

**ABYSMAL: A CRITIQUE  
OF CARTOGRAPHIC  
REASON**

By Gunnar Olsson.

Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007. 584 pages, maps, illustrations, diagrams, notes, bibliography, indexes. \$40.00, hardcover.

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**Review by:** Russell S. Kirby, University of South Florida

It is possible that Gunnar Olsson's *Abysmal: A Critique of Cartographic Reason* is one of the most important contributions to the field of modern philosophy in recent years. If this is so, let us hope that the "Abysmal for Dummies" version or the Cliff Notes thumbnail summary appears soon, as most intellectuals who are merely "gifted" will never successfully read and comprehend this book from cover to cover. This unfortunate conclusion pains this reviewer greatly, as it is clear that Olsson provides significant insights into the human condition, into the ability of the human mind to think spatially and comprehend one's surroundings within their geographical context, and into how this ability shapes human morality and aesthetics.

Olsson's narrative focuses on the "abyss" between what goes on within the human mind and what goes on in the world. While his context is geographic, this subject will interest all students of philosophy. Olsson argues that all human reasoning is geographic in some sense, and hence, all reason is also cartographic since cartography can be thought of as the language of geography.

The organization of *Abysmal* is similar to Olsson's earlier writings, including *Birds in Egg/Eggs in Bird* (1980) and *Lines of Power/Limits of Language* (1991). The major section headings are as follows: Confession, Prelude, Mappings, Instruments, Imaginations, Collation, Atlas, Requiem, and Memorials. That the book represents prodigious reading and research on Olsson's part goes without saying; the notes section takes up 62 pages in an even smaller font than the body of the text, which is small enough in its own right. This volume links directly to modern philosophy, with direct reference to Kant, Wittgenstein, Whitehead, and other icons of this field of inquiry. However, while there are references to some major figures in the history of cartography, the bibliography contains no citations by key twentieth-century philosophers of geography (for example, Hartshorne, Sack, and Tuan to name a few).

*Abysmal* contains many insights and quotable passages, but casual readers will likely be unable to distill the text

to its essence. Those who make the effort will find the journey worthwhile, but most of us will prefer to leave that task to others.

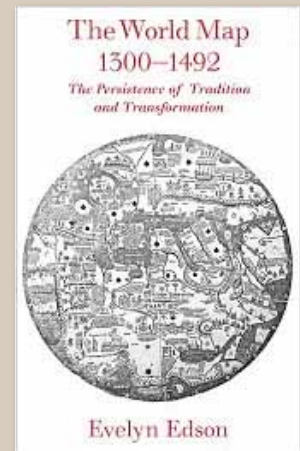
**THE WORLD MAP 1300-1492: THE  
PERSISTENCE OF TRADITION AND  
TRANSFORMATION**

By Evelyn Edson.

Baltimore. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007.  
312 pp., 35 halftones, 3 line drawings; \$50.00, hardcover.

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The emergence of new and refreshing theoretical and methodological perspectives in cartography has helped us to see historical maps in a different light; that is, as socio-cultural constructions that must be understood within the context of the societies in which they were produced. Bringing to mind the late J.B. Harley, the challenge for the researcher and "cartophilic" these days is how to read between the lines of the maps to reveal different meanings, hidden agendas, silences, secretcies, and contrasting worldviews.

The most recent book by the historian Evelyn Edson (a specialist on cartography and the Middle Ages) deals with maps and mappings just prior to 1492, and is an example of this more relativistic and context-driven approach to the history of cartography. Over its more than 300 pages, *The World Map, 1300-1492* steps into the "contact zones" of three different mapping traditions during this period: the Portolan-style sea-charts of the late medieval seafarers; the world map of the High Middle Ages (with its historical and philosophical underpinnings); and the re-emergence of Ptolemy's geography based on projections and mathematical calculations. Edson's aim is to show the complex relations that existed between these three different worldviews before 1492 when Christopher Columbus set sail for the Americas. Her main argument is that Columbus was not a cartographic path-breaker and that the reshaping of the world was not triggered by the "discovery" of the "New World," but that it instead turned on a process of changing geographical conceptions, mapmaking and usage that had been affecting cartography from a point