mastery of the materials and techniques with which one works), but one cannot be taught the art" (Robinson et al. 1978, 280).

In "The Map-Maker on His Art," Nemerov emphasizes that poet and map-maker are linked by their art. Yet he also knows that aesthetic urges are complex and human. Even as the map-maker objectifies the traveler's adventure, he is seduced by the romance of the safari he is mapping. "I . . . set forth across the clean, uncharted paper" shows his desire to emulate the traveler; so does "my fluent pen / wanders . . . / over the page, making the lonely journey . . ." The defensiveness behind the map-maker's condescending posture is brought home when he protests too much about the hotel that will be built and named for the traveler. Afraid of appearing as "colorless" as his hero is "bronzed," the map-maker lets his "imagination rage" in coloring his map. And so Nemerov's map-maker blows his cover of being entirely scientific and technically proficient: he unwittingly

*"But even if his tools are old-fashioned, Nemerov's alter-ego knows his craft and designs his map in such a way as to inspire others to retrace the traveler's journey."*

reveals his resemblance to the traveler, whose poetic “night thoughts, philosophic notes,/ [and] rainy reflexions” he had tried to suppress. Not that Nemerov equates science with “truth,” or poetry with its opposite:

In his essay “Poetry, Prophecy, Prediction” Nemerov has observed that scientific language is the language in which we “tell each other myths about the motions and the purposes of mind disguised as world, as time, as truth,” adding dryly that “myth believed is never called a myth” (Labrie 1980, 17).

*“The implication that Africa is the locale of the traveler’s adventure leaves little doubt that Joseph Conrad’s 1899 classic Heart of Darkness can be far from Nemerov’s mind.”*

Unlike cartographers who enjoy being out in the field, Nemerov’s map-maker is active only in terms of his creation. But like most poets, this map-maker distances himself from what he records in order to see it whole. In his commitment to his art and his pretense of objectivity, he sacrifices a fuller participation in life: the world of his maps becomes a convenient substitute for the world itself. The traveler, by contrast, risks life and sanity for knowledge. In the wilderness, the only frames that circumscribe his experience are the spatial and chronological boundaries of his journey, and the diary with which he defines that experience for himself.

The implication that Africa is the locale of the traveler’s adventure leaves little doubt that Joseph Conrad’s 1899 classic *Heart of Darkness* can be far from the poet’s mind. Nemerov’s favorite fictional character was Marlow, the narrator of *Heart of Darkness* (Nemerov 1965, 152). Early in the novel, Marlow utters one of the most celebrated passages about a map’s effect on others. After his harrowing adventure in the Belgian Congo, he recalls how this part of central Africa had seemed “the biggest, the most blank” space on the maps of his childhood (Conrad [1899] 1969, 10):

Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, “When I grow up I will go there.”

Marlow’s story reflects that of his creator (Baines 1960; Allen 1967; Sherry 1971). In his autobiographical *Some Reminiscences*, Conrad confesses that he had resolved at the age of nine to visit “the blankest of blank spaces on the earth’s figured surface” (Conrad 1912, 41). For him that meant the sixty-mile stretch of rapids on the upper Congo River known as Stanley Falls. Eighteen years later, in 1890, Conrad got his chance to command a steamship on the Congo, one of the longest rivers in the world. In “The Map-Maker on His Art,” the traveler’s “great . . . running river” may allude to the fascination his literary predecessor experienced when confronted by the sight of the Congo River “on the map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled” (Conrad [1899] 1969, 10).

*“Conrad himself never overcame his disillusionment with the reality of African exploration.”*

But there is a dark side to maps that depict empty spaces in far-off countries. In *The Power of Maps*, Denis Wood suggests that “mapmaking cultures [like American, Belgian, and British] differ from non-mapmaking cultures [like African and Native American] by the need, among others driven by mapmaking, to fill in the blanks within and without maps” (Wood 1992, 44). Such “empty spaces” imply that the area is uninhabited, except perhaps by “savages, bugs, and snakes”; and that it is open to foreign exploration, exploitation, or settlement (Wood 1992, 115; Harley 1994, 308). Conrad himself never overcame his disillusionment with the reality of African exploration. He later confessed that reaching Stanley



Falls brought him “a great melancholy . . . and the distasteful knowledge of the vilest scramble for loot that ever disfigured the history of human conscience and geographical exploration” (Conrad 1926, 17).

“The Map-Maker on His Art” differs from Conrad’s novel in tone and in its emphasis upon “uncharted” *paper*, not wilderness. Yet the poem reveals the cultural imperialism and economic colonialism of mid-twentieth-century American society as clearly as *Heart of Darkness* reflects the colonial mentality of Victorian England. Though Nemerov’s map-maker and “bronzed, heroic traveler” are dissimilar in so many ways, both are pawns and manipulators of their society’s curiosity and acquisitiveness. Nemerov contrasts the hero’s mythical journey with the hype that greets him afterwards. In his footsteps, developers and tourists will follow, staking out claims and converting the wilderness into an exotic theme-park ringed by hotels that offer the comforts of home. Just as a poem or a map are one remove from the experience they record, so is the creation of this artificial wilderness in the heart of another people’s land. Although insisting that he will never go there, the map-maker contributes to this transformation by making his inexpensive maps attractive to any would-be “heroic traveler.”

Conrad never names the Congo or its great river in *Heart of Darkness*. This may explain why Nemerov remains so vague about the location of his traveler’s adventure. But there may be another reason as well. His name is Ernest Hemingway, and he appears to be Nemerov’s third inspiration for “The Map-Maker on His Art.”

“Writer, soldier of fortune, big-game hunter, deep-sea fisherman, and bullfight buff” (L. Hemingway 1962, 13), Hemingway was a darling of the media from the 1940s until his suicide in 1961 (Lynn 1987, 545). Relentlessly associated with his own fictional heroes, he is the obvious model for Nemerov’s “bronzed, heroic traveler.” By 1957, Hemingway had made two celebrated safaris to East Africa, and had canceled a third only recently. Hemingway transformed his 1933-34 hunt for big-game into his *Green Hills of Africa* (Hemingway 1935) and the acclaimed short-story “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” (Hemingway 1939). In 1953-54, he returned to Kenya and Tanganyika. Then, while flying over Murchison Falls on the Victoria Nile in Uganda, Hemingway’s plane crashed (Baker 1956, 330; see Hemingway’s “The Christmas Gift” in *Look* magazine, 20 April and 4 May 1954). Feared dead, Hemingway later delighted in reading the obituaries and retractions that proliferated in late January 1954. There was even an apocryphal story about Hemingway’s press conference in the Lake Victoria Hotel days after the crash: it is said that he was carrying “a bottle of gin and a bunch of bananas and defiantly proclaiming that his luck was running good” (Lynn 1987, 572). Three years later, however, poor health forced Hemingway to abandon plans for his third safari. Instead of Africa, the Paris Ritz became his home from November 1956 through January 1957 (M. Hemingway 1976, 440-441).

“The Map-Maker on His Art” reveals other correspondences to Hemingway. In the autobiographical *Green Hills of Africa*, Hemingway intersperses his own “night thoughts, philosophic notes, / rainy reflexions”—most of them on writers and writing—with graphic accounts of hunting lions, antelope, and rhinoceros. He complains of tsetse flies, mosquitoes, and locusts; abhors snakes; and describes several encounters with Masai villagers (Hemingway 1935: e.g., 19ff., 59, 70ff., 108ff., 195ff., 218-24, 283ff.). Critic Edmund Wilson panned *Green Hills of Africa* in part because of its treatment (or lack thereof) of the Africans themselves: “As for the natives . . . the principal impression we get of them is that they were simple and inferior people who enormously admired Hemingway”

*“Though Nemerov’s map-maker and ‘bronzed, heroic traveler’ are dissimilar in so many ways, both are pawns and manipulators of their society’s curiosity and acquisitiveness. “*

*“Conrad never names the Congo or its great river in Heart of Darkness. This may explain why Nemerov remains so vague about the location of his traveler’s adventure. But there may be another reason as well.”*

*"Nemerov's 'bronzed, heroic traveler' appears to be a composite of Conrad, Hemingway, and their semi-autobiographical heroes who, like themselves, could not resist the lure of Africa."*

(Wilson [1939] 1941, 228). The amebic dysentery and prolapsed lower intestine that hospitalized him early in the 1933-34 safari become the gangrenous leg that kills his writer hero, Harry, in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro." Before Harry succumbs, he hallucinates about being flown over Mount Kilimanjaro, the tallest mountain in Africa (Hemingway 1939). Although I know of no Hotel Hemingway in Kenya or Tanganyika, the Ritz in Paris was such a favorite haunt that its smaller bar ("and cocktails at the Ritz") was renamed in Hemingway's honor (Fitch 1990, 158). Thus, Nemerov's "bronzed, heroic traveler" appears to be a composite of Conrad, Hemingway, and their semi-autobiographical heroes who, like themselves, could not resist the lure of Africa.

Stanley Hyman once said that Nemerov regards "history from the point of view of the losers" (quoted in Duncan 1971, 15). Perhaps being Jewish contributed to his identification with those whom society needs but rarely rewards—like the anonymous map-maker in the poem. Nemerov himself felt "absolutely neglected" at the time "A Map-Maker on His Art" was released in *Mirrors & Windows* (Nemerov 1965, 17). Within a few years, however, he had become "practically a pillar of the church, or ruined temple, of poetry" (*ibid.*). That acclaim lasted the rest of his life, culminating in his appointment as Poet Laureate of the United States (1988) shortly before his death, at seventy-one, in 1991. Always aware that our brief lifespan forms the ultimate frame of our experience, Nemerov has his map-maker/poet conclude with the wistful, yet defiant, realization that he has circumscribed his life within the margins of his art.

MARK STRAND'S "THE MAP" (1960)

Composed, generally defined  
 By the long sharing  
 Of contours, continents and oceans  
 Are gathered in  
 The same imaginary net.  
 Over the map  
 The portioned air, at times but  
 A continuance  
 Of boundaries, assembles in  
 A pure, cloudless  
 Canopy of artificial calm.  
 Lacking the haze,  
 The blurred edges that surround our world,  
 The map draws  
 Only on itself, outlines its own  
 Dimensions, and waits,  
 As only a thing completed can,  
 To be replaced  
 By a later version of itself.  
 Wanting the presence  
 Of a changing space, my attention turns  
 To the world beyond  
 My window, where the map's colors  
 Fade into a vague  
 After-image and are lost  
 In the variable scene  
 Of shapes accumulating. I see  
 A group of fields

Tend slowly inland from the breaking  
 Of the fluted sea,  
 Blackwing and herring gulls, relaxed  
 On the air's currents,  
 Glide out of sight, and trees,  
 Cold as stone  
 In the grey light of this coastal evening,  
 Grow gradually  
 Out of focus. From the still  
 Center of my eyes,  
 Encompassing in the end nothing  
 But their own darkness,  
 The world spins out of reach. And yet,  
 Because nothing  
 Happens where definition is  
 Its own excuse  
 For being, the map is as it was:  
 A diagram  
 Of how the world might look could we  
 Maintain a lasting,  
 Perfect distance from what it is.

Mark Strand wrote "The Map," one of his earliest poems, while on a Fulbright to Italy in 1960 (telephone conversation with Mark Strand, 17 May 2001). Although the twenty-six-year-old poet sent the poem to *The New Yorker* shortly after, it was not until 1963 that "The Map" appeared in print. The following year, Strand made minor changes before including this version in his first collection of verse, *Sleeping with One Eye Open* (Strand 1964, 19-20; reprinted courtesy of Mark Strand). Since then, the painter-turned-poet has achieved the highest recognition, including a MacArthur Fellowship (1987), his election as Poet Laureate of the United States (1990), and a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry (1999).

Strand had not met Elizabeth Bishop when he wrote "The Map," but befriended the older poet only when he went as a Fulbright lecturer to the University of Brazil in 1965. Both Strand and Bishop shared fond memories of their early years in Nova Scotia; and both eventually translated contemporary Brazilian poets into English. Strand regarded Bishop and Nemerov as two of his favorite poets (Kelen 1991, 62-65) and included several of their poems in his anthology *Contemporary American Poets* (Strand 1969).

Strand's poem is full of their influence. From Nemerov, he borrows the devices of map and window as frames for perception. From Bishop, Strand gleans his title, her "decisive delicacy" (Howard 1980, 592), and his meditation on the map's relation to the world. Like Bishop, Strand remains vague about the map: all we know is that it shows the world covered by a coordinate system. Like Bishop, Strand animates the map in the part of his verse that calls most attention to the similarity between maps and poems. After all, Strand's "imaginary net" alludes not only to the grid indicating lines of latitude and longitude but to the devices that shape words and ideas into poetry rather than prose. In Strand's case, however, it is not the mapped land that appears animated, but the map itself. The map "draws," "outlines" and "waits," as if that "composed" object were creating itself—Escher-like—without the aid of map-maker or poet. And unlike Bishop, Strand uses the first person several times in "The Map." His lines "from the still/ center of my eyes,/ encompassing in the end nothing/ but their own darkness" indicates an inwardness, a concern

*"... Strand's 'imaginary net' alludes not only to the grid indicating lines of latitude and longitude but to the devices that shape words and ideas into poetry rather than prose."*

*"Some might find comfort in the aura of immutability and permanence the map lends even to such notoriously unstable features as coastlines and tides. Not Strand."*

for "the interior universe" that distinguishes Strand's "The Map" from Bishop's insistent focus on the "external environment."<sup>10</sup>

For Strand, the map presents a world frozen in time, like a photograph or completed poem. Some might find comfort in the aura of immutability and permanence the map lends even to such notoriously unstable features as coastlines and tides. Not Strand. Instead, he protests against the map's "pure, cloudless/ canopy of artificial calm." Although clouds would obscure the earth's "continents and oceans," their absence on the map denies the presence of an atmosphere, the very thing that makes the earth a unique, life-bearing planet. Without clouds, the map is "not a portrait of the earth but at best a picture of its *land and sea surfaces*" (Wood 1992, 63). Strand's "pure . . . canopy" refers to another convention of most maps: the uniform lighting of the mapped surface, even though half the areas they represent on earth are hidden by night at any given time. Without night, the map refers neither to the earth's rotation on its axis nor to its sphericity (Wood 1992, 63). "A later version" of the map Strand had in mind is the so-called "portrait map" of the earth created by artist Tom Van Sant and scientist Lloyd Van Warren. "The Earth From Space"—a stunning map that has become an icon of the late twentieth century and its perception of our planet—looks like a photograph but is, in fact, a heavily manipulated product of three years and thirty-five-million satellite-scanned sections of the earth (Figure 5).

"Wanting the presence/ of a changing space, my attention turns/ to the world beyond/ my window." There Strand finds what is missing in the map's static, "artificial calm": life, movement, accumulating shapes, sound, cold, haze, light's disappearance. Yet his window frames perception just as the map's edges do. While the map offers a view of the entire world, the window opens on a very limited area, one too insignificant to appear on a small-scale map. While he watches, birds "glide out of sight" and trees "grow gradually/ out of focus." Denis Wood has his own comments about the relationship between maps and windows (Wood 1992, 21):

Only by the slimmest margins does the map fail to be a window on the world, margins which, because we can control and understand them, no more interfere with our vision than does a sheet of window glass.

All you have to do is ignore the frame.

All you have to do is ignore the way the window isolates this view at the expense of another, is open at only this or that time of day, takes in only so much terrain, obligates us to see it under this light...or that.

*"Maps offer us a reality that 'exceeds our vision, our reach, the span of our days'."*

As the darkness of evening descends, Strand understands that the ultimate frame of perception is not the window but his own eyes, "encompassing in the end nothing/ but their own darkness." And that darkness, in turn, forces him to acknowledge the universe's terrifying and uncontrollable mutability as the "world spins out of reach." Today, scientists who have mapped only 1/100,000 of the volume of the visible universe complain that they cannot produce maps drawn to scale. The universe is so empty and the distances between galaxies so great that, as one astrophysicist puts it, "even the tiny points shown in the more schematic maps are too large: true to scale, the galaxies would be invisible" (Geller 1997, 38).

If maps generally "extend the normal range of vision" and make the world's size and variety comprehensible to "diminutive human beings" (Robinson et al. 1978, 5 and 149, respectively), they also offer us a reality that "exceeds our vision, our reach, the span of our days" (Wood 1992, 49; cf. 5). Strand's final lines contrast the world beyond his window with the





### The Earth — From Space A New View of the World

Figure 5: "The Earth—from Space: A New View of the World" (1990), created by Tom Van Sant and the GeoSphere Project, Santa Monica, California, and processed by WorldSat International Inc., Mississauga, Ontario, Canada. The scale is approximately 1:46,000,000; and at the Equator, 1" = 726 miles. Courtesy of © 1990 The GeoSphere® Project/ Tom Van Sant, (800) 845-1522. (A later version is also available at [www.geosphere.com](http://www.geosphere.com).) I photographed this map courtesy of the Map Division, The New York Public Library—Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

unified, unchanging, and idealized version on his map. For Strand, in the end, the map must be viewed as a poem: "a diagram/ of how the world might look could we/ maintain a lasting,/ perfect distance from what it is."

Each of these poems has something to offer the geography student. Nemerov's "The Map-Maker on His Art" raises several questions. What is the relationship between a map-maker and his sources? How well does the poetic description of a map-maker's craft reflect the current technology? What are a map-maker's ethics as well as aesthetics? Bishop's "The Map" alludes to many issues vital to poets, cartographers, and their readers. By blurring the distinction between nature and its representation on the map, Bishop forces us to consider the boundaries between imagination and accuracy, between what we see and what we (think we) know. Perhaps no better way exists to explore these distinctions than requiring students to find the cartographic inspiration for a poem or other work of fiction. Yet since "The Map" is about reading maps and poems astutely, it can supplement introductory cartography texts or the groundbreaking article "Maps in Literature" by Philip and Juliana Muehrcke (1974), whose many literary examples give students a broad perspective on the nature of maps and mapping.

The poems also invite a post-modernist reading of maps. Only their concise poetic form distinguishes them from essays by Brian Harley or Denis Wood, works already fundamental to geography and cartography classes. Take, for example, Wood's critique of Van Sant's "The Earth From Space" (Figure 5). Though the map did not appear until 1990, thirty years after Mark Strand wrote his poem, Wood's deconstruction of the Van Sant map bears an uncanny resemblance to Strand's critique of *his* map's artifice and air of transcendence (see Wood 1992, 48-69; and above). Reading Strand's "The Map" in conjunction with chapter 3 of Wood's *The Power of Maps* makes us realize how pervasive the post-modern critique of maps had become in the second half of the twentieth century—thanks, in part,

### CONCLUSION

*"The poems also invite a post-modernist reading of maps."*

to Bishop. And it makes us wonder what the world map of the twenty-first century will look like.

Meanwhile, poets continue to explore their relation to cartographers. One of them is Beatriz Badikian. Her poem "Mapmaker" brings us back to the classical world where this paper—and map-poems—began (Badikian 1994, 10: emphasis mine):

I am Eratosthenes' heir—the librarian  
 who measured earth . . . .  
 A cartographer of sorts—I measure  
 earth with words . . . .  
 . . . .  
 this journey never ceases,  
*Mapmaking is a life-long task.*

#### ENDNOTES

1. In my telephone interview with Gloria Oden on 9 August 1995, the poet recalled writing the poems in these years. Both poems appear in Hughes 1964.

2. In 1973, the International Cartographic Association defined cartography as "the art, science, and technology of making maps, together with their study as scientific documents and works of art" (*Multilingual Dictionary* 1973, 1). Only twenty years later, however, "art" was banned from the definition. The 1992 "Report of the ICA Executive Committee" currently defines cartography as "the discipline dealing with the conception, production, dissemination and study of maps" (*ICA Newsletter* 20, reprinted in *Cartography and Geographical Information Systems* 20.3, 188; quoted in Krygier 1995, 3). So ingrained is this dualism in American culture that even *Webster's Dictionary* defines cartography as the "art or science" of making maps (*Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed., 1996). Fortunately, cartographers continue debating the best definition of "map" and "cartography" for the twenty-first century. (See the 2001 *Bulletin of the Society of Cartographers* 34.1 and 34.2).

3. For the dates of Bishop's poems, see Wyllie 1983.

4. A similar map, entitled "Mapping of the World," appeared for the first time in J.G. Bartholomew's *The Advanced Atlas of Physical and Political Geography*; but it occupies the bottom half of a much later page and uses a deep brown to indicate the most sophisticated trigonometrical surveys (Bartholomew 1917, 24). In the next monumental atlas prepared by John Bartholomew, the map is black-and-white and embedded in a Bartholomew Sinusoidal Projection (*Times Atlas of the World: Mid-Century Edition* 1958, xix). Finally, it is worth mentioning that *The Times Survey Atlas* in which the "red map" appears is itself bound in red.

5. The "yellow Labrador" detail distinguishes the map Bishop describes from the "red" map Virginia Woolf refers to in her novel *The Voyage Out* (Woolf 1915, 89). Like G.K. Chesterton in his parodic "Songs of Education, ii: Geography, Form 17955301, Sub-Section Z" (Chesterton 1927, 86; see above), Woolf alludes to the maps representing the British Empire as red. Though Labrador's boundaries were the subject of a dispute from 1902-27 between Canada and Newfoundland (which became part of Canada as late as 1949), Labrador is red—or actually pink—on such maps because Canada and Newfoundland were both members of the British Empire.

6. Bishop might have seen the atlas at the home of any one of her wealthy friends or paternal relatives, and borrowed it subsequently. She certainly would have found the atlas at the New York Public Library, where I discovered it over sixty years later. That fine library is one reason Bishop moved to New York City after graduation. No sooner had she settled at 16 Charles Street in July 1934 than Bishop "established a work space in the New York Public Library" (Millier 1993, 60 and 64).
7. Bishop to "Leo," 26 April 1948, quoted in Millier 1993, 78 n.12. See also her letter to U.T. and Joseph Summers, 19 October 1967, quoted in Goldensohn, 1992, 239-40, and Bishop 1994, 477.
8. Bishop's acceptance speech for the Books Abroad/Neustadt International Prize for Literature, April 1976; quoted in Millier 517 and n.32.
9. For instance, Gordon (1973, 1985), Liebowitz (1977) and Millier (1993). Those who discern a more complex relation between history and geography in Bishop's various periods include Parker (1988), Travisano (1988), Goldensohn (1992), and Harrison (1993).
10. Beatriz Schiller's 1977 interview with Elizabeth Bishop. Quoted in Monteiro 1996, 76; cf. Kirby 1990, 13-14.

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