LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

Bray, Patrick M. (2013) *The Novel Map: Space and Subjectivity in Nineteenth-century French Fiction.* **Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 271 pp., ISBN: 978-08101-2866-8.**

Brigstocke, Julian (2014) *The Life of the City: Space, Humour and the Experience of Truth in Fin-de-siècle Montmartre.* **Farnham: Ashgate, 230 pp., ISBN: 9781409448969**
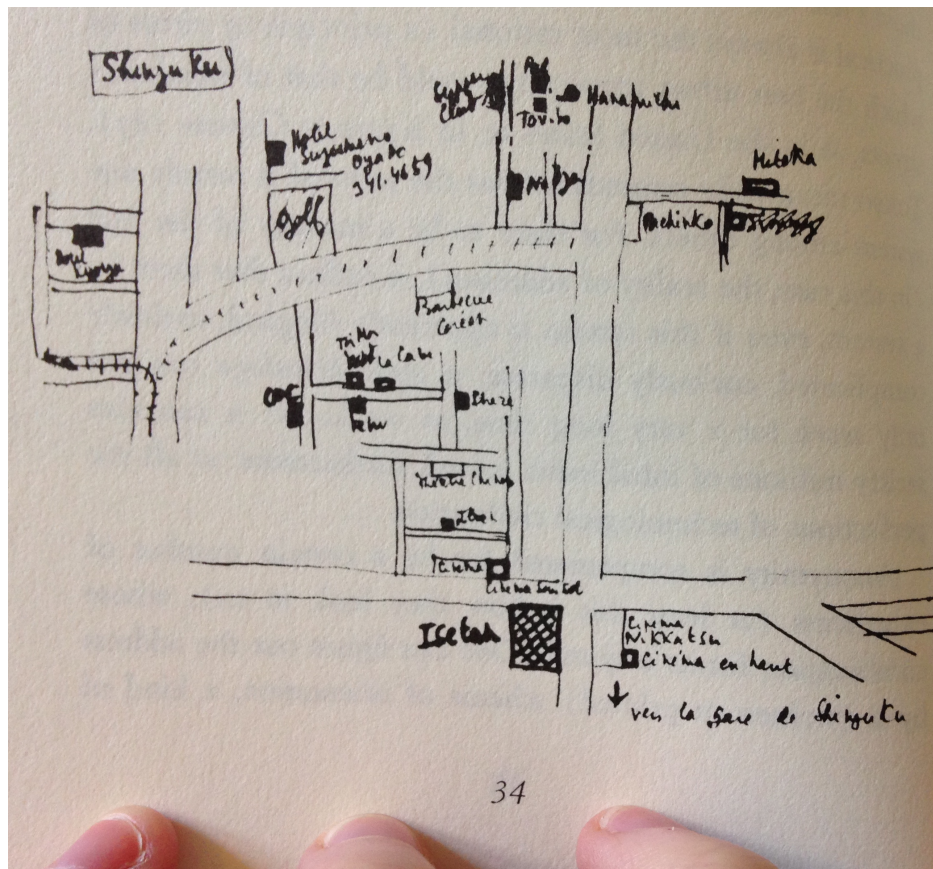

Figure 1. Orientation map, *Empire of Signs* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1982) p.34

The Novel Map by Patrick M. Bray is an account of textual subjectivity across selected works of Stendhal, Gérard de Nerval, George Sand, Émile Zola and Marcel Proust. Bray's initial premise is that the shrinking cursed piece of skin in Balzac's *La Peau de chagrin*[1] functions as both text and map of and for the novel's protagonist. Because of this it becomes a 'novel map'. Bray reads a series of novel maps through the texts in question, using the concept to explore the particular and new spacing of subjectivity in these works of nineteenth-century French fiction (though he will queer the term 'fiction' throughout). Bray's novel maps,

'Stendhal's birds-eye view of Rome, Nerval's double perspective of himself as other, Sand's Indiana's confusion of Paris and the Ile Bournon, Zola's genealogy of the Rougon-Macquart, and Proust's entire work as a double text' (Bray 2013, p.22), are moments of imaginative and defensive textual practice. Imaginative in their attempts to textually render space, subject and time, defensive because this attempt is taking place within or beside 'the oppressive spaces of a modern society' (p. 229). The difference between text and map is clearly key, so it is worth stopping to think about how this is articulated. A text is made of language. It is written to be read, one word after another. It is linear and it progresses. A map is a figurative image that describes the relative positions of a series of objects, places or structures in space. Bray's novel maps collapse time and space *textually* to maintain the illusion of a subject and space over time.

There is an assumption, particularly in the age of satellite-generated images, that maps are objective, but this is not always (if ever) the case. Roland Barthes' *Empire of Signs* contains maps (he calls them orientation drawings) which are hand-drawn by inhabitants of Tokyo who want to help him find his way. He writes that way-finding is possible in this strange city, by 'a schema of orientation, a kind of geographical summary which situates the domicile starting from a known landmark; a train station for instance' (Barthes 1982, p. 33-35). These maps are subjective because they are drawn by one person and describe *their* understanding of the physical space they represent. They are anchored by a 'known landmark' which increases this subjectivity even though the number of subjects has also increased – the landmark must be known by the person who draws and the person who is drawn for. (Barthes 1982, p. 33-35) We have all drawn maps like this from time to time, they can be more useful than spoken directions for the foreign traveller because they cannot be forgotten once she or he is out of reach of their creator.

Frailty of memory is a recurring motivation for the creation of both text and map in the books examined by Bray; where one will not do, it must be supplemented by the other. This need for supplement derives from a frustrated effort of self-representation, it seems text alone is not enough to ground the writer. Stendhal begins the *Vie de Henry Brulard* with an attempt to write a life thematically but finds: 'I will be unintelligible if I do not *follow the order* of events.' (Stendhal 1995, p.45, my emphasis) He is compelled to give his reader a landmark from which to depart from, in much autobiography this known landmark is birth. This is not a subjectively experienced event but a coordinate that is assigned and read by others. Bray comments, 'the impersonal character of memory suggests that we do not remember ourselves but only the places where one of our many selves may be found' (p. 195). He makes clear that the texts under inspection engage with memory only as a means with which to understand the present self (the writing self). Gérard de Nerval's *Fantastic Genealogy* shows the writer attempting to trace the beginning of his existence through a sprawling and fanciful family tree, the logic of which is, 'a hybrid between the arborescent and the rhizomatic' (p. 88). It cannot be said to be text or map but it practices a spatialisation of the relations between people and words over time. Unlike the maps drawn for Barthes in Tokyo, this subjective map is not made to help someone else find their way but rather to

help the writer himself find out how he got to the point in time of writing. Stendhal worries about being 'unintelligible' without chronological order but Nerval's genealogy traces the disorder of chronology.

The effect of text or map is not to simply represent and record, the writing of memory can also distort and erode. Stendhal writes: 'one spoils such tender feelings by recounting them in detail' (Stendhal, 1995 p. 459). At other points however, he grasps for detail to overcome (or spoil) the indistinctly tender, reaching for categories and mathematical language to make sense of overwhelming emotion: 'In order to consider them as philosophically as possible and to try thus to remove the halo that gets *in my eyes,* that dazzles me and impairs my ability to see clearly, I will *arrange in order* these women (mathematical language) according to their individual qualities' (Stendhal p. 25). Having ranked 'these women' he draws up a simple chart of his life which he likens to his friend Antoine de Jussieu's collection of plants and which shows his 'occupation' from childhood to 'the present quarter of an hour' (Bray, 2013, p. 25). I am reminded of the artist Carolee Schleeman's *Ye Olde Sex Chart (Sexual Parameters Chart)* which analysed sexual encounter through a series of categories (nationality, duration, hands, mouth) drawn up in a long chart, playfully pulling experiences of sexual encounter into the apparently objective world of science. In writing subjective experiences an author must reach either for shared subjectivities (the landmark) or for apparent objectivities (categories, dates). The insufficiencies of language in the face of memory and emotion leave these writers reaching for more dependable frameworks. The urge to categorise the tender or dazzling appears at a degree twice removed as Bray cites Roger Shattuck's classification of happy or felicitous moments caused by involuntary memory in Proust's *Le Temps retrouvé.* 'Shattuck recognises six stages in a basic but variable pattern: 1) a pre-existing state of mind (usually depression), 2) an intense sensation (like the taste of a madeleine), 3) an inner feeling (pleasure, exultation or sadness), 4) recognition of a past sensation, 5) presentiment of the future, and 6) some result (like the revelation of Marcel's literary vocation' (Shattuck, 1963, p. 70). Shattuck's scientific approach to writing belies an archive fever all of its own. This fever has been affectionately parodied by Anne Carson's *The Albertine Workout.*

1. Albertine, the name, is not a common name for a girl in France, although Albert is widespread for a boy.

2. Albertine's name occurs 2363 times in Proust's novel, more than any other character.

3. Albertine herself is present or mentioned on 807 pages of Proust's novel.

4. On a good 19 per cent of these pages she is asleep. (Carson 2014)

Playing with the data-fication of literary criticism, Carson enacts the same out-sourcing to the objective that Stendhal attempts. In both cases it seems that the workings of memory

cannot be represented by a six-part equation; in this case 'detail' has completely eroded tenderness.
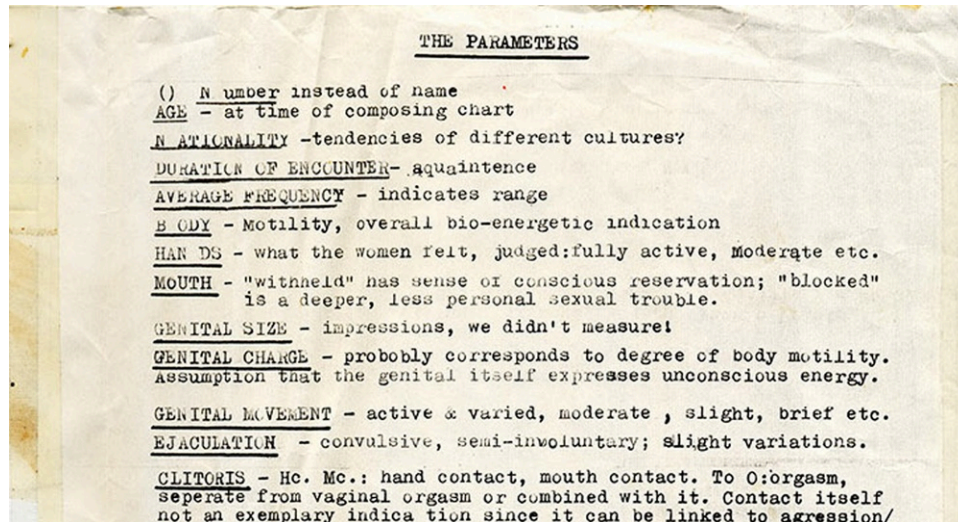

Figure 2. Carolee Schleeman's *Ye Olde Sex Chart (Sexual Parametres Chart),* 1975

Bray places the novel map's fusion of text, typography and cartographic detail within the literary and cultural contexts of nineteenth-century France. These include the emergence of autobiography, the rise of the novel and a radical alteration of the physical space of the country. At the end of the eighteenth century, 'French national space went through drastic and unprecedented transformations' (Bray, 2013, p. 134). These included the appropriation of public space, the redistribution of political space and a visual representation of the natural landscape. This last development stood in direct contrast to the first two as it made possible a conception of France 'as a country whose unity was not subject to human history because its natural boundaries were self evident' (p. 134). These boundaries were surveyed and presented by the Carte de Cassini, the first attempt to map an entire country using geodesic triangulation. Surveys of France were taken from 1756 to 1789, and the 180 individual maps were published by subscription from 1756 to 1815. This was not an upheaval of space but a revelation of it. Bray describes how George Sand used these maps to write *Nannon* and draws from this an argument about the presence of utopia in the blank spaces of the Cassini maps. Here, rather than the limits of language leading to a need for more rigid and objective form, it is the lack of the definite or the *named* that makes possible a written space. Sand's *Nannon* follows the systematic unraveling of the old order and its replacement by a community of equals. This community can only thrive because of its distance from Paris. Julian Brigstocke's *The Life of the City: Space, Humour and the Experience of Truth in Fin-de- Siècle Montmartre* follows the consequences of the unraveling of the old order through the artistic and political life of Montmartre, and the attempts of certain members of the arrondisement to distance themselves from Paris culturally if not geographically.

Brigstocke locates the epicenter of artistic dissent in late nineteenth-century Montmartre at The Chat Noir, a *cabaret-artistique* run by Rodolphe Salis. The club is examined through attention to police reports (there were invariably plain-clothed police on site), songs, poems, pantomimes, cartoons and printed ephemera. Analysing what went on at the club as 'cultural experiments' (Brigstocke, 2014, p. 1) explicitly draws attention to the spatial and symbolic consideration of the performances and the place in which they took place. The Chat Noir – and Montmartre – were spaces in which the transgressive and experimental were performed and, somewhat paradoxically, *permitted*. The presence of plain-clothed policemen both underlines and destabilizes this permission.

Brigstocke aligns the demarcation of the club and district with the new currency of scientific demonstration, symbolized by the annexed zone of the laboratory. The laboratory is implicated as part of the experiential form of authority that he sees as having emerged from the positivist intellectual climate of the Third Republic, where 'authority to speak the truth was all but impossible to acquire from outside legitimizing institutions such as scientific laboratories, hospitals, museums and universities' (p. 178). Montmartre's challenge to anxieties of authority took the form of a series of playful parodies, firstly, of the emerging culture of museum display, and secondly of the empire-influenced traveller's narrative. Both modes were used to narratavise time, to present official and authoritative versions of reality, and to underline strict divisions between savage and civilized life.

Understood here as a challenge to the authority of the museum display, the design and decoration of the Chat Noir cabaret was described in 1885 as 'a temple of architectural and decorative eclecticism … tomorrow the whole of France will understand that the broken line is less dull than the straight line' (de Seigneur, 1885, p. 517-18). It was to the broken line (of history and veracity) that the club's décor was devoted, in direct contradiction of the orderly – and apparently natural – chronology of museum display. The Louvre had opened to the public in 1793 and was ordered in such a way as to make visible and sensible the progress of art and culture. It did so through a form of representation that referred to Carl Linnaeus and Comte de Buffon's method of classifying plants and animals by genus and species (Brigstocke, 2014, p. 134). Museums and galleries were disciplinary spaces not just for the narrative they extolled but for the behaviour required to inspect it as well, 'visitors themselves were put on display and learnt to reform their own morals and behaviours' (p. 135). The 'reality' on display in the museum was orderly and unambiguous. The work of the curator was therefore necessarily invisible. Salis, owner and curator of the disorderly Chat Noir, produced a catalogue to guide his visitors through the space and its treasures. His approach seems to have been a precursor to the decorative style of Planet Hollywood, a gaudy festival of tacky citation and announcement. Unlike in the restaurant chain however, the pieces on show at the cabaret were labeled with announcements that were 'ostentatiously inauthentic' (p. 128). Item 19 in the catalogue is described as follows:

16th century lantern, originating from the 'Piot qui chante' cabaret, once frequented by the master François Villon. This superb windowed lantern was bought in 1846 by

Monsieur Champfleury, who kept it until 1885, the date when it was offered to the Chat Noir by King Oscar of Sweden. (Auriol, 1887, p. 9)

In this playful 'exhibition of error' the straightforward evolution of past to present, which was presented with such seamless simplicity in the Louvre, is garbled. The institutionally sanctioned expert (the curator) is a man at work and he can make mistakes. The Chat Noir's catalogue shows he can also lie.

Artists' investment in the metaphorical distance between Montmartre and Paris proper is evident in a collection of articles parodying the travel narrative of colonial explorers. Casting the city as alien colony, the writers destabilise its assumed authority. One explorer confuses the Louvre with the Ministry of Finances, and writes home, 'you can reassure our friends in Montmartre that there is not a single painting here that can compete with theirs' (A'Kempis 1882, np). Mary Gluck argues that the flâneur's role shifted after Haussmann's innovations in the city. In the newly legible space the flâneur no longer exercised his skill to read the city but instead had to defend his imagination against its over-determined messages (Gluck 2003, 2005). The Chat Noir's adventuring artists do not fit this mold, they parody the stance of the popular flâneur (who skillfully interprets the city) but make a performance of failure, they *mis*read, get lost, and get it wrong. In doing so they reduce the authority of the city *and* the figure(s) of the flâneur, refusing 'to replicate the binary structure of the world-as-exhibition' (Brigstocke, 2014, p. 142).

Gérard de Nerval's *Voyage en Orient*, published thirty years previous to A'Kempis' article, labours at both labeling and telling, through what Bray describes as an attempt to portray the perfect balance of ethnographic literature (p. 65). This balance is achieved through disregard for the picturesque accounts of Chateaubriand and Lamartine alongside the insertion of the subjective – making it '*more real* than scientific accounts' (p. 65, my emphasis). To Bray's mind the novel map compliments and surpasses cartographically mapped space which already subverts and grounds the textual. The playful parodies of the Montmartre artists cannot be termed 'novel maps' though they too are set in opposition to the authority of the scientific. They subvert set structures of representation and space but in their effort to express a new and alternative existence they cannot be seen to be concerned with the articulation of a subject over space *and* time as the authors Bray investigates are. They are much more concerned with now than now and then. The novel map permits a simultaneity of tenses, places and even identities to be accounted for. It shows its creator in the process of reconciling past with present, fact with fiction and, above all, reality with textuality. Bray's section on Proust begins with a quote from Georges Perec; 'Space melts like sand running through one's fingers. Time carries it away and only leaves me with shapeless fragments' (Perec, 2008, p. 91). Bray's novel maps can be read as attempts to resolve the shapeless fragments left by time into something legible on the part of their creators.

Brigstocke presents what might be described in contrast to these written maps as a series of speech acts. The artists at work in fin-de-siècle Paris had cats winding about their

feet. Poe's cats (who influenced things from afar) are one-eyed and murdered or suffocatingly affectionate and murderous. Baudelaire's cats are uniformly feminine, animal and mysterious, whilst Manet's black cat stands shocked and wide-eyed, tail electrified, at Olympia's feet. The presence and placement of these animals is, Brigstocke urges, symbolic of a peculiarly modern conception of truth. This is truth that can only emerge out of darkness (p. 30-48). *The Life of the City* can be read as an account of the successes and failures of the district to speak its truth. These speeches are made in the form of shadow plays, bombs, magnificent hoaxes, shaking and stuttering bodies and print. Brigstocke leads us through the nighttime world of Montmartre and in each case analyses the authority these speech acts sought to disrupt and the truth they wanted to bring to light.

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Notes

[1] 'In Balzac's *Peau de chagrin* (*The Magic Skin*) Valentin – a young man on the make – comes across an enchanted donkey's hide inscribed with magical ciphers, which turns out to have the power to grant its owner's wishes. But every time it does so it shrinks, and at the same time cuts shorter the number of days Valentin has left.' Marina Warner, *London Review of Books,* March 2015.
http://www.lrb.co.uk/v37/n06/marina-warner/learning-my-lesson

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