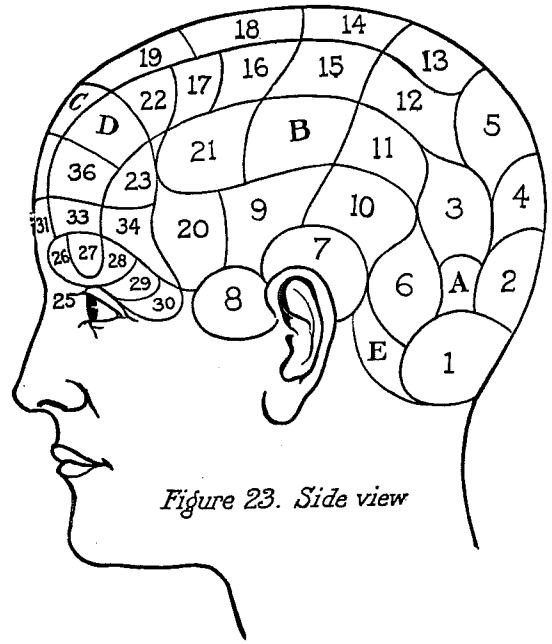
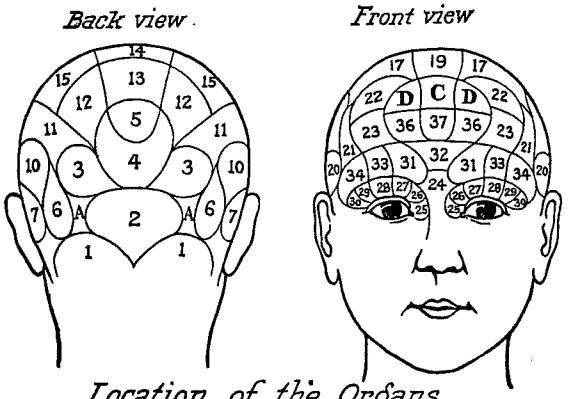


Figure 23. Side view



Location of the Organs.

MAPS OF THE IMAGINATION: THE WRITER AS CARTOGRAPHER

PETER TURCHI

TRINITY UNIVERSITY PRESS
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METAPHOR: OR, THE MAP

The writer is an explorer.

Every step is an advance into new land.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

THE EARLIEST extant alphabetic texts, the earliest extant geographical maps, and the earliest extant map of the human brain date back to the same general period: around 3,000 B.C. While no one can say for certain when the first writing and mapping occurred, the reasons for recording who we are, where we are, what is, and what might be haven't changed much over time. The earliest maps are thought to have been created to help people find their way and to reduce their fear of the unknown. We want to know the location of what we deem life-sustaining (hunting grounds and sources of fresh water, then; now, utility lines and grocery stores) and life-threatening (another people's lands; the toxic runoff from a landfill). Now as then, we record great conflicts and meaningful discoveries.* We organize information on maps in order to see our knowledge in a new way. As a result, maps suggest explanations; and while explanations reassure us, they also inspire us to ask more questions, consider other possibilities.

To ask for a map is to say, "Tell me a story."

* Several early maps, etched into clay tablets, appear to have been made with an eye toward another essential of civilization: taxation.

WRITING IS OFTEN discussed as two separate acts — though in practice they overlap, intermingle, and impersonate each other. They differ in emphasis, but are by no means merely sequential. If we do them well, both result in discovery. One is the act of *exploration:* some combination of premeditated searching and undisciplined, perhaps only partly conscious rambling. This includes scribbling notes, considering potential scenes, lines, or images, inventing characters, even writing drafts. History tells us that exploration is assertive action in the face of uncertain assumptions, often involving false starts, missteps, and surprises —all familiar parts of the writer's work. If we persist, we discover our story (or poem, or novel) within the world of that story. The other act of writing we might call *presentation*. Applying knowledge, skill, and talent, we create a document meant to communicate with, and have an effect on, others. The purpose of a story or poem, unlike that of a diary, is not to record our experience but to create a context for, and to lead the reader on, a journey.

That is to say, at some point we turn from the role of Explorer to take on that of Guide.

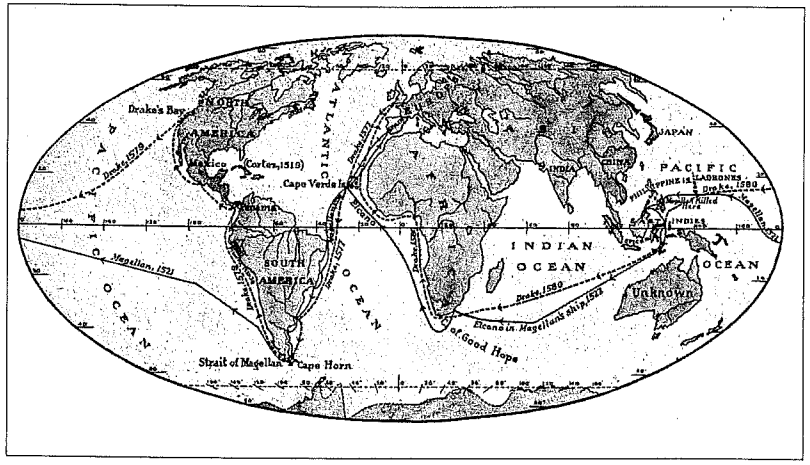

FIG. 1 THE FIRST VOYAGES AROUND THE WORLD

> If this book of mine fails to take a straight course, it is because I am lost in a strange region; I have no map.
>
> — GRAHAM GREENE, *THE END OF THE AFFAIR*

ARTISTIC CREATION is a voyage into the unknown. In our own eyes, we are off the map. The excitement of potential discovery is accompanied by anxiety, despair, caution, perhaps, perhaps boldness, and, always, the risk of failure. Failure can take the form of our becoming hopelessly lost, or pointlessly lost, or not finding what we came for (though that last is sometimes happily accompanied by the discovery of something we didn't anticipate, couldn't even imagine before we found it). We strike out for what we believe to be uncharted waters, only to find ourselves sailing in someone else's bathtub. Those are the days it seems there is nothing new to discover but the limitations of our own experience and understanding.

Some of the oldest stories we know, including creation myths, were attempts to make sense of the world. Those early story-tellers invented answers to the mysteries all around them. Why does the rain come? Why does it stop? If a child is created by two adults, from where did the first two adults originate? What is the earth like beyond what we have seen, and beyond what the people we know have seen? What lies beyond the stars?

The stories and poems we write today rarely take on the task of explaining natural elements or the failure of crops; for those answers, we turn to science or some other form of belief. Nevertheless, in every piece we write, we contemplate a world; and as that world would not otherwise exist, we create it even as we discover it. Some imagined places are as exotic as the deserted island of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* and Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island, Thomas More's Utopia, Jonathan Swift's Lilliput, Aldous Huxley's Brave New World, Italo Calvino's Invisible Cities, and Jorge Luis Borges's Tlön,

Uqbar, and Orbis Tertius. Some writers use settings more familiar but make those places unmistakably their own: Jane Austen's England, Nathaniel Hawthorne's New England, Charles Dickens's London, Flannery O'Connor's Georgia, Richard Russo's Maine. There is no mistaking E.B. White's New York for John Cheever's, or Joseph Heller's for Ralph Ellison's, or E.L. Doctorow's for Amiri Baraka's.

We might set out intending simply to describe what we see — to open the curtains beyond our desk and report on the landscape outside our window — but even then we describe what *we* see, the way we see it. We know the names of the trees and birds and grasses, or we don't. We're aware of the different types and formations of clouds, or we aren't. Even if we could know it all, at any given moment we would have to choose the evocative description or the scientific fact. No matter how hard we work to be "objective" or "faithful," we create. That isn't to say we get things wrong, but that, from the first word we write — even by choosing the language in which we will write, and by choosing to write rather than to paint or sing — we are defining, delineating, the world that is coming into being.

If we attempt to map the world of a story before we explore it, we are likely either to (a) prematurely limit our exploration, so as to reduce the amount of material we need to consider, or (b) explore at length but, recognizing the impossibility of taking note of everything, and having no sound basis for choosing what to include, arbitrarily omit entire realms of information. The opportunities are overwhelming.*

We face the same challenge with each new story, novel, poem, play, screenplay, or essay: given subject X, or premise Y, or image Z, there are an infinite number of directions in which the work could go. There is no reason to think one direction is inherently better, more artistically valid, than all the others. Yet we must choose—for each individual piece—just one. "The writer,"

* This explains why it can be so difficult for beginning writers to embrace thorough revision — which is to say, to fully embrace exploration. The desire to cling to that first path through the wilderness is both a celebration of initial discovery and fear of the vast unknown.

says Stephen Dobyns, "must discover his or her intention, must discover the meaning of the work. Only after that discovery can the work be properly structured, can the selection and organization of the significant moments of time take place. The writer must know what piece of information to put first and why, what to put second and why, so that the whole work is governed by intention." This is a logical and persuasive argument. We cannot create a structure without understanding its purpose, any more than we would pick up a hammer to make some undetermined building out of nails and wood. But to equate "intention" or "purpose" with meaning is to assume that a poem or story is, ultimately, a rational creation; anyone who has been transported by reading knows, however, that enchantment and beauty transcend the rational.

"Intention" is a useful term when more broadly defined. Intention might be meaning, but for another writer, or another poem or story, the intention might be to depict a particular emotional state, or to explore an ethical dilemma in its complexity, or to understand how a particular character could commit a particular act — or, for that matter, to test the limits of associative movement, or collage structure. Certainly we have some intention(s) for each piece, or we wouldn't be writing. (What explorer in our history books set sail with, as Chuck Berry would say, no particular place to go? An explorer means to explore *something*, something as specific as the Northwest Passage, or the kingdom of Prester John, or as general as the uncharted waters beyond the Azores.) The plan that guides our exploration may or may not be the structure-defining intention of the *map*, the document that leads the reader; experience reminds us that there is often a world of difference between what we hope to find, or think we might find, and what we discover. Goals of our exploration, then, include refining our intention and determining the best way to present it.

Further complicating matters is the fact that our vehicle for discovery is the work we're trying to create. While some writers are able to conduct the exploration of a new world entirely in their minds (Katherine Anne Porter is reputed to have composed and

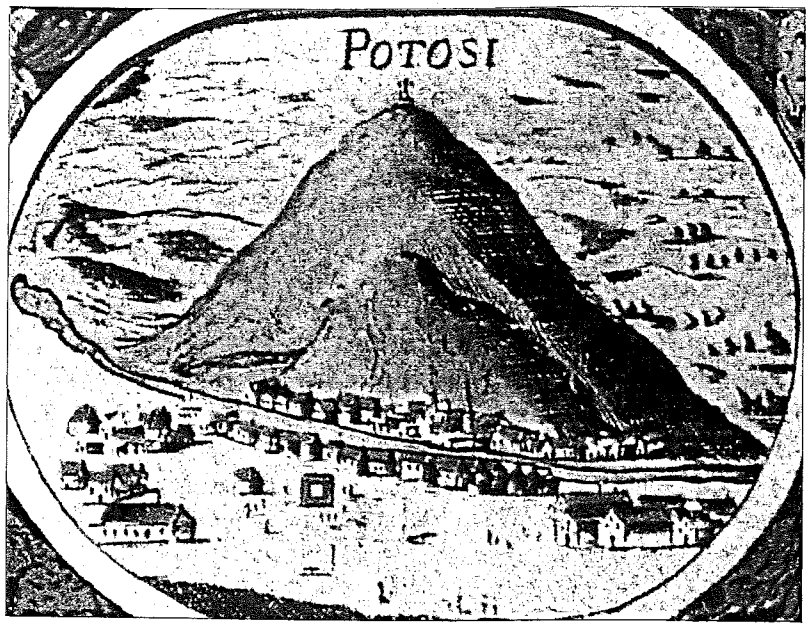

FIG. 2

revised entire stories in her head, so that she had to type only the final version), and others might work by jotting down individual lines, sketching scenes, and collecting details in notebooks, so that writing a novel is largely a matter of compiling its parts (as it was for Angus Wilson), most of us write a draft, a draft that at some point takes what we feel to be a wrong turn or leads to a dead end. We begin again, only to find we've made a tight circle—our expedition hasn't left sight of camp. Another time, we realize we're starting from the wrong place: we can't get there—where we think we want to go—from here. (We may find *a* story, or poem, in that very first draft, but we want the story that offers us, and our readers, deeper rewards.) Eventually, we find the story not *despite* failed efforts to find the story but *through* those efforts. Without our false starts, we would have gotten nowhere at all. "Writing delivers us into discoveries of what,

till we had formed some way to articulate it in language, had remained unformed, had been *unknown* to us," Reginald Gibbons says. "The articulation becomes the knowing; the knowing comes out of the process, and it refuels a further effort at articulation. A sense of ecstatic fruitfulness, of rich discoveries, of voyaging, comes to us in the exhilarating moments of being-in-our-work-in-progress."

IN THE EARLY 1960S, James Lord agreed to pose for Alberto Giacometti for one afternoon, for a sketch. The sketch became a painting, and the session went on for eighteen days. Lord kept a record of Giacometti's process, which was cyclical. Giacometti would stall, sometimes for hours, before beginning to work (some days he had to be coaxed out of a café or kept from destroying earlier drawings in his studio); when he finally sat at the canvas, he would either despair over his inability to do work of any merit or make optimistic noises; before long his tune would shift from optimism to despair, or from despair to talk of suicide. Every day, he would erase, or paint over, the previous day's work. Typically, he would continue until the studio was almost completely dark; typically, at the end of the day he would deem the work a failure.

Lord's slim book *A Giacometti Portrait* makes for perversely heartening reading. The artist tells his subject from the start that "it's impossible ever really to finish anything." By that time in his career, Giacometti had developed a notion of "finished" that assured no work could meet that standard. The reason became clear when, at the end of one day, Lord and the artist had the following conversation:

> I said, "It's difficult for me to imagine how things must appear to you."
>
> "That's exactly what I'm trying to do," he said, "to show how things appear to me."
>
> "But what," I asked, "is the relation between your vision,

the way things appear to you, and the technique that you have at your disposal to translate that vision into something which is visible to others?

"That's the whole drama," he said. "I don't have such a technique."

Having "the technique"—the means, or ability, to get from here to there — is always, and has always been, the issue. The need to find methods of expression led to speech, to drawing, to maps ("*Here's* how you get there"), and to writing. The artist is always developing and refining the techniques he uses to convey his vision, his discoveries. This ongoing development often involves the guide himself being guided; and so we have a long tradition of artists referring to divine intervention, the muses, great artists of the past, and teachers. Odysseus's long journey home, assisted by trustworthy characters, bedeviled by others, mirrors a writer's frustration and exhilaration. Every artist is in

conversation with his or her own practice, peers, and predecessors. Dante the Pilgrim is led in the Earthly Paradise by Virgil:

> O light and honor of the other poets,
> may my long years of study, and that deep love
> that made me search your verses, help me now!
>
> You are my teacher, the first of all my authors,
> and you alone the one from whom I took
> the noble style that was to bring me honor.

Of course, mere imitation, mere following, won't do:

> ". . . you must journey down another road,"
> he answered, when he saw me lost in tears,
> "if ever you hope to leave this wilderness."

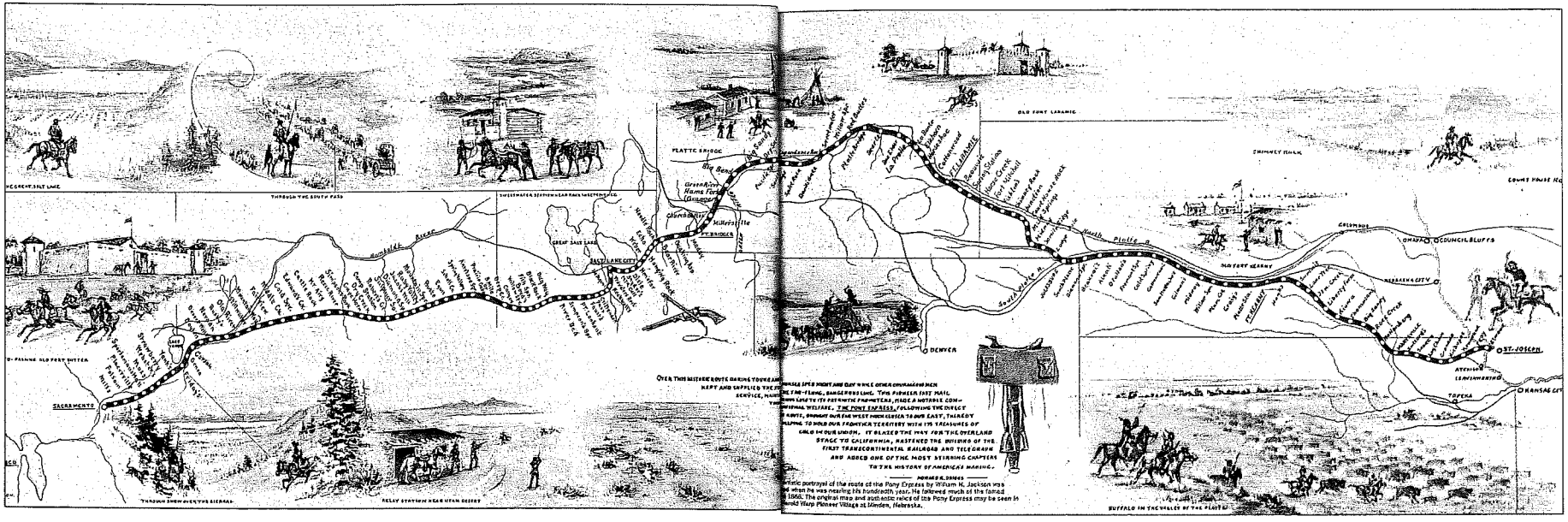

FIG. 3 **A PONY EXPRESS ROUTE MAP**

"You must" is the guide's imperative. Some advice comes in the form of stern instruction: *This is how you do it.* Nevertheless, the impulse to make and offer rules is often a generous one. Trailblazers across land are concerned less with personal glory — they are, typically, anonymous — than with the safe and efficient travel of others. We appreciate not having to stumble through vast forests or search for passage across every river; but the blazed trail quickly becomes a well-worn path, one from which most of the sights have already been seen. The writer as explorer naturally wants to see what's over the next rise, what happens to the creek when it goes under that shelf of rock. We want to be guided, but only when we *want* to be guided.

Even more than other writers themselves, their work is our guide; seen that way, the books on our shelves are volumes of an enormous atlas. Particular landscapes and routes through them are illustrated in exacting detail. Countless poems, stories, and novels have been based on or influenced by Homer's *Odyssey*, including works by writers who, like Dante, never had the opportunity to read it. That epic poem has been an extraordinarily useful guide.* Yet in the *Odyssey*, our hero often receives partial assistance: Get back on your boat, steer over there, but beware that singing; come ashore, you're welcome here, but *hands off the cattle, or else*. This is the sort of guidance we can expect from other writers and their work. Precisely what to make of it, and how to make the best of it, is left to us.

GIACOMETTI'S RESPONSE to the challenge of representation was to make evident in the "final" work its unfinished quality. In the portrait of James Lord, the subject's entire body and the background are hastily sketched in; Giacometti devoted the eighteen

* Despite Homer's apparently poor knowledge of the actual geography he described. (An entire subcategory of literary scholarship is built around investigating whether the settings of various works are "real": in Asheville, North Carolina, people meet every year to identify the "actual" settings, characters, and items of clothing worn in Thomas Wolfe's novels; in Hannibal, Missouri, Mark Twain's house is identified as Tom Sawyer's, the house beside it, Becky Thatcher's; a cramped store in London claims to be the "real" Old Curiosity Shop. Writers, and serious readers, know that's the least interesting kind of correlation between life and art.)

days almost exclusively to painting, and eliminating, and repainting Lord's head. The artist explained:

> Sometimes it's very tempting to be satisfied with what's easy, particularly if people tell you it's good. . . . What's essential is to work without any preconception whatever, without knowing in advance what the picture is going to look like. . . . It is very, very important to avoid all preconception, to try to see only what exists . . . to translate one's sensation.

Here the plan for discovery is deceptively simple: "to see only what exists." The intention is "to translate one's sensation" via visual representation.

To believe that nothing can be finished leads to moments of despair — we're taught to gain pleasure from completion — but also to obsessive devotion, as only work we believe to be of tremendous potential value is worth pursuing to the end of our days. How do we resolve the conflict between shapeliness, or control, and our sense that we are never entirely in control, in that we can never entirely close the gap between the work we envision and the work we create? Tony Hoagland writes that "control exacts a cost too: It is often achieved at the expense of discovery and spontaneity." He writes in praise of "insubordinations," against the dominance of "repression as a useful agent in creative shaping." The call is not to let anything go, but to allow for passionate excess, and the irrational, and useless beauty. The conflict is, ultimately, between unruly nature and civilization's desire for order, utility, and meaning-making. Do we admire the Navajo basket, not only beautifully designed but also so tightly woven that it can hold water? Or do we prefer nonfunctional pottery, the howls of the Beats, the delirium of Dada, the splatters of Pollock? Do we have to choose? (A glance toward the dance floor: The Talking Heads sang "Stop Making Sense" to a perfectly rhythmic beat.) Can't we admire both stay-at-home Emily Dickinson and wide-ranging Walt Whitman? Wise Dr.

Chekhov and self-destructive Stephen Crane? Flaubert's meticulously considered *Madame Bovary* and Mark Twain's uncivilized *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, with its ill-fitting final quarter, the raft run aground? The wild-eyed riffs of *Moby-Dick* and the canny constructions of Borges? We can, and will — so long as, whatever its temperament, every map, every story or poem, persuades us of its purpose and justifies its methods.

When Giacometti finally agreed to stop and allow the portrait of James Lord to be sent off for exhibition, he provided the end-of-the-artist's-workday view:

> He took the painting from the easel and stood it at the back of the studio, then went out into the passageway to look at it from a distance.
>
> "Well," he said, "we've gone far. We could have gone further still, but we have gone far. It's only the beginning of what it could be. But that's something, anyway."

Sam Hamill writes of the poet Bashō, "His journey is a pilgrimage; it is a journey into the interior of the self as much as a travelogue, a vision quest that concludes in insight. But there is no conclusion. The journey itself is home." We recognize the sentiment: it isn't where you go, it's the getting there. But tell that to Odysseus. As readers, we know that if a work's conclusion is disappointing, if we aren't satisfied with where it has taken us, the guide has let us down. A map may be beautiful, but if it doesn't tell us what we want to know, or clearly illustrate what it means to tell us, it's merely a decoration. The writer's obligation is to make rewarding both the reader's journey *and* his destination. Each completed work is a benchmark, an indication of how far we've come. If we've done our work well, we can be pleased with it; if we're serious about the pursuit of our art, we are, nevertheless, unsatisfied.

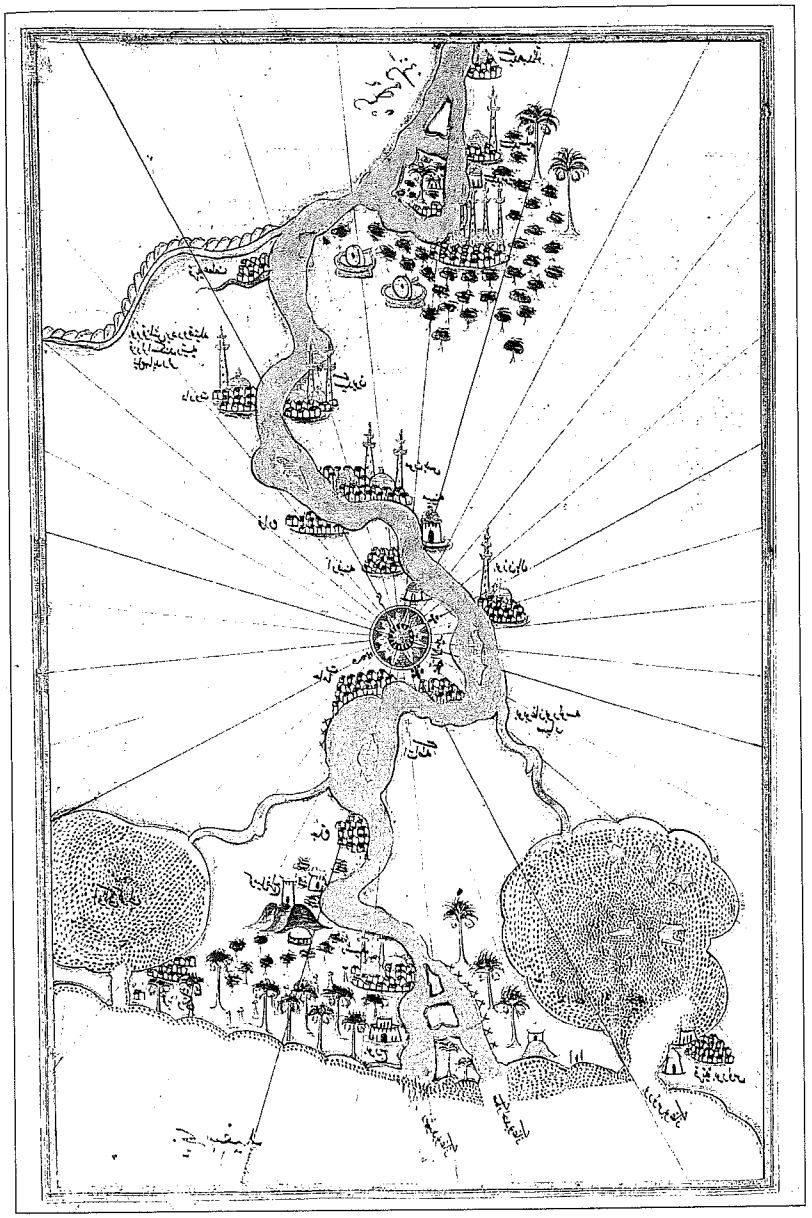

FIG. 4 A MAP OF THE NILE DELTA BY OTTOMAN NAVAL COMMANDER AND CARTOGRAPHER PIRI REIS (1465 – 1554)

Writing offers the Scylla and Charybdis of Authority and Humility. It requires us to assume authority over our creations, to assert our knowledge and talent; yet it also requires humility, a recognition that there is always more to learn. Danger looms at either extreme. While it may be good for the soul, living in a constant state of humility can lead to a refusal to take responsibility for the work or to pursue fully one's ambitions. Constantly asserting authority can lead to being far too sure of oneself, to the detriment of true discovery. Our task is not to avoid the two entirely, but to steer between them, making the most of the currents they create.

At some point in the lifelong journey, the traveler recognizes he has something to offer others. Having mapped the Mississippi River and its environs, Mark Twain found himself prepared to tell the world about a place it had never seen the way he had seen it. Having been asked for directions, Nick Carraway realizes, "I was lonely no longer. I was a guide, a pathfinder, an original settler." Every writer, especially every writer who teaches, is asked for directions; and to the extent that he offers them, he takes on the role of guide in another way, outside of his work.

I have no training in geography or cartography; mine is strictly an amateur's enthusiasm. Like many others in many fields, I have found mapping to be a potent metaphor. My interest is not, particularly, in writing that addresses mapping and geography in its content. Neither is it to offer instruction, at least not in the spirit of Circe when she tells Odysseus:

> I will set you a course and chart each seamark,
> so neither on sea nor land will some new trap
> ensnare you in trouble, make you suffer more.

Any number of others are both able and willing to set courses and chart seamarks. But while some writers may appreciate lists and categories, catalogs of options and examples, others resist the prescriptive, inclined toward analogy rather than

explication, exceptions rather than rules. For those of us in the latter group, metaphor is as comfortable as a sweatshirt: sufficiently defined to serve as clothing, but loose enough to allow freedom of movement. We appreciate the limits to Circe's guidance: "once your crew has rowed you past the Sirens, a choice of route is yours."

The chapters that follow contemplate issues relevant to many kinds of writing: selection and omission; conventions (adherence to and departure from); inclusion and order; shape, or matters of form; and the balance of intuition and intention. The structure of each chapter is more or less associative. At times the leap from figure to ground is left to the reader, while at other times the connection is more clearly drawn. The writing addressed is, most often, fiction, though there are also discussions of poetry and film (as well as glancing references to visual arts, cartoons, board games, and haircuts). The first-person plural pronoun is used throughout to refer to writers, and at times to readers, with the assumption that all writers are readers.

ROUGHLY TWO THOUSAND years before Columbus, another explorer braved the ocean to establish colonies and trading posts. Heading out through the Straits of Gibraltar in sixty ships, King Hanno of Carthage saw islands within islands, an active volcano, crocodiles, hippopotami, and gorillas. The record of his voyage is the earliest known first-hand report of travel along the west coast of Africa. Hanno's "Periplus," or story of the navigation of a coastline, is both vividly detailed and tantalizing in its brevity. Just eighteen lines long in surviving translations, it provides an invaluable record even as it continues to inspire speculation.

This periplus, a record of a different sort of circumnavigation, is offered as a companion on the long journey through uncharted waters, with the hope that it will inspire the reader, once ashore, to pursue tempting trails left unexplored.