

## ON MAPS

*“Our view of reality is like a map with which to negotiate the terrain of life. If the map is true and accurate, we will generally know where we are, and if we have decided where we want to go, we will generally know how to get there. If the map is false and inaccurate, we will generally be lost.*

*While this is obvious, it is something that most people to a greater or lesser degree choose to ignore. They ignore it because our route to reality is not easy. First of all, we are not born with maps; we have to make them, and the making requires effort. The more effort we make to appreciate and perceive reality, the larger and more accurate our maps will be. But many do not want to make this effort. Some stop making it by the end of adolescence. Their maps are small and sketchy, their views of the world narrow and misleading. By the end of middle age most people have given up the effort. They feel certain that their maps are complete and their Weltanschauung is correct (indeed, even sacrosanct) and they are no longer interested in new information. It is if they are tired. Only a relative and fortunate few continue until the moment of death exploring the mystery of reality, ever enlarging and refining and re-defining their understanding of the world and what is true.*

*But the biggest problem of map-making is not that we have to start from scratch, but that if our maps are to be accurate we have to continually revise them... The process of making revisions, particularly major revisions, is painful, sometimes excruciatingly painful. And herein lies the major source of many of the ills of mankind.”*

M. Scott Peck: ‘The Road Less Travelled’

My map is coffee-stained and torn: parts are so faded as to be hardly readable; in others, hasty indications in heavy black marker have hidden softly pencilled nuance and, besides, for the most part, the map stays in my filing cabinet with all the other important things to be done. We had a reunion for alumni of Art Center at the end of this term and students came back from as far as Japan: ‘You still here?’ they said with various accents of nuance (I am the only teacher from the beginning of the school) and I wondered exactly where I had been while they had been out with the knapsack on their backs (“I worked for a while in Paris, then I took a job in Japan before I went home to Sweden...”). I catch myself sitting by the fireside and recounting old adventures for the price of a drink - perhaps one can teach too long.

The effort of constant re-assessment is painful and, besides there are fine lines between doubt and weakness, conviction and intransigence; between form and formlessness. Doubt, questioning aligned with integrity takes strength as well as imagination - they are often taken for weakness (I know it from the

classroom). It is easier to act in the blind belief of conviction and so often power seems to be in the hands of the least imaginative and most convinced; they offer ready-made maps that are easy to follow; they slough motorways across the inconvenience of gentle fordings and their simple slogans are easily graspable in the modern form of communication- the advert, the fax, the headline and the quick television summary. The modern hero, the re-invention of the man of action speaks determinedly into his cellular phone, making the quick and incisive decision as he surveys the tangle: 'cut down that forest', the road goes there. More attractive to the modern mind perhaps, than the doubt torn and self-obsessed Romantic poet- consumption is not as fashionable as it was.

Is it just the modern echo of Nietzsche's 'Will to Power' in front of existentialist anxiety and our loss of a singularity of language and value?;

Deconstructionalism, Post-Modernism are but the crux of being caught in a paradox; 'meaning' and 'connection' in human terms require a subjective, limited vision within a context. Perhaps the apple of the Tree of Knowledge was self-consciousness: "we saw that we were naked"; the realization that any context is but one possible of many and has no absolute value sets a sort of desperation where the idea of 'standard' and 'value' are disparaged and self-consciousness takes away that integrity of unaware absorption with subject that leads to quality. Why take any route rather than another?; the map becomes a confusion of crisscrossing by-ways which trample the delineation of major highways - self-conscious parody has always been the defense of insecure societies in periods of decline. Making pretty maps can become a defense for not travelling. The labelling of landmarks becomes more interesting than the reality; our technology gives us more and more means to recreate the topography in a 'virtual reality' that is seductive; the idea of experience takes over from experience itself and disconnects from meaning.

The greatest works of culture do manage to speak across time and space (the moments which are the only ones I will, punctiliously, grace with the name of Art; for the rest we are caught in a messy and prosaic wrestling with materials: the difference between a transcending moment of ecstasy and the brief and inadequate fumble in the dark). Such moments of the sublime have usually arisen out of a refinement of a specific cultural map, a paring of craft to a point of essence not dogged by the self-conscious awareness of the limitation

of context; television, in creating the idea of celebrity and the eternal present, has stripped us of such innocence. How can any work avoid imasculation by a media that renders everything vapid by making it the victim of an idea of itself?

Scanning the horizons, I find that the contours of the landscape, the mountains of Truth do not change; T.S. Eliot's moment in the rose garden is felt by us all at one time or another, The fact that human metaphor is constantly evolving and absolutes have to find new expression for every new generation does not mean that there is not a real landscape behind the map; real forms behind the shadows on the wall- a truth to bear witness to.

I was struck, while considering the apparent powerlessness of contemplation in front of action- of gentleness in front of brute force, with the absolute and uncompromising simplicity of Christ's Truth; not that of the Resurrection, but of the Birth and Crucifixion: the Truth of pure humility and refusal to bargain an integrity or to defeat arrogance and certitude by their means. Judas never could understand that Christ would not save himself in the end: he confused weakness and absolute strength. 'Domine, Quo Vadis?' - Carracci's Christ carries his cross with a jaunty nonchalance, but there is no hiding from his irrevocably pointing finger. One has to be ready to start on the road again, even when one remembers more the discomfort than the adventure: the search for a Truth we can only glimpse. For us there is only the "raid on the inarticulate with shabby equipment always deteriorating" - but Eliot was right, "the rest is not our business".

So I have been wandering for a year, confused by the fact that different maps can give different names to the same mountain; sometimes one realizes that one is climbing the wrong mountain altogether and sometimes what one thought was the peak was just a ridge far below the summit; just occasionally one gains a peak and is met with a glimpse of elation and a distant goal which becomes dim and forgotten when one toils down into the next valley- and all the time I have been sitting in this same corner.

Has anyone got the Michelin guide?