Somatopias
by Giorgio Mangani

In London, in 1868, William Stokes, an English teacher of the art of memory—which, at the time, was regarded as something which could indeed be taught—published an umpteenth manual for the easy mastering of geography, a genre which was extremely popular in France and England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The teaching method included the use of a globe on which, apart from the continents, the features of the human face were also reproduced. The use of eyes, nose and lips as reference points facilitated the memorising and identifying of islands, countries and cities; the Greenwich meridian, for example, lay just beneath the nose of this strange face.

Stokes’ globe, which could also be taken apart, and which is now in the British Library (BL Maps C.7.a.26), makes an appearance whenever the industrious world of antiquarians and collectors of geographical items turns its attention to so-called “cartographic oddities”, itself a large playful continent of maps depicting regions in the form of heraldic animals, of imaginary regions and other such curiosities. In fact, however, this globe is something more than a mere oddity, since it unintentionally embodies one of the most important functions played by cartography over the last two thousand years, namely, that of an aide-memoire; and this, for many centuries, preceded and prevailed over the function of the representation of geographical places, and of orientation.

Indeed, the writing of the history of this “odd function” of maps means going in search of the very foundations of geographical representation, and of its original narrative and fantastical character, relegated in our own times to the rank of mere oddity by the prevailing practical use of the modern map. Stokes’ globe is very helpful in clarifying the function performed by anthropomorphic metaphor in the representation of geographical places: it made the locating of the individual places easier by superimposing another, more familiar, system of references upon real space. In a society based mainly upon the oral transmission of knowledge, the peculiar character of mental association was a basic feature of the art of memory, and already in the classical world the linking of the known geographical regions with parts of the human body is attested by a treatise on the number seven attributed to Hippocrates. The use of figures for mnemonic purpose also lay at the root of the powers attributed to the signs of the Zodiac; linked to the constellations by strong emotional attributes, to which we probably owe the idea of the influence of the stars on human behaviour, such figures were an aid to their identification, reminding men of their approximative shape.

The creation of such “moralised” heavens served as a model for terrestrial geography. Classical geographical description thus became a “speculative” genre, an opportunity to reflect on the human condition. In the eighth century Cosmas Indicopleustes’ Christian
Topography based the form of the world on the mystic form of the tabernacle of the temple in Jerusalem; circular medieval mappamundi, with the three great continents (Europe, Asia and Africa) represented schematically (and hence more easily memorisable), roughly in the form of a T, were put up in convent refectories and bishops' palaces, and used as a memento mori: the thirteenth-century Ebstorf mappamondo showed the world as superimposed upon the body of Christ, with his head and feet protruding beyond the earth's circumference, as though it were not large enough completely to cover his divine condition.

Rather than crediting medieval culture with a general naiveté, as has long been the case, a proper understanding of these cosmological and geographical reconstructions requires us to bear in mind that they were in fact mnemonic figures, complex images which strove to document information bringing ethnographical, theological, moral and scientific matters together with historical memories and millenarian premonitions in a powerfully emotive and dynamic manner.

This was the purpose served by the anthropomorphic maps of the monk Opicino de Canistris, from Pavia, which until a few years ago were regarded as the outpourings of a disturbed fourteenth-century mind. In his meditative exercises, the outlines of the continents were overlaid with figures of monks, and women, which gave the cartographic representation an interpretative slant whose functioning has been compared with that of the Tibetan mandala. What is surprising in such geographical representations is the fact that, in them, sound "scientific" information is shown, unproblematically, side by side with a narrative and symbolic system. Their versatility may in fact be explained by the maps' mnemonic nature, by their function as instruments to be used above all to encourage the chain of reflections set in motion by memory itself, in accordance with a method used in both science and mystical meditation. For real-life travel, it was simpler to use written itineraries or portulans, not necessarily illustrated; for travel within mnemonic figures, it was necessary to make use of the above-mentioned maps. The great theorist of figurative thinking in twelfth-century meditation, Hugh of Saint Victor, had written that a knowledge of geography could be based on such descriptions, but to understand the meaning of the world it was necessary to make use of his complex meditative figures known as machinae universitatis.

This combination of moral symbols and straight information was not confined to the Middle Ages; it continued to flourish down to the eighteenth century, with the making of maps to convey both geographical information and moralising instruction, as guides to both geographical orientation and to ethical behaviour, in a sense anticipating the more subtle codes of contemporary media communication. The deep-seated relationship between maps and the mnemonic use of images was immediately grasped by the great mapmakers of the sixteenth
The effective synthesis of geodesic
reliability and moral instruction,
borne out by the fact that the Jesuit
Matteo Ricci used it, in the sixteenth
and seventeenth centuries.
specifically as a vehicle for Christian
propaganda, translating it into
Chinese for the purpose. For his part,
the French Orientalist Guillaume
Postel had had it translated and
engraved in Arabic, in Venice, a few
years earlier, to be used in the
Islamic world as a crusading vehicle
for his idea that all religions were
basically similar (the famous theory
of concordantia omnium rerum,
whose acronym was none other than
the word cor, heart); a coincidence
which Postel regarded as the reverse
of accidental, and much more than a
mere “curiosity”. Rather than heralding the decline of
the symbolic and meditative aspect
of cartography, it might be said that
printing actually helped to generalise
its use, boosted by the rise of a
dawning sensitivity to the individual
and private faith typical of the so-
called derotto moderna, particularly
in Protestant circles. Where devices
prompting reflection on the Holy
Scriptures were required, images of
this kind came into their own. One
such example is the map of the
Itinerarium sacrae scripturae
(Helmstedt 1581, printed until
1757) by Heinrich Bunting, a
German humanist and Biblical
scholar who represented the world in
the form of a clover leaf, with
Europe as a queen and Asia with the
features of Pegasus, the mythical
horse; the work was intended as an
accompaniment to the Bible and
suggesting a “geographical” reading
of it, transforming the loci of the text

century, such as Abraham Ortelius
and Gerard Mercator. Ortelius even
referred to it in the introduction to
the great printed atlas published in
Antwerp (the earliest ever) in 1570,
the Theatrum orbis terrarum. In so
far as they are figures, wrote
Ortelius, maps are easily impressed
upon the memory, fostering a
knowledge of the world for the
armchair traveller. Similar
observations had inspired the
medieval mystics such as Hugh of
Saint Victor (Ortelius himself, apart
from being a skilled mapmaker, was
also a respected spiritual leader).
From this point of view there was not
much difference between a scientific
representation of the world and one
which tended to superimpose an
anthropomorphic or symbolic
“figure” upon it. The two models co-
existed as late as the seventeenth and
eighteenth centuries, and the same
cartographic workshops often
produced both types.
One up-to-date and reliable map of
the world, the one printed in the
sixteenth century by Mercator. Finus
and Ortelius – all respected scholars
and amongst the foremost modern
cartographers – had adopted the
“cordiform”, or “heart-shaped”,
projection to represent the world as
the place of ethical choice, upon
which the soul’s salvation was
dependent, by analogy with what
was believed to occur in the human
heart. But the map also functioned
on the basis of a reliable projective
technique which was capable of
representing the curved surface of
the globe in two dimensions,
maintaining the proportions of the
distances to a maximum. Ortelius’
cordiform map was regarded as an

(Cartographical Curiosities, G. Hill
1978). Systematic research into the
genre was spearheaded by Franz
Reitinger (“Mapping Relationships:
Allegory, Gender and the
Cartographical Image in
Eighteenth-Century France and
England”, in Imago Mundi, 51,
1999, pp. 106-130). On the deep-
seated relationship between the art
of memory, cartography and
anthropomorphic metaphors, see
G. Mangani, Il “mondo” di Abramo
Ortelio. Misticismo, geografia e
collezionismo nel Rinascimento dei
Poesi Bassi, Modena 1998; Idem,
“Abraham Ortelius and the
Hermetic Meaning of the Cordiform
Projection”, in Imago Mundi, 50,
1998, pp. 59-83; L. Nurti, “The
World Map as an Emblem:
Abraham Ortelius and the Stoic
Contemplation”, in Imago Mundi,
analysis of the geographical and
cartographical sources, common in
English literature from the
sixteenth century onwards, may be
consulted in the online periodical
Early Modern Literary Studies
(http://purl.oclc.org/ems), and an
Internet newsgroup interested in
anthropomorphic maps has recently
been set up (RPMaps on
http://groups.yahoo.com).
into places on an itinerary. Bunting’s maps also had a meditative
character, and were intended to
accompany and enrich a reading of
the Scriptures. They functioned like
the figures of the Zodiac in astrology
(which influenced the *skopos* of life
on the basis of the hour of one’s
birth, i.e. the horoscope), and gave
an emotional slant, a textual *skopos*,
to the interpretation of the texts.
This was a device which was far
more complex, rich and dynamic
than mere allegory, because it
worked itself deeply and powerfully
into the necessarily different
personality and imaginary universe
of every single reader. Indeed, for
many years Bunting’s figures
continued to be appended to
Protestant editions of the Bible, until,
in 1618, in an outburst of
iconoclasm, the Synod of Dordrecht
decided that it was better to banish
such images from the Scriptures once
and for all.²
Indeed, in the age of printing the use
of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic
metaphors actually became more
popular than ever. The newly
available printed images also
favoured the combining of inward
moral meditation, achieved through
figures, with the genre of
pornography, which encouraged a
widespread use of the female body as
a geographical metaphor and as a
territory ripe for conquest.
Ignatius Loyola had trained his
fellow members of the Society of
Jesus (which included some of the
finest geographers of the time) to
make use of inward images (that is,
those stored in the heart) for their
own spiritual exercises. With its close
association between emotion and the
human figure, the glorification of the
female body proved to be the most
effective form of inner exercise, given
wider currency by printing in the
sixteenth century, as Paula Findlen
has recently explained.³
In this way, oddly enough, the genres
of pornography and nationalist and
colonial treatises adopted the same
metaphors as love poetry and
meditative mysticism. The English
poet John Donne, writing a love
poem to his mistress (Elegy 13,
*Love’s Progress*), imagined himself as
a seafarer sailing over the body of his
beloved in search of Eldorado: in the
frontispiece of his *Theatricon*, Ortelius
represented the continents using
figures of women; a few years later,
in his *Iconologia* (Rome 1603)
Cesare Ripa extended the same
symbolic system to the regions of
Italy, listed with their characteristics
in the form of female bodies. In the
age of discovery and empire-
building, the woman’s body became
a metaphor for territories to be
explored and conquered. Political
speeches, colonial epics and
pornographic literature – of which
Darby Lewes⁴ has written a checklist
- made free use of the metaphor of the
body, building up a sort of
Utopian sexual landscape around it
which Lewes termed the *somatopia*,
an expression which aptly conveys
the nature of such places, perceived
as feminised bodies, and conceived
for the purposes of pleasure. Indeed,
like female bodies, the colonial
regions did not exist until they were
discovered and claimed by their male
conquerors, who reached them on
board ships which were themselves
compared to female bodies, and
usually with women’s names:

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Notes
1. Œuvres complètes d’Hippocrate,
M.P. Littéré ed., Paris 1861, vol. 9,
chapter 11.
2. See M. Carruthers, *The Craft of
Thought, Meditation, Rhetoric, and
the Making of Images*, 400-1200.
3. See P. Findlen, “Humanism,
Politics and Pornography in
Renaissance Italy”, in *The
Invention of Pornography:
Obscenity and the Origins of
Modernity*, 1500-1800, Lynn Hunt
4. D. Lewes, “Utopian Sexual
Landscapes: An Annotated
Checklist of British Somatopias”,
in *Utopian Studies*, 7, 2, 1996,
pp. 167-195.
Facing page
Humorous map of Scotland.
William Harvey, Geographical Fun: being Humorous Outlines of Various Countries, London 1868 (?).

into places on an itinerary. Bunting’s maps also had a meditative character, and were intended to accompany and enrich a reading of the Scriptures. They functioned like the figures of the Zodiac in astrology (which influenced the skopos of life on the basis of the hour of one’s birth, i.e. the horoscope), and gave an emotional slant, a textual skopos, to the interpretation of the texts. This was a device which was far more complex, rich and dynamic than mere allegory, because it worked itself deeply and powerfully into the necessarily different personality and imaginary universe of every single reader. Indeed, for many years Bunting’s figures continued to be appended to Protestant editions of the Bible, until, in 1618, in an outburst of iconoclasm, the Synod of Dordrecht decided that it was better to banish such images from the Scriptures once and for all.²

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Notes
Virginia, Maryland etc.
From the seventeenth century, the adventure-packed genre of journeys and conquest actually lent its own titles to an increasingly fashionable series of pornographic treatises such as *Erotopolis* by Charles Cotton (1648), *A new description of Merryland* by Thomas Stretser (1741), and *A voyage to Lethe* by Samuel Cock (1741).

Not even royal bodies were safe from this device. In the portrait of Elizabeth I known as *The Ditchley Portrait*, in the National Portrait Gallery, the queen is standing on an island, an allusion to her own royal power, of course—as already seen in the frontispiece of *Britannia*, by William Saxton (1585), the first English atlas—but also to her single status, with subtle polemical implications also found in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*.

If, in such maps, geographical territories took the form of female bodies, sentimental relationships might be expressed in terms of warlike deeds and sieges. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this gave rise to a popular genre of what might be called “gallant cartography”, centred on the cartographic representation of amorous entanglements, wooings and love affairs represented as assaults, seiges of fortified cities or journeys bristling with dangers and obstacles. Even Protestant cartographers such as Matthias Seutter and Franz Joseph von Reilly were not above producing maps and atlases of this type, which were printed for an aristocratic clientele such as that of the lovers of the epistolatory novel by Madame de Scudéry, which spawned the famous *Carte du Tendre*, giving visual form to amorous pursuit in the shape of an extended and simplified landscape strewn with lakes of indifference, seas of hostility and rivers of elective affinities. But there was also another public, less frivolous and more concerned with self-improvement, clamouring for “curious” maps, namely the one “targeted” by the satirical-allegorical atlas by the Viennese publisher Franz Joseph von Reilly (*Atlas von der moralische welt in dem satyrisch-allegorischen landkarten*), which opens with a frontispiece decorated with the image of *Hercules at the Crossroads*, the traditional emblem of moral choice, followed by various imaginary maps. The year was now 1802, at the height of the Napoleonic upheaval, but the substance had not changed since the time of Opicino.

In the meantime, “scientific” cartography had developed an effective rhetorical tone of its own, with geodesic accuracy concealing its own ethical purport and moralistic leanings, abandoning moral cartography to the realms of an outdated “oddity”: this marked the final stage of a journey which has not, it would seem, had any further developments.

Giorgio Mangani
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