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The Novel Map

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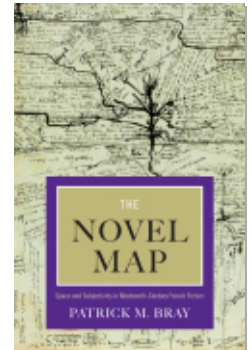
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CONCLUSION

Now and Then: Virtual Spaces and Real Subjects in the Twenty-First Century

In nineteenth-century French literature, the self was written in text as a subject of space in works that upset the traditional generic boundaries of novel and autobiography. This subject of space emerging from the play of language in text projected an origin outside the text, in an autobiographical self inhabiting real-world places. Maps in the novel (Stendhal's ichnographic projections, Nerval's genealogy, Sand's reference to the Cassini maps, Zola's maps of Plassans, Proust's opposing "ways") delimit textual space and the textual subject and provide a material foundation for the self as text. But the spatialization of self in text inevitably fragments it, partitions it within discrete moments of time, at once isolating it, in vain, from the instability of language and obscuring the change and difference wrought by the work of time. In order to maintain the illusion of self in text, in order to simulate the becoming across time of a changing self within and outside of the text, an image synthesizing different places in space and specific moments in time conceals the missing unity of an "I" divided between the "here" of the page and an imaginary "there." This image, the novel map, both new and fictional, supplements and surpasses the maps in the novel, creating a synoptic and textual image of the self beyond the page and the present of writing.

In this book I have argued that what I term the novel map, such as Stendhal's bird's-eye view of Rome, Nerval's double perspective of himself as other, Sand's character Indiana's confusion of Paris and the Île Bourbon, Zola's genealogy of the Rougon-Macquart, and Proust's entire work as a double text, attempts to imagine a new, textual subjectivity, one that could renegotiate the relationship between the self and the oppressive spaces of a modern society.

In our own iteration of modernity or postmodernity at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the ever-accelerating speed of communication

and transportation technologies coupled with the omnipresence of new forms of surveillance have shrunken space and arrested time. As Paul Virilio has argued in *L'Inertie polaire* (1990) and elsewhere, real space has ceded to real time through the acceleration of technology, leading Virilio to the paradoxical conclusion that the state of modernity is not a greater freedom of movement in space, but rather a state of inertia. When it becomes possible to communicate instantaneously with someone anywhere on the planet, when inconceivably large amounts of data exist in an unlocalizable network, when international news is projected live twenty-four hours a day, the specificities of regions and the importance of place seem almost meaningless. And yet satellite technology, global positioning systems (GPS), and mobile telephones have combined to make the slightest movements of anyone instantly knowable and traceable, leading to the bundling of spatial information sold for marketing purposes, but eventually, one supposes, available for the formulation of political and military strategies. While the spatial imagination has contracted and the acceleration of movement and information has slowed the flow of time, our connection to real places and to materiality has been severed. Cinema is in the process of abandoning celluloid film for digital, screens are replacing paper, online social networks stand in for public meeting places.

The rapid pace of change renders any cultural response necessarily delayed and displaced. Whether an Amélie Poulain nostalgia for an era when contact with others was authentic and meaningful or a morbid fascination with the unpredictability of the everyday manifested in “reality” television, unprogrammed chance encounters in real-world spaces now seem to belong to the realm of fiction. Proust’s “livre intérieur” (“inner book”) that inscribed the real within us may have been replaced by the “inner book” of our genome, whose code is readable by all and which in the popular imagination formed by vapid journalistic exposés would seem to predetermine our actions and our fate. Proust may have anticipated discoveries in neuroscience, but literature’s specificity lies in its ability to heighten intuition, to create new sensations and form new perceptions.

While the writing of a novel map created the fiction of a self both situated in the space of a text and ubiquitous, both material and extra-temporal, the ultimate goal of virtual reality is to lose all consciousness of the physical world and the present moment. Conversely, the ideal vacation for many today is to travel someplace outside the range of cell phone towers, to “go off the grid” only to find oneself cut off from one’s own identity as a subject of technology. A more interesting tactic involves using Internet communication or GPS playfully to transform lived space; from the first flash mobs to the current Foursquare, satellite surveillance can

be subverted to assert the potential of the masses to converge or at least to reinvest in the importance of place. And yet there remains something undeniably predictable, mechanical, in these ephemeral games that denies a sense of the becoming of an individual across time and across space.

The barrage of the factual launched by our information society, where everything is already recorded and quantified, needs to be answered by the counterfactual of literature. The obsession with the instantaneous and with the contraction of the global into the “glocal” must be opposed by the unique perspective of the novel map, where the past, present, and future coexist and where space is opened up to the infinite. Writing the self would then operate a movement across identities that would transcend the limits imposed by historical conditions toward the material actualization of the imaginary as text.

