



On Cartography and the Sublime

I could live in Liege. Liege clings to the hillsides above a snaking river—a little grimy and disheveled, but intriguing. Compared to its German neighbors, it resembles neither the industrial ferocity of the Ruhr nor the gingerbread cuteness of the Mosel. It lacks the drama of Luxembourg’s gorges and is not haunted like the Ardennes. It is bypassed by time; it is Belgium. I would choose Liege if I were filming a *le Carré* novel. It has about it the brooding grayness of the Cold War. The highway along the river would show well in a car chase of bulky black Citroens, and the dark hillsides would seem to hold secrets.

As it did back in Maastricht, the road dwindles abruptly from freeway to thoroughfare when you get into town. The route flips you across one bridge into downtown, then back across to the other side as you leave the center. The effect is arresting, like being inside a zoom lens. One second we’re viewing the town from the distant multi-lane roadway across the river, and the next we’re in the thick of it: quick vignettes of cobblestone walks, peeling posters on lampposts, kids tossing cigarette butts, old men at outdoor cafes.

“I could live in Liege,” I say to Janet.

“Could you eat in Liege?” she answers, pointedly.

“I’d love to eat in Liege,” I assure her. But I am not as good as my word. By this time we’re in the thick of the city center. The traffic is intense. Opportunities to jump off the thoroughfare flit by like cracks in the pavement. That’s just a gas



station. That's too industrial. Whoops, just missed that one. And bingo, the E-25 has regained its freeway status and Liege is a part of our past, figuratively and cartographically.

I wonder if the University of Liege has room for a Professor of English and sometime travel writer who speaks neither French nor Flemish, German nor Dutch. I could be useful to them, if for nothing more than to add some poetry to their website description of their city as the "third biggest fluvial port in Europe and the economic capital of the Walloon region." The Meuse would be my muse.

"Why do you keep saying you could live in Liege?"

"I don't know. I just like the place. It seems sophisticated and yet remote. Like Krakow."

"How can you tell? We didn't even stop there."

"I don't know." I glance across at Janet and shrug. She rolls her eyes, but sweetly. Our Fiat Punto has an electric blue interior. It's tiny but tall—room enough to juggle, but you can park it in a phone booth. Ten days hence, I'd like to check it at the airport ("What do you mean that's a car? That's my suitcase! Just twist the tag around the wiper there"), grab it off the conveyor belt in Philadelphia, and drive it home.

"So I guess we aren't going to eat in Liege," Janet says, as the last traces of the city fall away behind us.

"Sorry. We'll find some place to eat along the highway."

"I don't get it. All these cool towns with great restaurants, and you want to eat at some truck stop along the highway."

"You're thinking like an American." I remind her that this entire continent, with the exception of some parts of the British Isles, is dedicated to the proposition that great food and wine are the cornerstone of culture, and major roadways are no exception. "Remember Italy?"

"Mmmmm. Panini."

"And don't forget The Categorical Cheese Imperative."

Together we review the terms. From my European sister I adopted the custom which dictates that the first thing one must do upon setting foot or tire upon Italian soil is buy cheese. The great thing is it's always there. The first gas sta-

tion you see will have better food than the entire state of Minnesota. Pump your forty liters and step inside with your credit card, and you see rows of golden crispy crusty panini stuffed with meats and cheeses. There will be three tables of cheeses—not cellophane-wrapped chunks of cheese-food but great lovely wheels with savory names, and you'll trip over bottles of local wine spilling out of wooden boxes on the floor. Whether you're coming in under Monte Bianco into Courmayeur, leaving Monte Carlo for Ventimiglia or just setting down at Fiumicino Airport, cheese will be close at hand. You buy a great hunk and you break off pieces and you eat it, right there, right then, regardless of what other obligations or intentions you may have. The Categorical Cheese Imperative is a rule to live by.

"Now I'm *really* hungry," Janet says.

My radar is picking up something. "*Really* hungry? Did I hear italics?"

"Not clinically," she assures me.

"Well, I'm sure there will be a great rest stop along here any kilometer now."

Only there isn't. We drive and drive, up and down over big hills of forests and farms, and it's beautiful, but bereft of roadside provision. Meanwhile, my cartographic imagination has been churning, and I say to Janet, "If I gave you a quiz asking which state was the closest in size and shape to the Netherlands, which one would you choose?"

"None of the above," she replies. "I would skip the quiz. It's boring."

"And I would say Maryland."

"That's nice, dear."

"Your alleged boredom is just a cover for your deep cartographic insecurity. You were afraid you'd rate illiterate."

"Bullshit." She says it pleasantly. "Any test for cartographic literacy would by definition involve a map. What you are testing for is cartographic *interest*. Mapheads will play your little game. The rest of us just don't care."



And mapheads, I am thinking, would see that the problem is that the panhandles are at opposite ends of the two states. If you flip Maryland over backwards and then turn it to the vertical, then it would more resemble the Netherlands. That would be cool. To mapheads. Out loud, I say, “I can’t believe we haven’t come to a rest stop yet.” The weird thing is, we keep passing American style rest stops, picnic tables and a toilet building, that you never see in Europe. But where’s the cool Euro-rest-stop, big square block building propped right over the top of the highway, with a hotel and at least two restaurants, accessible from parking on either side?

Janet isn’t through with me. “Speaking of cool Euro-things, what are you going to write?”

“Look, there’s the exit for Clairvaux.”

“The grant you got?”

“I wonder if that’s where St. Bernard of Clairvaux is from.”

She pokes my arm. “No, really. That proposal you made had something about Euro-dollars and postcolonialism—have you thought about that?”

“One of the most beautiful prayers of all time is attributed to St. Bernard of Clairvaux. The *Memorare*. Do Protestants know that, or is it just Catholics?”

“So you don’t want to talk about your project?”

“Listen to the first sentence: *Remember, Oh Blessed Virgin Mother, that never was it known that anyone who fled to thy protection, implored thy help, or sought thy intercession, was left unaided.* I would purely love to see that baby diagrammed.”

“Diagramming prayers. That’s the kind of thing you’d be up doing in the middle of the night. And no, Protestants don’t pray to the BVM.”

“They don’t know what they’re missing. Consider the audacity of it: opening with an imperative verb, grabbing Mary by the robe and reminding her that she is batting a thousand on all supplications, and you’re not about to let her slip to .999, not on your nickel. It’s like you’re doing *her* a favor. But by the next line you’re groveling with nice alliteration, *sinful*



and sorrowful, buttering her up for another order, *despise not my petition*.

Janet is staring out at the passing countryside, uninterested in St. Bernard of Clairvaux and his prayer. After a while I say, “How are the shoes?”

She brightens. “They’re great. After the second day walking around in Amsterdam I had this blister on my second toe, remember? But it’s callused now, and they’re really comfortable.” She picks up a shoe from the floor of the Fiat. “And they look great.”

“They are good. That rest stop should be coming along here any minute.”

She reaches across the brake lever and rests her hand on mine. For six months prior to this trip Janet said, “I have to get comfortable shoes for the trip,” and I said, “Well don’t wait until two days before we leave, because they won’t be broken in and you’ll get blisters,” and she said, “You think I don’t know that? *Of course* I won’t wait until two days before we leave.” She didn’t wait until two days before she left; she waited until one day before, and got these brown strappy sandals. But she weathered the blisters of Amsterdam, and now appreciates that I have offered a vindication of her shoe selection, and that I haven’t forgotten about food.

I’m glad Janet does not accuse me of patronizing her. I do not believe that cartography and the rhetoric of medieval prayer are inherently more worthy topics of discussion than are food and shoes. By practically any measure, food and shoes are more interesting than maps and medieval rhetoric. We are defined by our fascinations, and I have the luxury to have time for some arcane fascinations. I am also fascinated by Janet. Would I be more fascinated if she loved maps and medievalism? Probably not. Common interests are all well and good, but I’m leaning toward awe of individualism. Our minds are all eclectic, no matter what we focus them on. By extension, there’s as much mystery in the most prosaic of subjects as there is in the most esoteric.

“What are you thinking?”



Janet's on to me, as usual. "I could live in Liege."

"No, really."

"Really. I am thinking about the nature of attraction. Like, what was it about Liege that fascinated me. Why not Maastricht or Utrecht?"

"You don't like towns that have 'Treaty of . . .' in front of their names?"

"Was it really something inherent in the town? The look of it? Or something more intangible, some ambience? I loved the way the highway slung us into downtown, where this city, up to this point tucked up tight in its hills, suddenly lay open, vulnerable, surrendering to us its most intimate workings."

Janet's hand tightens over mine. "Are you trying to turn me on?"

"It *is* sexy. Maybe what I've meant all along is 'I lust for Liege.'"

She groans. "That's not what *I* meant."

"I know." But it does get to the heart of things, doesn't it? With a person or a place, what is it that rings the bell of our fascination? I tell Janet that I remember reading once that with men, marriage is all about timing. Men cling to the myth of unlimited sexual partnerships until it dissipates, then they marry the next woman who will have them. That's sort of how it was with Becca. I'd just come out of a five-year relationship with Sallie, that, in the end, had only for its obstacle that she wished for, and I could not abide the thought of, matrimony. I could not abide her hurt, so eventually I left Denver. I got myself accepted to grad school in Nebraska, moved to Lincoln, and got engaged to the first woman I slept with, even though I had strong doubts it could ever work.

"But that's not normal," Janet says. "That's pathetic. I like to think that the second time around it wasn't a question of your mood or that year's Stage of Male Progression, but that you found something in me that made your life better and fuller."

"Like your love of maps and the rhetoric of medieval prayers."

“Exactly.”

“And food and shoes.”

“Much better.”

“And sex.”

“Much much better.” She leans over and kisses my neck.

“So where does that leave Liege?” I ask.

“She’s a bawd. Forget her.”

“But I *liked* Liege.”

“A flirt. A weekend affair, at best. You couldn’t live with Liege. Tell me about Lausanne.”

I can’t help smiling, if a little sadly. “I’ve told you about Lausanne.”

“Tell me again.” Janet tucks her legs lotus-style beneath her, leans back where car door meets car seat.

I tell her again about Lausanne, a story that begins on a drive from Frankfurt to my sister’s place in Switzerland. She had just bought a ski condo in Nendez, and was very excited about it. *Mon refuge* she kept calling it. Her husband ran a luxury hotel, so he got free rooms in other luxury hotels, and he’d planned for us to stop overnight in Lausanne. I was twenty-three. I was looking forward to seeing the Alps for the first time. Some intimation of immortality had made me decide at an early age that I was a mountain person, and when I could go off to college, I went off to Denver. In my Colorado years I was a sometime skier and a half-hearted hiker. Mostly I ended up taking long drives by myself through the mountains, eating *huevos rancheros* at some clapboard diner, pulling off at overlooks to sit there for awhile with longing in my heart. And I always had my maps out, looking for a more obscure road, a higher pass.

Janet stops me at this point to say, “You never told me this part before. That’s so sad.”

“This is the full version. Where in the hell is a rest stop? I’m surprised we haven’t seen someone along the side of the road holding up a gas can.”

“Never mind that. Go on.”



I pick up the story at the crucial point. A moment I remember vividly. We were not in the mountains yet, but we were in Switzerland. We crested the top of a hill, and dropped down the other side, criss-crossing back and forth on long switchbacks. The hillside around us was all vineyard, rows of grape leaves, bright green. Below us, the city of Lausanne stretched out, its low skyline framed in the blue of Lake Lemman. And beyond the lake, almost lost in the haze, loomed the snow-capped peaks of Savoy. My response was physical. My diaphragm began pushing up against my heart—a heavy, full, feeling. If I got that feeling now, I’d be making a nervous call to the cardiologist. But at that age I could welcome the feeling and wonder at it. There may have been some conversation from the front seat; there probably was, I don’t remember. I was swinging from side to side in the back seat after each hairpin, straining to see more of the view. “See” is too weak a word. I was swallowing the view, and the view was swallowing me. The pressure in my diaphragm grew stronger. I knew this was a feeling that I had never had before, and that it was precious.

I was in a daze as we drove into the city. We got out at the door of a hotel called The Palace, and someone took the car away to the garage. I was barely aware of the opulence of the lobby. They gave me a key. I got in an elevator. My room was on the top floor, and it had its own balcony looking out on precisely the same view I’d seen from the car, only closer up, more intense. The rooftops of Lausanne rolled away beneath me to the lakeshore. The deep blue of the lake was dotted with brightly colored sails—red, blue, yellow, white. The mystical mountaintops floated in the distance. The pressure in my chest doubled, and I was intensely aware of my eyes. *My poor eyes*, I remember thinking. *How can they take all this beauty? They are going to explode.* I felt that all this immense beauty and perfection, the enormity of it all, was being channeled into something equally large and powerful inside me, through the narrow conduit of my lens and retina. The nuclear power

of the Alps being fed into the substation of my heart through the two-dollar extension cord of my eyes.

The thing is, I was not naïve about what was happening. I was an English major. I had a name for this thing that was happening to me. *The sublime*. It's what Wordsworth and Shelley were talking about, what they came to the Alps in search of. This was why Buddhist monks spend lifetimes in meditation: they are trying to suppress desire in order to achieve *this*. For the first time in my life I was *completely content*. I was *completely without any desires beyond the here and now*. I said to myself, *I could die right now*, and I meant it. I don't know what I had done to deserve such a gift, but there it was. The fulfillment of all the longing lonely drives through the Rockies. Sitting on that little balcony I experienced transcendence. I knew the sublime. And I knew, even then, that it would never come again.

As I trail off into silence, I think of Janet sitting there, and quickly add, "Not that way, I mean. Our love is transcendent in a different way."

She shushes me. "I know. I'm not jealous. I mean, I'm jealous of the experience, but not of Lausanne or the Alps or God."

"Funny. I didn't think of God. I remember thinking at the time that it was like a massive universal orgasm with the entire environment. But not sexual, either. It was all heart and diaphragm, breath and blood."

"Was it over that suddenly?"

"No. I remember sitting there on the balcony for, I don't know, thirty, forty minutes, digging it. And then my sister called and told me to get dressed up, we were going to dinner in Geneva."

Janet shakes her head. "Women and their food demands. Constantly dragging you down. Did you tell her, 'No problem, honey, we'll find something in a little while?'"

"No, I learned that later. I got dressed, and we went to Geneva, and the pressure in my diaphragm slowly went away. And I was exhausted. I remember we walked along the quay



there, by the *jet d'eau*, after dinner. I could barely drag my ass along. I just wanted to get back to the hotel and sleep.”

“So that part hasn’t changed.”

“Right.”

We drive in silence for a while. I appreciate that Janet believes me, and that she helps keep alive in me the knowledge of the sublime. A belief in transcendence is one of the things we have in common.

At that moment, as if on cue, the sign appears. Rest stop, the real kind. Massive quantities of great food, five kilometers. Glory be to God.

“You could live in Lausanne?”

“I thought I could. For awhile I thought I had to. I wanted to go live there and be transcendent 24/7.”

“Doesn’t that contradict the meaning of transcend?”

“The problem, as I saw it, was citizenship. And I would solve that problem, I thought, with marriage. I was actually considering taking out personal ads in Swiss newspapers for a wife.”

“No.”

“*Oui.*”

I remember exactly when the idea hit me. The next day, we drove on to Nendez, and in some tiny town I went into the bank to change money. The cashier looked about sixteen—honey blond, bashful, unaware she was beautiful. We flirted a little. She called her village “dead and boring.” And I thought, wow, this girl doesn’t realize that I am totally unworthy of her. There must be more like her. I should take out an ad. Normally I don’t mind telling Janet stories that make me look foolish; in fact, I’m pretty good at it. But this time, for some reason, I hold back. I have a strange protective feeling for that Romantic boy who touched the sublime.

“But you did go back to Lausanne?”

“Yes. With Becca. We were stuck in traffic for hours. We fought. It was horrible.”

“Same hotel?”

“No, too pricey. We stayed down by the lake, and it turned out to be the same hotel where Byron wrote ‘The Prisoner of Chillon.’ The irony was too perfect.”

Sometimes fate hits you on the noggin, and you barely even notice. And one day twenty years later you’re driving through Belgium and there it is. One should be wary of seeking transcendence, because the higher you dare to aspire, the farther down you admit you can sink. Those Romantics who stalked the sublime usually found dejection instead. When I went back to Lausanne I was about as miserable as an unhappily married Romantic can be. I couldn’t conceive of divorce; nobody in my Catholic family had divorced. I was terrified that I was becoming resigned to having thrown away my chance to share my life with a soul mate. Terrified that the best I could imagine was a grim acceptance of my dungeon, like Byron in Chillon, “My very chains and I grew friends,/ So much a long communion tends/ To make us what we are.” What if I had never met Janet? The thought almost makes me panic. I have to restrain myself from reaching over and squeezing her leg till she screams and smacks me, just so I can have more of her present in this moment. Damn. It’s enough to make a guy swear off this transcendence business. Maybe the neoclassicists were right after all. Be safe, sane, and civil. Moderation in all things. The alternatives are too risky.

“What’s wrong?” says Janet.

“Nothing,” I say, wrapping my hand gently around her knee as I pull off the highway. “Just a touch of Romantic melancholy.”