

When I was young, my family never traveled. I didn't understand why. We weren't that poor; it wasn't a matter of money. Now I know that it was a matter of horizons. Care for the things that were around you, attention paid to handling them, a talent for making them resonate with a certain beauty was thought to be the most appropriate way to reap some happiness from the parsimonious field of life. We obviously had an idea of happiness that was very cautious, very timid, very realist; there was no doubt that a noisy, garish, and exhibitionistic happiness would have constituted a form of vulgarity that we would never yield to, partly for reasons of decorum and very much, I think, because of religious convictions that provided solid roots for the family's behavior. Hence, we didn't travel.

Since we didn't travel, I began to read. Randomly, whatever I came upon, what I found in the house. I shut myself in my room and read, and that was my way of traveling, or, to be more precise, of escaping from that obsessively measured world. Since then, the basic idea has not abandoned me: that books are a form of escape, not so much in the sense of a pleasant amusement that can distract us but in the sense of a physical escape beyond certain walls: an activity that is rebellious, courageous, violent, even somewhat forbidden. I don't think I ever read a book without the physical impression of attacking my jailers, or of storming some fortress or prison. I was a convict and every book an escape.

Then I began to write books. It happened in a very natural way, almost without my realizing it. At a certain point I was writing books, that's all. There were people who read them, and that didn't surprise me much, either: that seemed natural, too. Then a lot of people began to read them, and of that, too, I was aware, but as of a curious phenomenon that didn't change the terms of the thing. I continued to escape and to travel. I escaped a lot, I traveled a lot, and now here I am. Once, when my son was still quite young, he saw me lying on the bed, with the computer, and asked what I was doing. I'm working, I told him. He thought about it a little, then said to me: it's not *real* work. Oh no? I asked him. Real work is done standing up, he said. Then I thought of a remark of Conrad's: "How do I explain to my wife that when I look out the window I'm working?" But by the time I remembered it my son had already left to do something else: the thing didn't interest him that much. But it interested me. I spent a lot of time trying to understand what sort of work I was doing, and if it was, in fact, *real* work. And what its most genuine, or purest, meaning was. I've accumulated a lot of answers; I often change them, and have always found them only partial. I'm choosing one of them, here, today, which isn't more precise or more plausible than others, but it's the one that is my companion at the moment. I would be unable to articulate a different one, at the moment, with equal passion.

Certainly it's a journey. Writing remains for me an activity derived from reading, and so it remains a way of traveling and of escaping: the most silent way there is. Yet I've learned, over time,

that if you're thinking of the figure of the explorer who ventures into unknown lands and returns to give an account of his adventures to the world, that's not what I'm thinking of. The matter isn't so simple. And I don't think the writer is, if we wish to be exact, an explorer. Often he doesn't have time to be, because he has to live, and writing is a slow activity that robs us of a good part of our life. How could we, really, have explored worlds? Let's say that, more likely, we spy on those who have traveled, we interrogate them, we steal their adventures, we end up understanding them much better than they do, we are capable of memorizing them in their details, we can recount them to others at any moment. If we're talking about the real world, about real journeys, about real places, there is a very precise word that signifies what we do: we make maps. We are *cartographers*.

One of the reasons I've been inclined to get excited about this theory lately is that ever since I was a child I've been mesmerized by maps. They fascinate me. I need them. I get pleasure even out of looking at the map of a shopping center. I adore the panels that display subway lines. Often, in the mountains, I find myself observing the map rather than the mountains themselves (I find it much more interesting). In other words, maps fascinate me, and probably it's a result of a mechanism not very different from the one that makes reading irresistible and writing very natural. It remains to discover what joins two objects theoretically so distant: a book and a map.

I don't know how much you know about cartography. It's an interesting subject; I could spend hours talking about it, although, in this particular circumstance, I can understand that it would be inappropriate. A few things, however, I really should mention. The first, and, if you like, fundamental, one is that geographical maps are *impossible*. To clarify: it's mathematically impossible to project the globe onto a flat surface. You can do it, obviously, but what you obtain isn't reality: it's one of the possible representations of reality. You're compelled, by unassailable mathematical rules, to introduce some distortions into the shapes and angles. (If you take a look at these illustrations, you'll notice how, over time, cartographers have tried, really, every kind of representation: in some cases with enticing results.) (Fig. 1) And here the analogies with the profession of writing begin. Which, of course, does something impossible: it projects life along a line made up of words constructed with a ridiculous number of letters. Madness, if you think about it: and yet it's what we do. The folly of the enterprise doesn't undermine our confidence in the least: since time immemorial we have forgotten how mad we are. We are mad the way cartographers were and always have been.

A second interesting thing is this: maps are a synthesis. They give a legible form to an endless multiplicity of things, they reduce immense horizons to a figure, they impose order on the chaos of creation. The size and ambition of this activity is evident. You can find it in a particularly moving way in this map (Fig. 2), which appears in a text of Isidore of Seville, published in 1472. It represents the world, all of it, and the concision of the gesture but also the childish exactness, the candor, the precision, the purity are enchanting. Naturally, more complex syntheses could be made,

and here I'll show you a fine example: it's the detail from a Portuguese map of 1630, a map of southeast Africa. The thing to note is that the cartographer feels compelled to describe the interior as well, and you see, if you look carefully, that he makes a definite choice: he decides that some things should appear on the map and others not. There are rivers, trees, houses, hills, mountains. There are vague green undulations. But if exactness had been his purpose, he shouldn't have stopped there: he should have drawn paths, fields, forests, groves, individual trees, maybe their leaves, maybe even *every* leaf. As Borges observed, a perfect map would be as big as the land it depicts: and therefore useless. So it's a matter of choice, of a threshold: there is a line beyond which it would be stupid to proceed. Because the goal is not exactness but synthesis. And here we get to one of the hearts of the activity of writing. Which is to choose. To establish a threshold of accuracy beyond which writing is useless. Think of Flaubert's *A Simple Heart*, one of the most perfect stories ever written. There is a life, a whole life, and then there is Flaubert's story, which is a map: at times he chooses tiny details, but then he skips entire years. He chooses. He has an invisible line that determines where a life is expressed, and where words would be vain, excessive. While any word left out would make the map unusable. In the end we have the impression of possessing, entire, the life of that servant, as if we had known it from up close. And yet we have known it from a great distance, or at least from that magical distance which is the distance of maps. A distant intimacy: that's what maps give us. It's the same thing that books offer. You see: cartographers.

The third thing I would like to point out is that the majority of maps of the world were made when humans didn't know the world at all: they knew pieces of it, they guessed at others, and still others they invented. That made their work an extraordinary mixture of the exact and the visionary, precision and imagination: I couldn't think of a better definition of the profession of writing. You can see this fantastic simultaneity of certainties and ignorance most clearly in maps of certain continents that were known only from the experience of sailors. As you see in this map, for example (Fig. 3), the coasts are drawn with great precision, and the toponymy of the places is almost fanatical; yet, if you venture into the interior, everything disappears, there is an empty space, and imagination is unleashed. Often there are fanciful drawings; often there is a fine, summarizing, childish, and world-famous phrase—*hic sunt leones*, here there are lions. Hard to imagine something vaguer or more fable-like. Another splendid example of a mixture of adult precision and childish imagination is the renowned Hereford Mappa Mundi (Fig. 4), a medieval map that is eight hundred years old. It's more than five feet high and was drawn on calfskin (you can make out the neck, at the top, and the dorsal spine). You may not believe me, but I assure you that, in its way, it's a very accurate map of the world, and in some details it is in fact maniacally exact. Yet if you proceed from the center (which is, naturally, Jerusalem) upward, you pass through immense portions of the world and look what you find at the top of the whole thing: Paradise. Last stop, Eden. Do you see the fantastic journey that,

starting from real things, ends at the summit of an imagined truth? All in all, I can't find a better way to explain what it is, perhaps, to write: we know the coasts down to the last detail, but then there are the lions. We line up cities and the last is Paradise. We proceed from the observation of real things and go on to describe with great assurance, without ever having been there, worlds of which we have only a vague intuition. We are scientists and inventors, doctors and wizards, notaries and prostitutes. It's our way of giving a meaning to our traveling, and people. It's our way of pursuing, in the half-light of ignorance, the luminous activity of creation.

One more analogy, and then I will end. Maps were made essentially for two purposes. First: to help travelers orient themselves; second, to legitimize the geopolitical ambitions of the powerful. In theory, there were no other goals. And yet: great care, always, was devoted to making the maps *beautiful* as well. It was a question of the quality of the drawing, the choice of colors, even the precision and elegance of the lettering. A great number of the details were there for a single, obvious purpose: beauty. May I show you some examples? (Fig. 5) This, too, has a close connection to the profession of writing. Undoubtedly we write in order to secure, synthesize, and put order into some portion of reality, but it would be reductive to think that literature is an activity having to do with knowledge. Often it's an activity having to do with beauty, simply. Or at least *also* an activity to do with beauty. We pursue the balance of a sentence, the color of an adjective, the rhythm of a paragraph, the sound of a style: and all this has to do with the attempt to be exact but also, and often above all, with the desire to capture some beauty. Often we are willing to lose in exactness in order to gain in beauty. No one can strip me of the belief that even the greatest books, those which are generally received as books filled with wisdom, and which seem to have drawn with a particular force an exact map of human experience, down to its most forbidden depths, are, in the end, maps whose beauty is often greater than their exactness. If I think of Proust, or Melville, or Faulkner, I think, finally, that their books are not beautiful because they are exact: rather, they seem exact because they are beautiful. They are maps by means of which one seldom emerges from the trap of life: but they deliver to us a certain idea of beauty that gives a meaning, however tenuous, to any trap and to any life.

That's why, finally, if at this moment my son should ask me what I'm doing, lying on the bed with the computer on my lap, I would tell him: making maps. I am paid to do it. I like doing it. It's work that requires a lot of care, a ton of patience, a great deal of time, and a significant dose of the visionary. You have to know how to make complicated calculations and draw well. You have to have taste, madness, and determination. You have to not be afraid of solitude and love silence. In the end you obtain something in which people will travel, and it will be their way of measuring space, knowing borders, penetrating mystery, and meeting lions. I admit that being a policeman has the appearance of being a more *real* job, but I insist on thinking that I am an artisan like others, maybe

with the privilege of being able to work on my bed, or at the window, but still an artisan: someone who can produce, by working with a certain material, something that corrects the profile of the world, for the better. There are some who do it with wood, or with puff pastry, or with colors, or with sounds, or with their own body. I do it with language, one of the most evanescent and real things that exist. I consider it a stroke of luck, a privilege, and a responsibility. Like all cartographers, I know that I have never made anything truly exact, that I am doing something impossible, and that I will never do anything definitive. With absolute certainty, however, I know that I will never live to see some Google Map make my profession useless. And this is an infinite consolation to me.